

The Christian Confession of God in the World of the Religions

By

Donald Wood

University of Aberdeen

and

David Gilland

Leuphana Universität Lüneburg

Published by The University of Aberdeen – Aberdeen University Research Archive (AURA)

October 2013

<http://aura.abdn.ac.uk>

Published in AURA with the kind permission of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

The Christian Confession of God in the World of the Religions

Donald Wood (University of Aberdeen) and David Gilland (Leuphana Universität Lüneburg)

Draft for publication in translation as ‘Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Gott in der Welt der Religionen’ in M. Mühling, ed., *Gott in den Religionen (Grundwissen Christentums)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

Christian confession, religious pluralism, and the knowledge of God

From its earliest beginnings, the Christian church has confessed its faith in God the Father of Jesus Christ. In doing so, it continually has realised and publicly exhibited its own distinctive identity in the world: ‘Even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth ... yet we acknowledge only one God—the Father—from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and only one Lord—Jesus Christ—through whom are all things and through whom we exist.’ (1 Corinthians 8.5–6).¹ Christian theology, broadly understood, is the church’s intellectual inhabitation of its confession, faith’s endeavour to know this God and all things in relation to God as their origin and end.²

Much recent study of early Christianity has sought to cast light on the complex and often conflicted processes of identity formation in which the first Christian churches forged a new communal sense of self by differentiating themselves in many and varying ways from culturally significant ‘others’. These nascent Christian communities—as also first-century ‘Judaism’ (itself a term of convenience for a complex, mobile network of social relations)—distinguished their faith from popular pagan polytheism and the ‘soft’ monotheisms of the philosophical schools by their commitment to a ‘hard’, particularist monotheism: for us there is only *one* God, and

¹ See Otfried Hofius, ‘«Einer ist Gott – Einer ist Herr»: Erwägungen zu Struktur und Aussage des Bekenntnisses 1.Kor 8,6’, in M. Evang, H. Merklein und M. Wolter (eds), *Eschatologie und Schöpfung: Festschrift für Erich Gräßler zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1997), pp. 95–108.

² Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q1, a7: *Omnia autem pertractantur in sacra doctrina sub ratione Dei, vel quia sunt ipse Deus; vel quia habent ordinem ad Deum, ut ad principium et finem.*

this God properly bears *this* name.³ But the followers of Jesus Christ also actively distinguished themselves within and from developing Judaism through christologically informed practices of devotion, instruction, and service.⁴ Christian confession, accordingly, took shape not as a rejection or dilution of Jewish monotheism but as its christological specification: for us there is one God *and one Lord*. The one God, these Christians said, is the ‘Father’, one properly named in relation to Jesus, the Son of God who in the fulness of time has been manifest as Israel’s messiah and appointed creation’s Lord.

This orientation to the cultural pragmatics of early Christian confession of God resonates with many recent discussions of the transformation of Christian identity in the late-modern west. Some such accounts focus on the ‘Erosion der gesellschaftlichen Bedeutung der Religion’ in post-Reformation Europe and predict a continuing decline of public adherence to the Christian faith.⁵ For others, the collapse of the cultural hegemony of Christianity in the west is an opportunity for Christian communities to recover a sense of Christian distinctiveness in conversation with many religious others. Thus in the analysis of Christoph Schwöbel, the key term is not ‘secularization’ but ‘pluralism’, and to understand our current situation after the demise of Christendom, we need to recognise it as marking ‘the return of the situation of the early church, when the still young Christian movement had to determine its identity through the determination of the identity of the God in whom Christians believed.’⁶ Thus a theologically informed investigation of ‘[d]ie Grundprobleme der Verständigung und des Zusammenlebens im religiös-weltanschaulichen Pluralismus’⁷ requires Christian theology reach back to the theological explorations of the early church, seeking to recover the intellectual integrity and cultural provocation of classical Christian doctrine—a provocation which for Schwöbel is distilled in the

³ Cf. A.J. Droge, ‘Self-definition *vis-à-vis* the Greco-Roman world’, in Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, *Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 1: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 230–44.

⁴ On early Christian devotion to Christ, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵ See Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gärtner, Nicole Kock, eds, *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), p. 16; Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Christoph Schwöbel, ‘Trinitätslehre. Eine Skizze’, in *Gott im Gespräch. Theologische Studien zur Gegenwartsdeutung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 407–22 (407).

⁷ Christoph Schwöbel, *Gespräch*, p. xii.

fourth-century trinitarian doctrine of the Christian east, in the conceptual innovations of the so-called Cappadocian fathers:

eine christliche-theologische Auseinandersetzung mit den Problemen des religiös-weltanschaulichen Pluralismus ihre Pointe verfehlen würde, wenn sie nicht daran erinnern ließe, daß in der Denkgeschichte des Christentums eine eigene Lösung des für den Pluralismus grundlegenden Problems von Einheit und Vielfalt entwickelt worden und in der Trinitätslehre, vor allem den in der kappadozischen Tradition und verwandten Traditionen im Westen anzusiedelnden Konzeptionen, eine präzise begriffliche Formulierung gefunden hat. Sie hat ihren begrifflich genauen Ausdruck in der Unterscheidung und Beziehung von *hypostasis* und *ousia* gefunden und der damit behaupteten Gleichursprünglichkeit von Einheit und Vielheit in der Trinität.⁸

The task before us is twofold: first, to set forth in brief outline the scriptural basis, early development, and creedal formulation of the doctrine of the trinity as the basis for contemporary Christian theological engagement with the characterisation of God in other faith traditions; and to do so, secondly, in view of the reconsideration of the grounds and ends of trinitarian theology in some representative Christian theologies of the modern west. In pursuit of this twofold agenda, we necessarily will find ourselves drawn us into the orbit of these recent attempts to trace the dynamics of Christian identity formation through cultural self-differentiation. In taking note of their central themes, major emphases, and characteristic idiom, however, must to exercise a twofold caution. First, we should not simply assume a theological understanding of the contemporary cultural and political situation of the Christian church will easily conform to analyses presumed in other forms of public discourse. Christian theology is not beholden to anthropology and sociology; where it does make use of the language of 'identity formation', 'religious pluralism' and so on, it does for

⁸ Christoph Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. x; cf. Schwöbel, *Gespräch*, p. xix: 'Mit ihrer Behauptung, daß Gott zugleich in der Dreiheit der trinitarischen Personen von Vater, Sohn, und Geist und in der Einheit des göttlichen Wesens ist, vertritt sie [viz., the Cappadocians] die These der Gleichursprünglichkeit von Einheit und Vielfalt für das Sein des trinitarischen Gottes, die sich darum in der radikalen Unterscheidung von Gottes schöpferischem Sein und dem geschöpflichen Sein von Welt und Mensch auch in Gottes Werken niederschlägt'. Recent patristic scholarship has shown a certain impatience with such systematic-theological recommendations of the trinitarian theology of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers, especially when it is portrayed in sharp contrast to a putatively monist conception of divine action in the western-Augustinian tradition. R. Kany, *Augustins Trinitätsdenken. Bilanz, Kritik und Weiterführung der modernen Forschung zu „De trinitate“* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), offers a clear review of the relevant literature with even-handed analysis.

its own reasons and on its own terms.⁹ Second, we must beware allowing an interest in the communicative pragmatics of Christian confession to obscure the simple fact that on its own terms the church's confession is not principally an act of communal *poesis* but an act of *acknowledgment*, one evoked by God's disclosure of his identity and his will for creation.

