Theological Study: Keeping it Odd

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Talk about God is delightful and difficult. It is difficult in a world in which legitimate explanation does not include recourse to God.[1] That puts Christians on the defensive. So much of what Christians write these days in the West seems defensive – unduly methodological, halting, preamble, throat-clearing.[2] Apologetic is the mode of most Christian theologies. Apologetic theologies work to show a secular public that belief in God and the gospel is consistent with other kinds of knowledge and the perceived priorities and needs and desires of today. It is not so much that theologians make arguments or confessions about what is true; it is more that they want to demonstrate the meaningfulness of the faith on terms set by dominant systems of thought or current issues. Translation of the content of Christian confession into a more general idiom for broader appeal and availability and above all meaning is usually the apologetic project. The desire seems a sound one, indeed almost a missional one.

The irony is that while this strategy aims to demonstrate relevance to our 'cultured despisers,' it comes across as needy and, worse still, boring. At times it reduces all religion to the outward expression of inner feeling, a private matter out of public view and influence. It often gives the impression that Christians do not have anything to say or feel or think that a good atheist does not already grasp from affective delight, one of the multiple forms of authentic individualism, or current cultural causes. We imagine apologetic theology as heroic, edgy and courageous, when in fact it has become a more-or-less sophisticated act of conformity to the ambiance of moment. Christians often end up in a reductive-therapeutic-theistic fog when the solvent of relevance-to-the-moment and 'public'[3] norms of intelligibility dissolve Christian confession. Instead of the spicy particularity of the Triune God, who comes among us as Jesus to rescue us from ruin and effect the transformation of all things, we can get a saccharine, same-saying substitute. We aim at relevance; we get redundance.

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1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 2-3, 550.

2 Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 184.

3 The idea that there is a 'general public' is a problematic assumption. Even the phrase 'public norms of intelligibility' is not a way of speaking that has currency across multiple cultural publics.

This conformity is a problem for the church. It means that instead of expanding the imaginative register of our time and place, we appear to be serving up what everyone already knows better from elsewhere. Remember we live in a time when six of the seven deadly sins are medical conditions – and pride is a virtue. Philosophical systems, therapeutic expressions and cultural causes become the template into which Christian confession is pressed and the unique story of Scripture is denuded of its life-giving offer. Flannery O'Connor said, 'you will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd.' The delightful oddness of Christian theology is doped down when we get too anxious about providing answers to the questions of the time. Theology becomes uninteresting when we think of the Christian faith as answerable to an obligatory God-bereft picture of the world and its problems.

I suspect, instead, that a patient exposition of the content of Christian faith raises the most pertinent questions. The burning issues of the day arise from a gospel reading of the world. Christian relevance is best demonstrated in the prophetic tension that confession of the God of the Gospel creates with the times, systems of thought and causes that are in circulation. *Vive la différence* is a more faithful approach to theological endeavour in the light of the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. And strangely, the relevance of Christian confession to the 'situation' may be best demonstrated by the distinct sense-making contributions, the framing of where in the world we are, that Christians can make to cultural common life out the distinct shape of Christian confession.

In what follows, I want to address some of the intellectual and practical temptations that theology faces and detail some of the practices and convictions that might help hold us accountable to the odd particularity of Christian confession when we engage in theological study. The recommendation of these practices is rooted in the subject matter of theology: God. Just before that, I want to anticipate two objections. There are at least two things that holding ourselves accountable to Christian particularity, an unapologetic approach to Christian theology, does not mean.

First: this approach does not mean that we absent ourselves from inter-disciplinary study and engagement, from ad hoc borrowings and learning from various fields of endeavour and from joint-efforts with a series of conversation partners. Christians have always taught the faith in the language and thought forms of their time. It is not only unavoidable, it is desirable. We want to communicate the meaning of our confession. At their worst our predecessors got co-opted by the thought forms of the time and confused that with Christian confession. At their best, our forebearers in the faith bent those thought forms into the service of the grammar of Christian confession. They used the language and concepts

available in their day to make the same theological judgements the Bible does about God, and everything else in relation to God, in a language appropriate to their time and place. That's not translation; it is more re-description and reiteration.[4] It is *andenken*,[5] thinking the thoughts of Scripture after Scripture, a sort of intellectual-spiritual discipleship in which redeemed reason follows the story and provides commentary that always directs attention back to the story Scripture tells and never dispenses with the story for another system or idiom or ethos. Our mothers and fathers in the faith wanted to communicate to their contemporaries; and so, they bent and contorted language and concepts – 'they dug out of the mines of God's providence, which are everywhere scattered abroad'[6] – to serve faithful communication of the content of Christian confession. Fidelity to the system from which language was borrowed got subverted, in the best cases, to the grammar of the Christian story as Scripture tells it. Sometimes to get what the Christian message entails nothing less than conversion, detoxification and a senior seminar (catechesis) are required.