Explication of this latter insight entails both a negation and an affirmation. On the one hand, in its confession, the Christian church acknowledges that God is not known otherwise than in his free self-disclosure (God lives beyond coercion and discovery, never unwillingly or unwittingly known as the one he is). This negation, however, follows from a prior affirmation: God graciously has made himself known as the one he is. 'The Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness' (Deut. 5.24); 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1.18). The church's acknowledgement of God and his works thus finds its ultimate basis and norm in divine *revelation*.¹⁰

In the church's deference to God's self-presentation, a special place is accorded to the faithful reading of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which are understood at once as a unique documentary issue and instrument of divine revelation and as the prime textual motive of the church's confession. In this respect, Christian theology may be characterised simply as a matter of 'being formed and forming others by Holy Scripture'.¹¹ And the presiding question in the Christian doctrine of God may be specified as the conformity of the church's confession of God to the reality of God in his self-presentation, a question which continually is put to the church by scripture in fulfilment of its divinely ordered role as 'canon'.

⁹ Schwöbel speaks of the need 'die Situation des Pluralismus selbst theologisch zu verstehen' (*Pluralismus*, p. xii).

¹⁰ Hilary, *De Trinitate* 5.21 (PL 10, 143A): 'A Deo discendum est, quid de Deo intelligendum sit: quia non nisi se auctore cognoscitur.' Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 189: 'If the knowledge of God be understood in such a way that in our own strength we can wrest from deity the secret of its nature, deity is lacking from the very outset. This kind of knowledge would not be knowledge of God, for it would contradict the concept of God. Hence the knowledge of God is possible only by revelation.' The theological utility of Pannenberg's formulation turns on a frank admission of its circularity: If the 'concept of God' is not itself a deliverance of revelation, it cannot form the basis for an argument that all human knowledge of God rests on revelation.

¹¹ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 28.1 (see J. Barbel, ed. *Gregor von Nazianz. Die fünf theologischen Reden*. Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1963, p. 62): τῆ γραφῆ τυπωθέντες τε καὶ τυπώσαντες.

According to the testimony of Israel's prophets, God freely wills to be, and wills to be known as, the creator of all things and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 'I am the Lord your God ... I who stretch out the heavens, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, "You are my people"' (Isa. 51.15–16). Israel's confession of its God therefore involves recognition both of God's gracious faithfulness to his chosen, wayward people and of his loving rule of all creatures, which in their own manner also are called to glad acknowledgement of their creator and also are implicated in Israel's destiny.¹²

Precisely in creation and in the election of Israel—in identifying himself as the unrivalled origin and governor of all things and as the Lord of his covenant people—God distinguishes himself from any and all creatures and also from all manufactured gods, manifesting himself to Israel as the uniquely glorious and gracious Lord, beyond all creaturely comparison or classification. 'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save. To whom will you liken me and make me equal?' (Isa. 46.4–5). The relationship between God and Israel is not less than fully rational: 'Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord' (Isa. 1.18); but here created reason is called to acknowledge a difference beyond its containment: 'as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isa. 55.9). Israel knew its sinfulness as an inhibition of its knowledge of God (cf. Jer. 4.22; Hosea 4.1–6); but the incomprehensibility of God is not coincident with human sinfulness. Already as the creator, God exceeds all created vision and comprehension; even the most exalted heavenly creature is denied direct sight of God (cf. Isa. 6.2).¹³

In the New Testament, this twofold divine self-manifestation and self-distinction assumes explicitly christological and trinitarian dimensions. The one, true God, the creator of all things and Israel's Lord, now manifests himself by the Spirit as

¹² See Psalm 136, 145, 148 *et multa alia*.

¹³ This holds whether one understands the seraphim depicted in this passage to be covering their own faces or (as in the exegetical tradition represented in Origen, *De Principiis* IV 3,14) the face of God. Among many patristic formulations of the theological principle, see Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 2.69: 'The barrier which separates uncreated nature from created being is great and impenetrable' (πολὺ γὰρ τὸ μέσον καὶ ἀδιεξίτητον, ᾧ πρὸς τὴν κτιστὴν οὐσίαν ἡ ἄκτιστος φύσις διατετείχισται) (in the translation of S.G. Hall (see L. Kafiková, S. Douglass, and J. Zachhuber, eds, *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II. An English Version with Supporting Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 74)).

the Father of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son through whom and for whom all things are created (cf. Col. 1.15–20; Eph. 1. Heb. 1.1–2). Accordingly, the relationship between God and the world inaugurated in creation and upheld in Israel’s election henceforth is to be proclaimed and acknowledged in all creation with reference to the relation between the Father and the Son realised and recognised in the Spirit. Here appears a ‘new self-identification of God in history’, one that ‘does not annul his earlier self-identification as the God of Israel, but which opens a new chapter in the history of God with humanity’.¹⁴

In complex continuity with the faith of canonical Israel, then, we see in the texts of the New Testament the early Christian church confessing the Father of Jesus Christ as the one creator of all and as the one Lord of the covenant. And we observe it doing so through scripturally disciplined patterns of speech—in acclamation, invocation, and proclamation—marked at once both by strict regard for the infrangible distinction between the uncreated creator and the creature and by an equally strict commitment to the trinitarian shape of God’s enacted faithfulness to his covenant with Israel, now opened to all those, both Jew and Gentile, who by the Spirit have been united in faith with the Father’s unique Son.

Here we encounter the particular freedom and pathos of Christian confession of God: On the one hand, the church that exists in praise and service of the God of the gospel is liberated from merely local religious affiliation or political allegiance. Finding itself directed by its crucified, risen, living Lord to bear and be borne by the gospel into the whole world, it is a properly ‘apostolic’ and ‘catholic’ community—a people sent with an announcement of universal significance, drawn into the freedom of the Spirit’s movement in the world. But the church that is segregated by God to this particular service, finding itself united precisely in its singular confession of one God as wholly free creator and as wholly faithful redeemer—the church that confesses itself to be ‘one’ and ‘holy’—suffers with and in the world which finds the gospel an perpetual offense.

The early development of the Christian doctrine of God

¹⁴ C. Schwöbel, ‘Trinitätslehre’, p. 412.

The church's early mission to the Jews and to the Gentiles is, theologically conceived, at once a profound spiritual mystery and a matter of quite considerable historiographical delicacy. Reduced to its simplest outline, and refracted through the scriptural themes we have traced thus far, the church's earliest movements may be told as its continual confrontation with a twofold temptation: on the one hand, to obscure the proper distinction-in-relation of the creator and creature; and, on the other hand, to admit a flattening of or rupture in the history of God's dealings with his people. The ways in which these two basic temptations shaped early Christian confession, the processes by which they were identified *as* temptations and resisted, and the extent to which they were overcome, require expansive narration and resist simple distillation. The church, of course, never encountered either temptation in isolation; in some measure, every moment of Christian witness was an occasion both to confess the absolute freedom of the creator and his astonishing faithfulness to creation. In concrete scriptural terms: 'the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 4.33). But its early encounters with the cultures of Mediterranean antiquity, the apostolic church found itself confessing the triune God by speaking of the resurrection now with this emphasis and now with that, now with particular insistence on the immeasurable power at work in this event and now with concern especially for the depth of the divine wisdom that shines forth in it, now under the aspect of freedom and now of faithfulness

Thus, confronting a first great threat to the church's unified confession, the apostles took up with special urgency the question of the proper continuity of God's saving action in face of the unanticipated working of the Spirit among the Gentiles. The issue is not wholly resolved in the New Testament, but two limit conditions are identified. On the one hand, in face of a so-called Judaizing trajectory, the church must not fail to acknowledge the genuine novelty of God's work in Jesus Christ attested by the Spirit of Pentecost (cf. Acts 15); on the other, against any form of spiritual forgetfulness, it must not conceive of this novelty as sheer displacement of God's earlier works—the Gentile church must understand itself, precisely as the adopted children of God, as taken up into the embracing history of God's dealings

with Israel (cf. Rom. 9–11).¹⁵ In the later second century, in the formative diagnosis of Irenaeus, we find these two limiting possibilities named heresies, to be rejected by the catholic church under the names Ebionitism and Marcionism.

Again, in a second threat to the church's confession, we see already in the New Testament the possibility that the God of the gospel may be understood, not as the free creator of all things, but as in some manner a restricted god. This restriction may be understood variously: God may be conceived as a needful deity, one who requires material provision and human service; conversely, God may be understood as one to whom materiality is repellant and for whom direct involvement with embodied human existence is unthinkable. And we see in the apostolic gospel a continual insistence at once upon the radical transcendence of God, the one who lives from himself, beyond need, beyond creaturely conditioning, the one who has life and gives it (cf. Acts 17.24–5), and upon his presence in his own creation in the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit to restore and to perfect the world fallen from its original goodness.¹⁶ In Irenaeus, we find this apostolic tradition maintained especially against the cosmological dualism and complex theology of mediation developed amongst the Valentinians.¹⁷ For Irenaeus, God the Father of Jesus Christ is not other than the sole creator of heaven and earth; the Father's claim upon creation enacted and announced in the incarnation of Jesus Christ is original, immediate, and comprehensive; the goodness that properly is a predicate of God alone derivatively is a predicate of creation in all its aspects, both spiritual and material; and in Jesus Christ this goodness is graciously reaffirmed and restored to all creatures.¹⁸ More closely, the human creature, 'a mixture of soul and flesh', is not brought into being by

¹⁵ The mode of apostolic reasoning about the significance of incarnation and pentecost—the pervasive sense that these events must be depicted and understood precisely through immediate and intensive engagement with Israel's scriptures—itself is as telling as any discrete apostolic affirmation of God's abiding interest in Israel.

¹⁶ In formal regulative terms: When speaking of the divine transcendence, Christian theology must 'avoid both a simple univocal attribution of predicates to God and the world and a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates'; when speaking of God's creative agency, it must 'avoid ... all suggestion of limitation in scope or manner' (K. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology. Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 47).

¹⁷ On the need to develop a 'non-Irenaeian paradigm for understanding the second-century' which resists the widespread habit of speaking of Irenaeus' opponents (the disciples of Marcion, Valentinus, and so on) generically as 'gnostics', see David Brakke, 'Self-differentiation among Christian groups: the Gnostics and their opponents' (*Cambridge History of Christianity* I:245–60; the quotation is from p. 246).

¹⁸ M.C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 73.

a demiurge or by angelic agency but is formed and molded in the image of God by God the Son and God the Spirit, the ‘two hands’ of God the Father.¹⁹ The whole human creature, in both its spiritual and physical determinants, is the object of the one God’s creative intention; this intention is enacted by the Son and the Spirit, who thus have an original share in the uniquely divine activity of creation. It follows that the salvation of humanity in Jesus Christ entails the restoration and perfection of the flesh, not an escape from it; and that the Son and Spirit act with nothing less than divine authority in their saving work.

We see, then, in Irenaeus’ work, a properly trinitarian vision of God’s unified creative and redemptive activity—one that to a remarkable degree anticipates some of the central affirmations of fourth-century Nicene Christianity. In a recent distillation:

the creation and the salvation of human beings are the work of God insofar as he is Trinity. The divine action is one, and its modality is essentially Trinitarian. The same God the Trinity who leads humans to the fulfillment of their vocation is the God who created them. And God creates like he saves, that is to say, in a Trinitarian manner: the Father creates and saves through his Son and Spirit.²⁰

Ingredient in this understanding of the trinitarian nature of the whole course of God’s dealings with creation—the entire divine ‘economy’—lies an affirmation with implications for a question about the status of the distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit that deeply exercised Christian thought in the second and third centuries: Do the names ‘Father’, ‘Son’, and ‘Spirit’ simply refer to sequential presentational ‘modes’ in which the one God, who in himself is without any real distinction, manifests himself in the world? Or is the relation between Father and Son (to focus on the relation on which the debate most often was concentrated) real also in God? Committed to retaining the axiomatic unity of God, third-century ‘modalists’ affirmed the former. In response, Tertullian proposed the church speak of God as ‘trinity’ and

¹⁹ See *Against Heresies* 3.21.10; 4.pref.4; 4.20.1. On the ‘two hands’ language in Irenaeus’ theology, see the cautionary remarks of A. Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), who draws attention to a misplaced tendency in some recent work to ‘consider[r] the identification of the Son and the Spirit as Hands to hold the principal place in Irenaeus’ conception of the Trinitarian relations and to be his principal expression of the immanence of God to creation’ (p. 114 n. 41).

²⁰ Gilles Emery, *The Trinity. An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. M. Levering (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), pp. 169–70.

to recognise in its talk of God a systematic distinction between the three divine *personae* (the Father, Son, and Spirit) and the unitary divine *substantia*. This distinction was intended to secure both the primal Christian commitment to the oneness of God and the authenticity of his self-revelation in time. For, as Tertullian rightly saw, the truthfulness of the biblical attestation of God is at issue. In modalist theology, a gap is opened between the Father, Son, and Spirit whose creative and saving activity scripture depicts and the 'real' God who lies behind these manifestations. Thus 'the whole biblical talk of God is deprived of reference to God. None of the three is God'.²¹

In attempting to grasp the full significance of the characterisation of God in the 'divine scriptures',²² Origen of Alexandria—a figure of remarkable exegetical penetration and rare speculative power—found himself required to affirm both the Father's unique prerogative to be called God in the true sense of the term and to insist upon the divinity of the *logos* that was, according to his reading of John 1:3, with God 'in the beginning'.²³ Origen himself, it seems, did not reconcile what later came to be perceived as a tendency towards subordinationism (finding expression in the distinction between the Father, who is 'true God', and the Son, who is divine but not 'true God') with his conviction that the Father never is the Father without the Son (finding expression in his doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Just so, he bequeathed to the church a problematic whose resolution was central to the great theological debates of the fourth century.²⁴ At the beginning of these contestations, we find in Arius of Alexandria an exploitation of the conceptual distinction between 'divinity' and the 'true God' and a rejection of the doctrine of eternal generation. For

²¹ Robert Jenson, 'The Triune God', in C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson, eds, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 119.