Second: holding to Christian particularity, even before audience engagement and internalizing the so-called public norms of intelligibility, does not inhibit Christian participation in public life. In the pluralistic society in which we live, we ought to look for partners as we witness to the reign of God and the coming reconciliation of all things through Jesus Christ. And we can do this with all sorts of humane movements of our time. People who do not share Christian convictions also work for the good of the world in ways Christians recognize as consistent with the faith Christians confess. Where we observe common cause or 'overlapping consensus'[7] around seminal issues or challenges, we share in the work in Jesus' name with our neighbours. People of other faiths and of good will have their own motivations and interests born of deep conviction, as do Christians. The motivations may not be the same but the commitment to the work of human fullness in specific instances will be the same.

And so, let's return to an inventory of the practices and convictions appropriate to engagement in theological study – in the broadest sense – that help fortify us against the temptation of dissolving Christian confes-

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4 See Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p. xix.

5 Paul Ricoeur uses this term to describe 'a call to reflection or meditation' in response to encounter with biblical discourse. See *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with Francios Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 149.

6 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans., J.F. Shaw (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2009), p. 75.

7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 532.

sion into religious Esperanto. We can work these in any order since they are connected and overlap. There are at least five: 1) remember: theology is not anthropology; 2) engage in charitable reading; 3) adopt a teachable frame; 4) be alert: danger lurks in generalities (including this one) and; 5) before we speak (or write), we are spoken to by God.

THEOLOGY IS NOT ANTHROPOLOGY (OR SOCIOLOGY OR POLITICS OR ETHICS OR CULTURAL CAUSES, ETC., . . .)

This section heading is part of a longer phrase spoken by Karl Barth. He said that 'theology is not anthropology spoken in a really loud voice.'[8] The subject matter of theology is God, and then everything else in relation to God. Barth spotted a problem that is still very much with us. We start off intending to speak of God and then subtly but surely begin to transfer the weight to anthropology – our morals, our experiences, our causes. We even apply for grants to study the physiological and biochemistry of religious experiences and inquire after the social function of religion in descriptive fashion that focuses only on human actors and historical artefacts. These kinds of studies serve some good ends – the ends of moving beyond excavation to exegesis. They could matter to the theological exegesis of Scripture. However, excavation is not theology since attention here is not on God as the subject of the text and the active agent in interpretation, but the social world of a text's production.[9] The subject matter of theology is God. Theologians, while not unconcerned with religious experience and aspects of the ancient world, focus their attention not just on the generated but on the generative. We rivet our attention on the ways and works of the Triune God as these are revealed to us through Holy Scripture in the power of the Spirit and witnessed to in the history of the church's testimony. God is a difficult subject matter and so often the closer theology gets to the university, the more colonized by the 'immanent frame'[10] it becomes. Instead of Scripture study, we get biblical studies. Instead of theological study, we get religious studies. The defining feature of both moves is that it brackets God out of consideration in the interest of objectivity, which is really agnosticism as default position.

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8 Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 14. This phrase can be found throughout Barth's work.

9 Robert Alter notes that much biblical interpretation focuses on 'unscrambling to omelette' not tasting it. *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York, 1992), p. 133.

10 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 550.

Those who have been educated lately know that 'context is everything.' We post-moderns understand the situatedness of all work, all our interpretation, all our claims. We interpret Scripture and theological texts with agendas and in the light of problems of a time and place, which is as it should be. The trouble arises when we universalize from our context, get imperious about our interpretative vantage point and impress it on other people (by 'saming' them). This inhibits their opportunity to hear a word from God in their time and place and culture and give expression to the good-news as the people they are. Colonial impress has often led to imposition and violence on the part of those who would enforce their interpretation on the world. The later move is especially perverse when Christianity gets mixed up with the imperial aspirations of the regnant order and overrides the dignity and humanity of other people in the guise of paternalism.[11] These important recognitions have become central to much theologizing of the late 20th and early 21st century. They are now collectively, a point of departure and unfortunately, at times, they have become a destination.