²² Cf. *De principiis*, 4.1.1.

²³ *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* 2.2.16: Αληθινὸς οὖν θεὸς ὁ θεός, οἱ δὲ κατ' ἐκεῖνον μορφούμενοι θεοὶ ὡς εἰκόνες πρωτοτύπου· ἀλλὰ πάλιν τῶν πλειόνων εἰκόνων ἢ ἀρχέτυπος εἰκὼν ὁ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐστὶ λόγος, ὃς «ἐν ἀρχῇ» ἦν, τῷ εἶναι «πρὸς τὸν θεόν» αἰεὶ μένων «θεός», οὐκ ἂν δ' αὐτὸ ἐσχηκῶς εἰ μὴ πρὸς θεὸν ἦν ἰ.ε., τῆς λογιστικῆς αὐτόθεοσ, καὶ οὐκ ἂν μείνας θεός, εἰ μὴ παρέμενε τῇ ἀδιαλείπτῳ θέα τοῦ πατρικοῦβάθους.

²⁴ On these fourth-century controversies, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); J. Warren Smith, 'The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers', in G. Emery and M. Levering, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 109–21.

Arius, the Son is freely begotten by the unconstrained will of the unbegotten Father to serve as a created mediator between the uncreated creator and the rest of creation; the Son thus precedes all other creatures but does not exist eternally with the Father: 'there was when he was not'. In Athanasius of Alexandria we encounter an appropriation of Origen's doctrine of eternal generation with a corresponding rejection of any concept of 'graded' deity. The line between the eternal creator and the creature is absolute; if the Son is eternally with the Father he is equal in divinity with the Father and so one with the Father according to his divine nature (*homoousios*).²⁵

It is not insignificant that these doctrinal debates unfolded just as the churches on both sides of this debate faced a dramatic transformation in the political landscape. In the first decade of the fourth century, Christians were enduring active persecution under Diocletian; twenty years later, under Constantine, they enjoyed imperial patronage and oversight. Constantine saw in Christianity a force for the social cohesion of his empire, and recognised the political consequences of sustained doctrinal division between the churches. At his behest, then, a council of bishops from east and west gathered in Nicaea in 325 to resolve, *inter alia*, the dispute between Arius and Athanasius, and the assembled bishops repudiated Arius' teaching, endorsing the Athanasian *homoousios* and speaking of the eternally begotten Son as 'true God from true God'.²⁶

The Nicene definition of the faith provoked ongoing controversy throughout the fourth century. Its use of the (nonscriptural) word *homoousios* proved controversial: talk of the divine *ousia* was easily misconstrued in materialist terms to suggest that the generation of the Son involved a division of the Father's substance. Further, the *homoousios* seemed to the Eusebians and their allies to elide the proper distinction of Father and Son, and some of its most prominent advocates (including Marcellus of Ancyra) were suspected, not without reason, of tending towards modalism. On the other hand, in the view of the 'orthodox' churches, Arius'

²⁵ See, e.g., *Oratio I contra Arianos*, 39.4–5 (K. Metzler and K. Savvidis, *Athanasius: Werke, Band I. Die dogmatischen Schriften, Erster Teil, 2. Lieferung* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998)): μόνος αὐτὸς ἀληθινὸς υἱὸς καὶ μόνος «ἐκ τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ θεοῦ θεὸς ἀληθινός» ἐστίν, οὐ μισθὸν ἀρετῆς ταῦτα λαβὼν οὐδὲ ἄλλος ὢν παρὰ ταῦτα, ἀλλὰ φύσει κατ' οὐσίαν ὢν ταῦτα. γέννημα γὰρ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς οὐσίας ὑπάρχει, ὥστε μηδὲ ἀμφιβάλλειν ὅτι καθ' ὁμοίότητα τοῦ ἀτρέπτου πατρὸς ἀτρέπτος ἐστὶ καὶ ὁ λόγος.

²⁶ See Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils. Volume One: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), p. 5: Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ.

subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father undercut the legitimacy of received Christian practices of devotion to Christ, and it left claims regarding the work of the Son in effecting human salvation without a basis in being. If Christ is not true God, he cannot perform the works that God alone performs; if Christ is a creature among other creatures, he cannot properly be the object of the church's worship.²⁷

We cannot here review in any detail the complex disputes that led to the vindication and elaboration of the Nicene faith at the Council of Constantinople (381). In broad outline, the period from the 350s saw a consolidation of doctrinal and political postures towards the Nicene formula. A broad confederacy of 'pro-Nicenes' came to believe acceptance of its definition an important marker of catholic Christian identity. They were regarded as innovators by those retaining a more conservative biblicist style of belief, who found themselves united in a conviction that Christian theology flourishes where it exhibits direct deference to scripture without (the nonscriptural) language of the divine *ousia*. These 'homoians' rejected the Nicene *homouousios* whilst claiming that Son is like (*homoios*) the Father in all things not according to *ousia* but simply 'as the Holy Scriptures say and teach'. A recourse to *ousia* language marked a stronger form of subordinationist, anti-Nicene Christianity: from the late 350s, Aetius and his disciple Eunomius began to teach that the Son was *unlike* the Father according to essence.²⁸ Eunomian theology can be understood as the product of a particular philosophy of language brought to bear in a theology marked by a primal and controlling commitment to the 'unbegottenness' (*agennesia*) of the divine nature. Eunomius' argument: Names reveal the essence of a thing; God's essence may be fully comprehended under the name 'Unbegotten' (*agennetos*); the Son is begotten (*gennetos*); the Son thus is, *per definitionem*, not *homouousios* with the Father. In other words: the divine essence, *qua* unbegotten, cannot be communicated; thus the generation of the Son by the Father cannot yield a communication and continuity of essence between them. Rather, the notion of generation marks an essential *difference* between the Father and Son.

²⁷ See, e.g., Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 2.22–4.

²⁸ Beeley, *Nazianzus*, p. 21, notes that while the group that coalesced around the teaching of Aetius and Eunomius came to be called 'Anomoian', that title is misleading; their claim was not that the Son was unlike the Father in all respects but strictly *kat'ousian*, so that they are more aptly called 'heterousians'.

Eunomius' proposals provoked widespread reaction; and the responses of the so-called Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus—proved crucial for the continuing course of Nicene orthodoxy. These three figures did not always speak with one voice; the tactical and material differences between them should not be underestimated.²⁹ But in their responses to Eunomian theology they developed and exhibited a set of shared doctrinal priorities and strategies that were widely shared in the trinitarian culture of the fourth century in both the east and west, and which continue to shape Christian thought and speech about God.

The language of trinitarian confession

'True faith', Bonaventure says, 'bids us believe that, in the one nature, there are three persons [*in unitate naturae sunt tres personae*]: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. The Father is uniquely unoriginate or innascible; the Son originates from the Father alone through generation; the Spirit originates from the Father and the Son through spiration or procession. And yet this irreducible plurality of persons 'does not exclude from the divine essence a supreme unity, simplicity, immensity, eternity, immutability, necessity, or even primacy; more, it includes supreme fecundity, love, generosity, equality, kinship, likeness, and inseparability'.³⁰ In Bonaventure's presentation of the sound understanding [*intelligentia sana*] of the true faith [*recta fides*] *secundum sanctorum Doctorum documenta* we may see the legacy of the patristic insight that in face of the divine mystery the church is led to speak of God under a twofold aspect, employing both substantial names and relative names. Christian confession of the Trinity involves two modes of predication: by way of substance and by way of relation.³¹

²⁹ See, e.g., Christoph Marksches, 'Gibt es eine einheitliche »kappadozische Trinitätstheologie«? Vorläufige Erwägungen zu Einheit und Differenzen neunizänischer Theologie', in *Alta Trinità Beata* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000), pp. 196–237.

³⁰ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 1.2 (*Opera Omnia* (Quarrachi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1891), V:210; ET *The Breviloquium*, trans. J. de Vinck (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), p. 35).

³¹ *Breviloquium* 1.4 (*Opera Omnia* V:212; ET p. 41): 'in divinis sunt duo modi praedicandi, scilicet per modum substantiae et relationis'. In the background lies the categorial scheme of Aristotle, *Categories* 1b25–2a4.

Substantial names denote what is common to the Father, Son, and Spirit—their one power, operation, nature, glory; relative names refer to the distinctive properties of the three. And it is ‘from the combination of both, that is, of the common and unique, we arrive at comprehension of the truth’.³² For Gregory Nazianzus, ‘the three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities [*idiotes*]³³, so that he can enjoin his hearers:

when I speak of God, let yourselves be surrounded with a flash of that light which is both one and three: three in properties, or indeed in hypostases, if one wants to call them that, or indeed in ‘persons’—for we will not become involved in a battle over names, as long as the syllables point towards the same notion—and one with regard to the concept of substance, or indeed divinity.³⁴

In contemporary theological parlance, Basil and Gregory here are recommending and exhibiting a ‘reduplication’ (*redoublement*) in Christian language about God.³⁵ In Gilles Emery’s terms, ‘in order to speak the Trinitarian mystery, it is necessary always to employ two words, two formulas, in a reflection in two modes that joins here the substantial (essential) aspect and the distinction of persons (relative properties)’.³⁶

The first mode of signification takes regard for the unity of the divine essence and will, in conformity to the rule that ‘terms predicated as substances of all three persons are predicated severally and jointly, and in the singular’.³⁷ Everything said of God essentially—every designation of what God *is*—is to be said equally and simply of the three persons: each is all that the one God is; each is fully God with the others who themselves are fully God; accordingly each acts with undiminished, undivided divine power commonly and inseparably with the others. God the Father is light; God

³² Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius* 2.28 (ET *St. Basil of Caesarea: Against Eunomius*, trans. Mark Delcogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2011), p. 174).

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.9.

³⁴ *Oration* 39.11 (ET Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 132). Cf. *Oration* 38.7–8; John of Damascus, *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.10.

³⁵ Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics. Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 214–6.

³⁶ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, p. 46. Lewis Ayres draws attention to a different form of this reduplication of trinitarian language in Augustine (*Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 260–1).

³⁷ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* 1.4.2 (*Opera Omnia* V:212–13; ET p. 43–4).

the Son is light; God the Holy Spirit is light; the one God is one light—one not by addition or abstraction but in the highest simplicity.

The second way of speaking has reference to irreducible threefoldness of God—to the distinctive properties of the ‘persons’ or ‘modes of being’ that exist in God and constitute the divine life. And here the basic rule is that one must not conflate the persons either with the one divine essence or with the other persons. God the Father is God, God the Son is God, and God the Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son; and the Spirit is neither Father nor Son. If we ask what distinguishes the Father from the Son and the Spirit from both, the answer is: they are distinguished by their relations to one another. More specifically, they are distinguished by relations of origin. The Father is from no one; the Son is from the Father; the Spirit is from the Father (and the Son). Put otherwise: the Father is unbegotten; the Father generates the Son, so that the Son is begotten by the Father; and the Father spirates the Spirit, so that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son). But the names Father, Son, and Spirit name relations that exist ‘within’ the one Godhead; so to acknowledge that the Son is not the Father, that as the begotten one he is not unbegotten, does not introduce an essential distinction between them.³⁸

This reduplicative pattern of theological speech is informed by the doctrine of divine simplicity, which affirms that the God whom scripture designates by his several names is wholly at one with himself in himself and in all his relations to creation. There are no ‘parts’ in God; no friction or fissure within the divine life. God is not a composite being but the one who eternally lives from himself in perfect self-sufficiency and self-consistency, also in his relations with creation. The three divine ‘persons’ thus do not compose the divine essence, nor do they hover above that

³⁸ Alternatively, with Gregory Nazianzus, one could say that the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit from the Father simply is the unity of the one Godhead. See *Oration* 42.15: ‘The name of the One without beginning is “Father”, of the Beginning “Son”, of the One with the Beginning “Holy Spirit”. There is one nature for all three: God. The unity [among them] is the Father, from whom and towards whom everything else is referred, not so as to be mixed together in confusion, but so as to be contained, without time or will or power intervening to divide them. These three have caused us to exist in multiplicity, each of us being in constant tension with ourselves and with everything else. But for them, whose nature is simple and whose existence is the same, the principal characteristic is unity.’ Cf. Beeley, *Nazianzus*, pp. 204–12 (commenting on *Or.* 25): The relationship of the three subsistent modes of God’s being is preserved as a unity because of the Father’s monarchy. The ‘dance’ of perichoresis is, then, not the mutual participation of each person in the other but the Son and the Spirit’s movement in and out of the Father who is ‘in’ and ‘with’ them because his divinity is in them. In this way Beeley rejects John Meyendorff’s characterization of Greek theology as emphasizing the principle of personhood over the single divine essence; the Father, as unbegotten divinity, is the starting point of Gregory’s theology.