One of the challenges that accompanies these observations is that we have so foregrounded context, the self-description and cultural place of readers and interpreters, that the subject matter of theology, God, is occluded. The self-description of the interpreting subject or subjects and their projects overwhelm the interpreted subject matter. We can end up studying lenses and not what is looked at. I think there are at least three doctrinal considerations which insert themselves into this hermeneutic alienation from the subject matter of theology.

First, while we are creatures and so located in history and time and culture with a variety of secondary identities, our primary context as the history of Christian confession teaches is 'before God' (*Coram Deo*).[12] Whatever the microclimate of our confession, we live before God, in the presence of the one who loves the world, who sent the Son for the reconciliation of all things, and who gives the Spirit of adoption and mission. That's our context.

Second, the fellowship of the saints extends through time and space in the power of the Spirit. We need to beware of so articulating our identity, our time, our culture, our church that we cut ourselves off from the interpretative fellowship of the saints, both the living and the dead. While other Christian communities through time and across the world now each have or had their own situation in which to confess, their language

[11] See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2011), pp. 223ff.

[12] See George Stroup, *Before God* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2004).

about God is truth-intending, it gestures toward the God revealed in Jesus Christ, especially in praise and adoration. Catholicity implies that we approach them and include them, not to globalize Western church norms and struggles[13] but in a spirit of humility and teachableness with a willingness to repent for the error of our ways. None of us gestures in words and witness toward the triune God perfectly or without group-interest or error, sometimes serious and pernicious error; but that is precisely why we need to listen and speak with the church catholic.

Third, the church has a mission to witness to the reconciling action of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and so has something to say to the context. Douglas John Hall, in many ways a parent of contextual theology in Canada, has noted the perils of this good idea. He notes the tendency to treat context as fate, to reduce 'the context' to a single issue of cultural currency and to forget that the Christian message gives us things to say which might just challenge the context.[14] It may be that the relevance of the Christian confession to this time and place is its contrary message in the service of life. God enters our context to not confirm it, but to alter it, to reconcile and overturn it. The action of God in Jesus Christ creates a context, a new creation.[15]

ENGAGE IN CHARITABLE READING

When I was an undergraduate philosophy student, I was taught the principle of charity by Prof. Bernard Suits. He told us that before we begin a critique of someone's position, first we take the very best reading of the

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[13] See Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 308-15. When we do globalize North American norms and struggles, we are just as colonial as 19th century Christian mission, without the necessity to travel.

[14] Douglas John Hall, 'The Future of the Church: Critical Remembrance as Entrée to Hope', The Kenneth Cousland Lecture, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, October 16, 2013. Alan Noble makes the point: 'A disruptive witness denies the entire contemporary project of treating faith as a preference.' *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downer Grove: IVP, 2018), p. 81.

[15] It is interesting how little this gospel consideration has figured into theologies that simply answer 'the context' as it is served up by non- or pre-theological depiction. Literary scholar Rita Felski notes the effect of powerful literature. 'If we are entirely caught up in a text, we can no longer place it in a context because it is the context, imperiously dictating the terms of its reception. We are held in a condition of absorption […] transfixed and immobilized by the work and rendered unable to frame, contextualize or judge.' *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2008), p. 57.

position we subject to examination. Do not caricature or misrepresent another person's point of view or we end up shadow boxing with our own bad interpretation rather than offering a legitimate analysis of an argument. Professor Suits told me this principle is observed mostly in its violation.

Whole theological schools of thought have begun in response to a misrepresentation of the longer Christian tradition or aspects of it. For example, I have found critiques of an 'interventionist god' to be critiques of theologies of the past that, in fact, do not exist. I have not found a major Christian theologian yet that sets up a theology of creation so that God is estranged from the world God creates and therefore can only engage with creation as Creator by interloping. It is God's world, God is always already involved in it – God does not get all 'supernatural' from time-to-time. Islam, Judaism and Christianity agree – God is creating now, creation and providence are ongoing; the world is now and always 'upheld by the word of his (the Son's) power.' (Hebrews 1:3). All this to say, beware of mischaracterizing a position that is not your own. Take the strong version of what you read; do some historical study to inform your perspective for the sake of justice and charity. Check your interpretations against other interpreters. Talk to others in your class to see if your problem in understanding is, well, you.