essence. Each is, with the others, the one God. Again, scripture speaks of God as good, just, holy, and so on; but the divine life is not an aggregation of discrete (mutually complementary or perhaps detractory) divine ‘attributes’. The scriptural names of God cannot be understood as a license to speak of God as attaining his unity through a process cumulative or conflictual. Nor, again, are these scriptural designations of God merely factitious, applied to a divine reality which in its proper essence is void of all distinction and agency. The God revealed in scripture is not a projection of religiously creative or of philosophically abstractive thought. God is the uncontained, self-giving term of theological intellection and denomination.³⁹ At perfect peace and rest in the richness of his fully actualised life, he reaches out to human creatures, immediately involving himself in their situation, drawing them to himself—not in actualisation or fulfilment or resolution of his own life but from a fullness of light and love beyond the reciprocities of creaturely life. And so he makes himself known as the incomparable creator of all things by taking to himself creaturely names, none of which is fully sufficient to the simple abundance of his divine life but all of which together form a pathway into the knowledge of God befitting human creatures. And so it is that *Deus, cum sit simplex, tamen multipliciter dicitur*.⁴⁰

This common commitment—not always expressed in regulative or ‘grammatical’ terms but more or less explicitly and consistently maintained in opposition to tendencies to conflate the essential and relational—to a reduplicative confession of the triune God may be traced from the fourth-century trinitarian bishops of the Greek and Latin churches through the theologies of the medieval and early modern west.⁴¹ And while the political, social, and intellectual transformations leading to and attending the sixteenth-century reformation placed enormous strain on the culture of biblical reading and theological argument that nourished classical

³⁹ Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *De trinitate*, 2.6; Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.7–8.

⁴⁰ Peter Lombard, I *Sent.* d.8, cap. 5. This sketch of the function of the doctrine of divine simplicity holds whether one adopts a version of the ‘identity thesis’, according to which God’s substance is identical with his attributes (cf. the formulation of the Council of Florence: *omniaque sunt unum, ubi non obviat relationis oppositio* (Tanner, *Decrees*, p. 571)), or conceives of the divine attributes as *propria* of the divine nature (see Andrew Rade-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: OUP, 2009)).

⁴¹ Further on the trinitarian ‘grammar’ of medieval and reformational theology, G. Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. F.A. Murphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 44–8; B. Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 67–8.

trinitarian theology, the characterisation of God in the confessions of faith of the Protestant churches often closely resembled the conciliar formulations of the high middle ages. To take only one example: the language of Lateran IV (1215)—‘unus solus est verus Deus, aeternus, immensus et incommutabilis, incomprehensibilis, omnipotens et ineffabilis, Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus: tres quidem personae, sed una essentia, substantia seu natura simplex omnino’⁴²—finds an echo in the resolutely Calvinist Scots Confession of 1560, according to which God is ‘eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost’.⁴³ The presenting issue in the conflict between the magisterial reformers and the Roman Catholic church, we might say, was not the formal identification of the one true God so much as the nature of true religion. The challenge to the classical doctrine of the Trinity came from other directions: from the sixteenth-century Unitarian and anti-Trinitarian pamphleteers; Enlightenment political philosophy and biblical scholarship; and—decisively for the continuing course of trinitarian theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the critical and speculative idealist systems of Kant and Hegel.

Religion and confession in emerging modernity

The material continuity and the decisive shift of emphasis in the early reformational confession of God is visible in Luther’s gloss on the first article of the creed: ‘Erstlich glaube ich von Herzen den hohen Artikel der göttlichen Majestät, daß Vater, Sohn, heiliger Geist drei unterschiedliche Personen, ein rechter, einziger, natürlicher, wahrhaftiger Gott ist: Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden, wie das alles bisher sowohl in der römischen Kirche und in aller Welt bei den christlichen Kirchen gehalten ist.’⁴⁴

Luther does not introduce a new object of Christian confession; God is known and named here in concert with the whole church as the triune creator of all things. But the tonal quality of the confession changes: glaube *ich von Herzen*. In Luther we

⁴² H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Barcelona: Herder, 1948), §428.

⁴³ G.D. Henderson, ed., *The Scots Confession: 1560* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1960).

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, ‘Bekennnis der Artikel des Glaubens wider die Feinde des Evangeliums und allerlei Ketzereien (Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnis) 1528’, in *Luther Deutsch: die Werke Martin Luthers in neuer Auswahl für die Gegenwart*, 4th ed., ed. K. Aland (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990), p. 309 (WA 26, 499).

encounter a new and distinctive interest in faith's confession as an act of religious subjectivity; a primary characterisation of faith as the hearing of the word of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and a relentless emphasis on the distinction between faith's reception of the gift of grace and all legal-moral calculation.⁴⁵

The truth of the gospel is this, that our righteousness comes by faith alone, without the works of the law. ... Human reason has the law as its object. It says to itself: "This I have done; this I have not done." But faith in its proper function has no other object than Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was put to death for the sins of the world.⁴⁶

In Luther's analysis of the dynamics of faith and reason, we find a second novelty—a new critique and so a new objectification of 'religion'.⁴⁷ The distinction between 'true' Christian religion and all other forms of human religious activity is drawn out in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone is characterised as the central point of Christian teaching and as the differentiating feature of true religion—the place of significant Christian variation from the common human tendency, variously expressed, towards self-justification on the basis of meritorious religious practices.

[A]lthough some do works that are more splendid, great, and difficult than the others, the content remains the same, and only the quality is different. That is, the works vary only in appearance and in name. For they are still works. And those who do them are not Christians; they are hirelings, whether they are called Jews, Mohammedans, papists, or sectarians.⁴⁸

This diagnosis finds an exact correspondence in the distinctive Christian insistence upon identifying and approaching God as Father solely with reference to

⁴⁵See B.A. Gerrish, 'Doctor: Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation', in P.N. Brooks, ed., *Seven-Headed Luther. Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483–1983* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 1–24 [18–19]: 'In Luther's theological reflection the religious subject does turn back upon itself; it makes its believing the object of thought. By the very fact of singling out justification by faith as his "chief article", Luther fostered a change of theological priorities and theological style in comparison with medieval Scholasticism. ... Assertions about God and man in this theology are made strictly as answers to questions about sin and justification; the object of Christian teaching is the life of faith itself, viewed from the inside. And in this respect there is genuine continuity between the Reformation and liberal Protestantism.'

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, ed. J. Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), p. 88; cf. pp. 113–14.

⁴⁷ On the relation of the nascent interest in religious subjectivity, the reformational critique of the medieval cultus, and the emergence of 'religion' as an object of detached analysis, see J. Samuel Preus, 'Zwingli, Calvin and the Origin of Religion', in *Church History* 46:2 (1977), pp. 186–202.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Galatians*, p. 10.

and in his unique Son Jesus Christ, the sole mediator between God and human creatures.