If philosophers have a principle of charity, Christian readers should do likewise. We ought to interpret other people as our theological neighbours, whom we honour as creatures made in God's image, given to us by God for our learning and edification. We ought to linger with our neighbour's writing, as an act of love, to understand what they want to say to us. One way of thinking about interpreting those who have gone before us in the faith is as an act of 'communion with the saints.' Those who went before us, in different times and places, struggled with making sense of the faith in their circumstances, and while different from our own, there are always things to be learned, even if they fall into the errors to avoid column. When we interpret with imagination, however, often we observe analogues and precedents that are remarkably prescient for our place and time.

Lots of interpreters will emphasis distance; an imaginative interpreter seeking to learn for the sake of salvation and discipleship and praise sees proximity. Hilary of Poitiers (315-368) has things to teach us about the gendered use of language with respect to God. 'The Son was conceived in the womb of the Father,'[16] he says. By saying this he contorts what we

[16] 'On the Trinity', trans. E. W. Watson and L. Pullan, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. ix, Second Series

know of biology so that we speak more truly of God and don't simply project maleness onto God. Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), the Sister of the King of France – Francis I, can teach us about the importance of theological conversation over 'ostentatious debates' – like those of Martin Luther and John Calvin – in conversational theological writings.[17] What shocks a reader of these documents and other authors from the past is not the historical gulf between then and now, but the incredible analogical relevance and immediacy of the past to the present through retrieval. Appropriation of what these friends in the faith teach us, requires humility, sustained attention, a teachable frame and a sanctified imagination open to a word from the communion of saints. We have got to be traditioned to be creative, formed to be transformative, or we repeat the slogans of the age in which we live and call that edgy.

A practical note: we are embodied readers so pay attention to your body when you read. Sometimes reading will make us feel uncomfortable. Your hands will sweat, your hearts start to race. Be careful not to give up when this happens. Worthy texts have a way of challenging what we have always thought. Learning sometimes involves dislodgement of long held ideas, and that's threatening. The defensive move is to throw up the safeguard of theory and use sophisticated tools to protect yourself. The more hermeneutics we learn, the greater the temptation. Instead, we should go for a walk and pray. Pray that in our reading we will be permeable to what we need to hear. It could be that an author is just wrong; it could be that we are being taught, even by God. And so, we try and identify what we read that produced this discomfort. At these moments we are discovering our theology. When cherished beliefs come under scrutiny, it is disorienting. We may need to read further to be charitable to the writer. Perhaps he or she has yet to address the other side of the point or go on to a thicker account of the matter. Or perhaps, we are being reoriented by means of what we are reading. Great texts have a way of doing that especially when and where God is or becomes the active agent by whom we are taught. We all start reading as people of a time and place and we think we know what matters and where in the world we are and what our life might mean. And now, now we encounter a new thing, a new reality, and we are recontextualized in the light of it, and we start to read the world, painful as it is,

(Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), Book 12, section 8, pp. 219-20. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 215.

[17] See for example L'Heptameron of Margaret, Queen of Navarre: Selected Tales, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2006). See also Carol Thysell, *The Pleasure of Discernment: Marguerite de Navarre as Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 9.

in terms of the God about whom we are reading. It could be conversion, calling, deepening of the love of God. If we experience the grace of that kind of encounter when we are reading about God, give thanks.

ADOPT A TEACHABLE FRAME

The concept of a 'teachable frame' comes from John Calvin's commentary on the Psalms.[18] For Calvin, teachableness before the text of Scripture and other esteemed teachers is crucial. When we come to read the Bible and important theological texts, fully armed with inflexible preunderstanding, we miss the opportunity to be instructed and transformed. If reading is simply an opportunity for us to engage in criticism based on high-powered theory that is set, gelled and hardened (privileged), we will use every important text as an opportunity to hear ourselves think. Calvin's interest in prayer before the reading of Scripture, in a prayer he called the prayer for illumination, is a recognition of our need of God's help to open us up to what is strange and unusual in what we encounter in Scripture. It means that in our encounter with Scripture and in texts which are commentary on the Bible, we participate in dying and rising with Christ.

There are at least three problems encountered by students in seminaries and theological colleges where it comes to a teachable frame. One is that we are distracted with technology, constantly searching for external stimulation which makes us incapable of disciplined attention. Alan Noble writes; 'Living a distracted lifestyle does more than waste our time, it forms our minds, often in ways that are harmful for deep, sustained thought – the kind of thought so important to religious discourse.'[19] Noble, while by no means a Luddite, proposes community and individual practices, acts of discipleship, that grace our capacity for attention to God: silence, saying grace, observing sabbath, incarnate attention to the liturgy, all for the sake of stoking a disruptive witness in a distracted culture.

Another obstacle to a teachable frame is that professors can give students too much to read and, even when they do not, reading can be minimalist and consumptive. With the flood of compulsory readings coming, a theological student is liable to adopt a rather rudimentary threshold for what counts as reading. Eyes-passing-over-the-page is not reading. We as professors can subtly encourage the need for speed, which does not allow students to linger with the words, to contemplate formative matters

[18] Calvin, *Jean Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 8: Psalms, Part I*, tr. by John King, [1847-50], at sacred-texts.com - <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/calvin/cc08/cc08005.htm>, accessed August 16, 2018.

[19] Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, p. 20.

offered in texts.[20] Texts will not resound and form the reader – contaminate a reader – where speed and extraction for research are the only goals in reading. If every text is simply strip-mined for papers, following a story or an argument for its formative potential is occluded from the outset. Resource-mining which glosses texts does not allow us to share in the interpretative fellowship of the saints.

The other temptation in reading the Bible and important theological texts is born of the state of the industry in literary and critical studies. Critical reading in the academy, where most students and professors are formed before they come to theological institutions, has almost exclusively come to mean 'suspicious' reading. We have all become aware that texts are located, that authors write from a point of view and we want to interrogate the moves being worked on us, the 'normative' worlds writers assume. Reading, on this approach, is equivalent to smoking-out authors and their interested points of view, detective like. It is less suspicious of interested readers who seem to operate from an immune transcendental standpoint![21] Suspicious reading as it turns out is not so much interpretation as diagnosis, most often of power moves on the part of the author. While this mode of reading has produced some interesting and helpful results, an increasing number of literary and educational theorists note how critical-suspicious reading estranges readers from the claims texts make on us. We end up speaking power to truth.[22] It makes us unteachable; aloof to what we are called to consider. 'Standing back' and even paranoia is the posture. Diagnosis and exposure are the goals. Affective delight and 'heroic pedagogy' are very often the motivation.[23] Lack of surprise – confirmation of strong theory – is almost always the result. Some literary scholars even ask, 'Is critical reading really reading at all?'[24]

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[20] See Deborah H.C. Gin and Stacy Williams-Duncan, 'Faculty Development: perk or priority', pp. 20-22, in *In Trust* (Summer, 2018), p. 20.

[21] Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 83.

[22] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (Kindle Location 5380-5386). Bloomsbury UK. Kindle Edition, 2012. Williams writes, 'The cost of giving up talking of truth is high: it means admitting that power has the last word.' (Kindle Location 5389). See also Heinz Bude, *The Mood of the World*, trans., by Simon Garnett (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 13-14. Bude describes postmodernity's 'fear of truth' and 'fear of knowledge.'

[23] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 6-7, 186-93.

[24] Michael Warner, 'Uncritical Reading', pp. 13-39 in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed., Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 15.

I think the more devastating comment – we theological types ought to hear – is well-articulated by Rita Felski, who asks: 'Why – even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity – is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?'[25] In our vigilance against texts, we use the 'barbed-wire of criticism' to 'guard us against the risk of being contaminated and animated by the words we encounter.'[26] But that's what Christian readers want as we 'pour over the Bible' … 'in a state of reverence and joy.'[27] Critical-suspicious reading can render us impermeable to Scripture and theological teachers and texts that could instruct and form us.