[I]t is a rule and principle in the scriptures, and one that must be scrupulously observed, to refrain from speculation about the majesty of God, which is too much for the human body, and especially for the human mind to bear. “Man shall not see me and live,” says scripture (Ex. 33.20). The pope, the Turks, the Jews, and the sectarians pay no attention to this rule. They put Christ the mediator out of their sight, speak only of God, pray only to him, and act only in relation to him. ... But true Christian theology ... does not present God to us in his majesty, as Moses and other teachings do, but Christ born of the virgin as our mediator and high priest. ... For as in own nature God is immense, incomprehensible, and infinite, so to man’s nature he is intolerable. Therefore whenever you consider the doctrine of justification and wonder how or where or in what condition to find a God who justifies or accepts sinners, then you must know that there is no other God than this man Jesus Christ. Take hold of him; cling to him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the divine majesty.⁴⁹

For Luther, this anti-speculative, christologically focused conception of Christian doctrine was directly linked to a robustly trinitarian identification of God: Christ is not merely a perfect creature—a teaching that Luther ascribes to the Arians and then, following an influential trajectory of Christian analogical reasoning, to Muslim theology—but true God, who performs acts that can be ascribed only to the creator. ‘For he grants grace and peace; and to give these is to condemn sin, to conquer death, and to trample the devil underfoot. No angel can grant any of this; but since it is ascribed to Christ, it necessarily follows that he is God by nature.’⁵⁰

In thus rejecting the medieval articulation of the Augustinian doctrine of grace (*fides caritate formata*)⁵¹ and reconfiguring it within a theological framework strictly ordered to the scriptural attestation of the death of Jesus Christ (*theologia crucis*), Luther opened a new chapter in the western theological tradition. In doing so, he presumed the abiding significance of the received tradition of western trinitarian theology, with its recurring anti-dualist emphasis on the unity and simplicity of the divine nature. Amongst many of Luther’s contemporaries, however, the entire

⁴⁹ Luther, *Galatians*, pp. 28–9.

⁵⁰ Luther, *Galatians*, p. 32.

⁵¹ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a 2ae, q.4 a.3

Augustinian heritage of the western church was called into question, and the doctrine of the trinity and its traditional conceptual apparatus was subject to direct and sustained critique. For the Spanish anti-trinitarian Michael Servetus, the classical doctrine of the trinity not only lacked scriptural support but proved an occasion for offense and derision amongst both Muslims and Jews and even (since all the works of the Lord praise the one God) the beasts of the field.⁵² Likewise, the authors of the 1605 Racovian Catechism, felt compelled to exhort trinitarian Christians to ask again whether they were not guilty of ‘the crime of polytheism, and consequently of idolatry’. The doctrine of the trinity is said here to contain ‘a palpable contradiction’, for ‘the essence of God is one, not in kind but in number’, since ‘a person is nothing else than an individual intelligent essence’, wherever we find ‘three numerical persons, there must necessarily, in like manner, be reckoned three individual essences’.⁵³

The accusation that classical trinitarianism amounted to a poorly concealed tritheism was widely rehearsed and sharply rebuffed: God ‘so proclaims himself the sole God’, Calvin wrote, ‘as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons’. But this is not license to ‘image that God is threefold, or think God’s simple essence torn into three persons’. And drawing freely on the trinitarian writings of the fourth- and fifth-century church east and west, Calvin sought to uphold in a long series of disputations the intellectual coherence and theological cogency of the ingrained Christian habit of speaking to and of God in both essential and relative terms. In Servetus, Calvin finds a denial of the distinct reality of the three divine persons in the one, simple divine essence. Conflating the essential and personal, Servetus is, on the one hand, unable to think of the persons as genuinely distinct, and collapses the Son and Spirit together; on the other, he is unable to think of them as genuinely divine, and ‘indiscriminately mingles both the Son of God and the Spirit

⁵² Michael Servetus, *De Trinitatis Erroribus Libri Septem* (Hagenau, 1531), pp. 42–3: ‘quod omnibus his acius est, quantum trinitatis traditio haec, fuerit Mahometanis, proh dolor, derisionis occasio, solus Deus novit. Iudaei etiam nostrae huic imaginationi adhaerere abhorrent, & stulticiam nostram cum Trinitate derident, ac propter huiusce blasphemias non credunt hunc esse illum Messiam qui in Lege promissus est. Et non solum Mahometani & Hebraei, sed bestiae agri nobis illuderent, si phantasticam nostram sententiam perciperent, nam omnia opera Domini uni Deo benedicunt.’

⁵³ *The Racovian catechism, with notes and illustrations, translated from the Latin: to which is prefixed a sketch of the history of Unitarianism in Poland and the adjacent countries* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1818), p. 33.

with created beings generally'.⁵⁴ The consequences are manifold: in trinitarian theology, in christology, and in what Calvin calls Servetus' 'Manichean delusion'—the claim that the human soul is the product of a divine emanation, 'a derivative of God's substance, as if some portion of immeasurable divinity had flowed into man'.⁵⁵ In rejecting the received language of essence and persons, Servetus accounts for the relation of the Father, Son, and Spirit in terms of a substance–accident idiom; as a result, God is rendered a complex being, vulnerable to the vagaries of historical change, not finally different from the human creatures with whom he relates. In contrast, in the Italian antitrinitarian Valentine Gentile, Calvin finds not so much a modalist denial of the eternal reality of the persons but a quasi-Arian subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father. For Valentine, to acknowledge the procession of the Son and Spirit from the Father necessarily is to recognise the Father as *essentiator*—the one who communicates the divine essence to the Son and Spirit—so that the Father alone is 'truly and properly the sole God'.⁵⁶ Again a direct appeal to the scripture's patterned identification of God is central to Calvin's response:

when we profess to believe in one God, under the name of God is understood a single, simple essence, in which we comprehend three persons, or hypostases. Therefore, whenever the name of God is mentioned [in scripture] without particularization, there are designated no less the Son and Spirit than the Father; but where the Son is joined to the Father, then the relation of the two enters in; and so we distinguish among the persons. But because the peculiar qualities in the persons carry an order within them, e.g., in the Father is the beginning and the source, so often as mention is made of the Father and the Son together, or the Spirit, the name of *God* is peculiarly applied to the Father. In this way, the unity of essence is retained, and a reasoned order is kept, which yet takes nothing away from the deity of the Son and Spirit.⁵⁷

This is not a recommendation of the technical vocabulary of classical trinitarian reasoning for its own sake. For Calvin, nothing turns, for example, on the use of the term 'person' itself: traditional sources use other terms—'subsistence' or

⁵⁴ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.13.22.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.5.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.23.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.20.

‘prosopa’ or ‘substance’—to render the Greek *hypostasis*, which scripture (Heb. 1.3) uses to indicate the distinctive property of the Father. The crucial point is that in scripture ‘three are spoken of, each of which is entirely God’ and yet it also makes it clear that ‘there is not more than one God’.⁵⁸ In his conviction that the doctrine of the trinity properly serves an *exegetical* end, arising from and tending towards the church’s reading of holy scripture as the textual location of God’s salutary self-display; in his insistence that theological terms and concepts have no independent standing but strictly serve the ineffable realities they indicate (so that one ought not take prevailing interest in the semantic potential of theological terms such as ‘person’); and in his untroubled assertion that ‘the essence of God is simple and undivided, and he contains all in himself, without proportion or derivation, but in integral perfection’⁵⁹—in all this Calvin gives voice to a set of theological instincts deeply embedded in the trinitarian tradition.