For much of the contemplative Christian tradition reading is analogous to eating. Reading Scripture and important theological texts requires chewing, lingering and tasting so that the text is digested for nourishment. To use another metaphor, the serious religious reader becomes a 'resonant manifold' – a chamber in which the text sounds and resounds so that meaning echoes in our lives.[28] This way of putting it draws our attention to sensuous wholistic engagement with Scripture, theological texts and traditions.[29] Commenting on the sources from which John Calvin drew his understanding of reading the Bible, Wesley Kort, notes his use of monastic practices of *lectio divina*. This way of reading was designed to allow biblical texts to have their maximum effect on the reader 'even to be inscribed on the reader's body.'[30] Reading and hearing are acts of communion with God, first with words and concepts and images; *lectio* is inseparable from meditation, from prayer and contemplation. The Bible is, as one of Calvin's favourite authors, Bernard of Clairvaux, put it, 'the wine cellar of the Holy Spirit.'[31] By reading one receives the text with the palate of the heart. And because of God's agency by means of the Bible, Scripture reading is 'inexhaustible fecund' and 'intoxicating' such that the Bible, and formative theological texts, can never be discarded or dominated.[32]

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25 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 13.

26 Ibid., p. 12.

27 Ibid., p. 55.

28 Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading* (New York: Oxford, 1999), pp. 47-48.

29 See for example Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), pp. 55ff.

30 Wesley Kort, *Take; Read: Scripture, Contextuality and Cultural Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 19-36.

31 Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, p. 42.

32 Ibid.

Let me show you an example of how reading Scripture works for Basil the Great (330-379). Here is the beginning and the end of a sermon on Genesis. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' is the text on which he preaches. It is quite disorienting for us to listen to him instruct us on how to comport ourselves for theological study of Scripture and the ends toward which Scripture interpretation moves.

> What ear is worthy to hear such a tale? How earnestly the soul should prepare itself for such high lessons! How pure it should be from carnal affections, how unclouded by worldly disquietudes, how active and ardent in its researches, how eager to find in its surroundings an idea of God which may be worthy of Him!
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> 'God created the Heavens and the Earth.' Let us glorify the supreme Artificer for all that was wisely and skillfully made; by the beauty of things let us raise ourselves to Him who is above all beauty; by the grandeur of bodies, sensible and limited in their nature, let us conceive of the infinite Being whose immensity and omnipotence surpass all the efforts of the imagination. [33]

The interpretation of Scripture, engaging with the doctrine of creation in this case, will require nothing less than the conversion of the interpreter. When a person takes up what is a holy enterprise, holiness is required. We are not worthy of this kind of familiarity with God's word and work; but can be made so. And Basil is not speaking about the acquisition of interpretative tools and hermeneutical prowess, of 'herding divine realities into the approved pens of dialectical arguments and critical studies.'[34] We need to shake off the uneasiness and anxiety that the false aspirations of the flesh and the twitchy multi-tasking 21st century world engender. This includes the affective delight of showing ourselves smarter than the 'interested' author, a critic of the naïve. Without freedom from carnality and disquietude, talk about God goes straight into the service of our personal projects, political aspirations and hardened ideologies. And then instead of loosing ourselves to the doxology and God's cause in the world, we praise ourselves and use God to promote career aspirations.

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[33] Basil, Translated by Blomfield Jackson. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 8. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/32011.htm>. *The Hexaemeron*, Homily I, 'In the Beginning God made the heaven and the Earth', accessed August 16, 2018.

[34] Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 3.

Basil insists that interpretation is hard work; it will require us to be 'active and ardent in our research.' This diligence, spiritual and intellectual, is in the service of finding ways of speaking of God that are worthy of God. Sanctified reason scans the world for ideas that do not diminish but extol God. Basil promotes passionate creativity that searches for analogical language worthy to express the eminence of God in ways that are congruent with the scriptural story. He knows the 'weakness of our intelligence' to 'penetrate the depth of the thought' in the Bible. But he also knows the power of the words of Scripture inspired by the Spirit to produce salvation in those who hear them. The goal of interpreting Scripture is not to display our genius, but to get caught up in the work of salvation by God. Learning Scripture, and theology, is to be taught by God about God.

Where real engagement with Scripture takes place, it moves interpreters to the praise of God. Here the language soars in glorification of God who makes all things, whose beauty is above all things beautiful and whose Being is no simple extension of sensible and finite things but is one-of-a-kind and surpasses all our attempts to speak of God. And yet, by visible and finite things we raise ourselves up to the invisible and infinite God. We get summoned to 'conceive of the infinite Being […] who surpasses all the efforts of our imagination.'

That's the exact space in which theology works: to conceive of the One who eludes our grasp with the very best analogical language we can muster guided by Scripture, taught by the church's teachers and empowered by the Spirit. This requires spiritual discipline and awed attention. And it is a task that is not in vain. Christians are not agnostics. We are enabled to speak of the infinite. The confidence to do so is grounded not in our abilities but in God's movement toward us: the incarnation. Stephen Pardue states the meaning of incarnation for speech about God: 'The Lord of heaven is in the habit of crossing boundaries, and thereby bringing fecundity where barrenness otherwise reigns.'[35] It is not within our natural grasp to speak truly of God. However, words can bear witness to God, in partial and clumsy but true ways accommodated to human capacity when they get enlarged by divine grace. Theological learning requires a teachable frame, so we are taught by God, through human teachers, and so that with sanctified intelligence we borrow language fit to extol God, which is the proper end of our learning.

[35] Stephen T. Pardue, *The Mind of Christ: Humility and the Intellect in Early Christian Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 182.

DANGER LURKS IN GENERALITY

The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana said, 'The attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular.'[36] The point is a crucial one in theological study. We can lose everything that makes Christianity, and other faith traditions, interesting by the quick move to talk about religion in general. People do not speak language in general. And so it is with religions. People are not religious in general, they belong to distinct traditions which embody and inscribe beliefs, practices and ways of disposing lives together.

It may be one of the lingering habits of modernity to move quickly to general categories so that particular things become instances of a class. This move can inhibit real surprise, unique practices and beliefs and odd features for purposes of classification and policing reality. I am not sure there is even such a thing as religion in general. There are religions, even religions that have some common formal features. However, as soon as we press into the language and structure and practice of a faith tradition, we begin to observe subtlety and uniqueness related to the local. We use general language to handle groups of things for the sake of communicative ease. That's impossible to avoid; it is a gift that helps professors name their courses and draw disparate things together so that we have subject matter and a course outline. The difficulty arises when we mistake the general term for the subtle realities we gather under that banner. It is quite possible to have a course on sacred texts or religious communities. It may also be quite possible to observe overlap and intersection between them – commonalities and similarities certainly exist. But to reify general terms like 'sacred text' as though the Christian Bible, the Tanakh, the Koran and the Vedas are instances of class is a fallacy that distorts each of them. Every one of these texts is most at home in the community for which they function authoritatively – like Orca in the ocean. Each of these texts is embedded in a world of practice and reading and theological understanding. Remove them from their natural habitat to a clinical world for observation and examination and they are Orca in an aquarium – behaving out of keeping with their nature because domesticated.[37]

Where doctrinal discussion takes place in Christian theological study the same difficulty arises. Formal features can replace the storied world of Scripture which is the primary basis of Christian belief. If someone

[36] George Santayana, *Reason in Religion*, vol. 3 in *The Life of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), p. 5.

[37] Thanks to my colleague Ross Lockhart for this helpful oceanic metaphor.

asks me to tell them about my spouse, I don't say, 'she's a biped.'[38] That's a formal feature, an abstraction. To describe my spouse, I'd tell stories about how we met, what she loves, what her family of birth is like. The significant doctrines (teachings) of the Christian faith are related directly to the long story that is the Bible, Holy Scripture, read according to a Trinitarian pattern with a Christ-centred focus, as the creeds of the church teach us. Doctrines are secondary commentary on the story; not designed to replace it with higher order conceptual precision. When Christians speak and write about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and salvation they have a particular story, read by particular people, with a particular pattern, in mind. 'God' is a cypher-term until we identify which God we are speaking about. Christians identify this God through the long narrative of the Bible. This is the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is this God identified with these people, who creates the world and people and makes and keeps covenant promises with Israel for the sake of the world. This is a God who comes among us as one of us, who lives, dies and rises again for our salvation as Jesus Christ and sends the Holy Spirit to direct the transformation of all things to God's good ends. That's not God in general, an instance of a general class. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, 'don't think, but look.'[39]

BEFORE WE SPEAK, WE ARE SPOKEN TO

The assumption that we can speak of God in theological study is a big one and it is an arrogant one if we believe we can manufacture this speech out of the residue of our interiority, community experience, naked observation of the world or current cultural trends. The danger is as Voltaire noted: 'God made man in God's image, and man returned the favour.' Idolatry is a perpetual danger in 'constructive' theology and it is especially acute when theology is forgetful of divine initiative and divine disclosure.

In the history of Christian theology, revelation is what generates our salvation and our thankful, awestruck, bewildered speech about God. We meet God in the places where God has chosen to meet us. And the good news is that God, if the author of Hebrews is right, is loquacious. If we have a problem around God speaking, it will be that God is way too communicative. Based on biblical testimony that's what happens to Isaiah and John of Patmos and to people whom Jesus delivered with a word. They were all gob smacked; amazed. They asked, 'Who is this?' said, 'he speaks

[38] Thanks to my friend Bishop William Willimon for this example of abstraction from the personal to the conceptual.

[39] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), #66.

with authority.' Stammering witness to what disorients and reorients finds a voice. This God wants to be known and loved. This God desires fellowship; opens a conversation[40] with the creatures in the world God made. This God chooses not to be God without us. And so, God talks 'baby talk,' says Martin Luther. God accommodates to our condition, says John Calvin, so that we can receive words about God, experience fellowship and life as God intended it.[41] Behind both these statement lies the doctrine of the incarnation. We understand in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word become flesh, that creaturely reality, flesh and language, is graced to accommodate divine speech. We can know God, not exhaustively, but truly through God's effective downward reach toward us and entry into the human condition. God can effectively deliver the message of reconciliation. 'The Holy Spirit is no skeptic.'[42]

Having been spoken to, the church speaks. Christians, including theologians, are witnesses with words to what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ. Lately, the church and some of its theologians seem to draw back a bit from speaking about God, as a humble gesture. There is wisdom in this. Apophatic theology ('negative theology' which articulates what we don't know about God since God is beyond any final formulation) is a noble part of the mystic traditions of Christian theology. God's infinity and beauty and grandeur exceed our comprehension, always and everywhere. Awe is the human gesture Scripture records before the revelation of God.

There is, however, more than one kind of apophatic theology. Some of what passes for 'apophatic' theology is more akin to agnosticism born of Enlightenment philosophy around epistemological limits. We have no sensible experience of God, according to Kant, and so no real knowledge of God. This approach to the limits of theological language is, it seems to me, simply a denial of revelation; that is, that God can effectively make God's self known through Jesus of Nazareth. Apophatic theology of this sort may not be about humility but rather an attempt to press revelation into a theory.[43]

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40 Robert Jenson maintains that the possibility of conversation with God is what it means to be made in God's image. *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live* (New York: Oxford, 2016), pp. 4, 14-16, 68-69.

41 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed., John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.13.1.

42 Martin Luther, in Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, gen. eds., *Luther's Works*, vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, Philip Watson, ed., 'The Bondage of the Will', trans. by Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 24.

43 For a detailed discussion of differences between 'classical apophaticism' and its modern Kantian versions with examples see Denys Turner, *The Darkness*

Negative theology, in the history of the Christian church, is less sanguine where it comes to speech about God. It is often accompanied by a more kataphatic confidence; that is, while we can cannot say everything about God, we can truly, but never exhaustively, speak of God by grace. It affirms that we cannot *finally* capture who God is in our formulations; but also that this is a joy, not a reason for silence. The inability ever to reach closure in our speech about God,

> doesn't lead them to conclude that nothing can be said of God. What they affirm is that no form of words, however true as far as it goes, is going to be fully adequate; there is always more to say (even in heaven). This is a theology that is hopeful because of the conviction that there is always more, and that this 'more' is always more compelling and wonderful.[44]

And so, we speak of God as those who have heard and are provoked to praise. We pray for deliverance and take up practices to temper our carnal affections and worldly disquietudes and, like Basil, we scan the world in search of analogical language which may be worthy of God. In Christian theology, we take up the invitation 'to conceive of the infinite Being whose immensity and omnipotence surpass all the efforts of the imagination.' And so we pray . . . 'Come Holy Spirit.'

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of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), cited in Pardue, *The Mind of Christ*, p. 178.

[44] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (Kindle Location 1408-1414). (Bloomsbury UK. Kindle Edition, 2012). See also the lucid treatment of apophatic and kataphatic traditions in Rigby, *Holding Faith*, pp. 19-25.