He did so with a strong sense that doctrinal purity, ecclesial unity, and civic security and liberty were mutually entailing. The pure and sound teaching of the faith served the edification of the one church and human flourishing in civil community, while it was the principal end of civil government ‘to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, and to adjust our life to human society’—in short, to ‘provid[e] that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men’.⁶⁰ Calvin maintained this position as a third way beyond an eschatological-revolutionary trajectory of political thought arising out of the so-called radical reformation and a political naturalism in which an interest in the techniques of power, freedom, and stability displaced language of divinely ordered civic ends.⁶¹

In his doctrine of the unified divine governance of the *regimen spirituale* and *regimen politicum*, Calvin thus proposed a theological-political vision in which church and state were granted a proper dignity and distinctiveness within an embracing vision of the movement of creation under the providential care of the

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2–3.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2–3.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.1: ‘from the one side, insane and barbarous men furiously strive to overturn this divinely established order; while, on the other side, the flatterers of princes, immoderately praising their power, do not hesitate to set them against the rule of God himself’. Cf. G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Publishers, 1992).

triune God.⁶² For Calvin, as for the other magisterial reformers, any ‘natural’ law or order, while universally valid, evident, and effective, was unreservedly a *divine* law—an ordinance of the one, true God.⁶³ Luther spoke of two kingdoms but of a single power: ‘Die Gewalt aber, die überall besteht, die ist von Gott verordnet’.⁶⁴ There were, in other words, no kingdoms, be they secular or sacred, nor laws, be they the Decalogue or some form of natural moral law, independent of God’s creative, providential and redemptive ordering.

In the complex intellectual and social-political conditions of the seventeenth century, this integrative trinitarian vision came under severe strain. The so-called wars of religion motivated a search for a non-sectarian vocabulary of civic identity and generally available resources for the pacific negotiation of convictional difference. The new experimental sciences gained prestige at the expense of older, textually mediated traditions of learning. And the Renaissance recovery of antique scepticism fed a widespread taste for a humane incredulity in face of confessional certainties whose more influential expressions included Descartes’ rationalism and Spinoza’s republicanism. In this context, one may see a growing tendency in post-Reformation Protestant theology to leverage for apologetic purposes the distinction between the order of creation and the order of salvation, the ‘natural’ knowledge of God given through the created order and the voice of conscience and the knowledge of God granted to the elect in the Word by the Spirit.

The work of Immanuel Kant may be seen at once as a culmination of and a decisive judgment upon these developments. Determining that theoretical reason could not make good on its promise to deliver a reliable speculative proof for the existence of a morally relevant deity, Kant concludes: ‘The idea of a moral rule of the world is a task for our practical reason: Our concern is not so much to know what he is in himself (his nature) but what he is for us as moral beings.’⁶⁵ God is characterised here as the divine lawgiver whose order may be discerned in ‘the starry heavens

⁶² Cf. M. Beintker, ‘Ethik, Politik und Versöhnung im Denken Calvins’, in H. Selderhuis, ed., *Calvinus clarissimus theologus: Papers of the Tenth International Congress on Calvin Research* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), pp. 59–78 (64): ‘Calvin die beiden Regimente nicht antithetisch einander entgegensetzt, sondern als zwei Strategien des göttlichen Wirkens begreift, die unbeschadet ihres kategorialen Verschiedenseins in einem Solidaritätsverhältnis stehen.’

⁶³ Cf. J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 169.

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, ‘Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei’ in *Christsein und Weltliches Regiment* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1982) (WA 11, 245–81).

⁶⁵ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* p. 165 (6:139).

above' and 'the moral law within'—the latter in particular understood to be accessible 'to all human reason and ... met with in the religion of most civilized peoples.'⁶⁶ But if Kant's program intends to safeguard a universal grounding for religion in moral reason, it appears to do so—or so its critics have judged—by emptying Christianity in particular and religion in general of distinctive content: 'Only the pure faith of religion, based entirely on reason, can be recognized as necessary and hence as the one which exclusively marks out the *true church*.'⁶⁷ Because of their formal proximity to the certain truths of reason, Kant feels able to develop rational accounts of certain key Christian doctrines, including the person of Christ, the kingdom of God, and (to great controversy) sin as 'radical evil'. He further attempts to show that a trinitarian specification about God can be amenable to a threefold understanding of God's will for human morality; but in discharging this proper function it meets its strict limit: 'if this very faith (in a divine trinity) were to be regarded not just as the representation of a practical idea, but as a faith that ought to represent what God is in himself, it would be a mystery surpassing all human concepts, hence unsuited to a revelation humanly comprehensible, and could only be declared in this respect a mystery'.⁶⁸ What is of primary interest is God's moral will for the world; the doctrine of the trinity is serviceable in relation to this interest, and can tell us nothing of God life *in se*.

Kant thus transforms and sharpens to the point of separation the traditional distinction between what can be said of God's inward life and what is said of God's relationship to the world, holding that any particular deliverances of statutory religions must be justified before the bar of natural religion, with its practically necessary conception of God as the source and guarantor of the universally available and binding moral law.

Accepting Kant's critique of traditional metaphysical proofs for God's existence but resisting his attempts to ground religion in morality, Scheiermacher sought to demonstrate that while religion always in fact is entangled with concrete acts of knowing and doing, and while it shares with metaphysics and with moral philosophy an interest in the universe and the relationship of the human person to the universe, it nevertheless has its own distinctive reality as 'intuition and feeling':

Sie [die Religion] begehrt nicht das Universum seiner Natur nach zu bestimmen und zu erklären wie die Metaphysik, sie begehrt nicht aus Kraft der Freiheit und der

⁶⁶ See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 269 (5:162); *Religion*, p. 166 (6:140).

⁶⁷ Kant, *Religion*, p. 146 (6:115).

⁶⁸ Kant, *Religion*, p. 167 (6:142).

göttlichen Willkür des Menschen es fortzubilden und fertig zu machen wie die Moral. Ihr Wesen ist weder Denken noch Handeln, sondern Anschauung und Gefühl. Anschauen will sie das Universum, in seinen eigenen Darstellungen und Handlungen will sie es andächtig belauschen, von seinen unmittelbaren Einflüssen will sie sich in kindlicher Paßivität ergreifen und erfüllen lassen.⁶⁹

Schleiermacher later would develop a more formally articulated account of the feeling of absolute dependence (*das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl*), where *Gefühl* means something like ‘a pre-reflective harmony or at-one-ness between oneself and one’s environing circumstances’—one that ‘includes a kind of comportment or disposition towards those circumstances’, so that it can direct acts of knowing and doing.⁷⁰ The awareness of being absolutely dependent is at once undeniably real and inexplicable apart from reference to a reality that transcends the world of reciprocal relations in which human moral agency is exercised. Human beings stand in complex relations of relative dependence and freedom, responsiveness and initiative with other human beings and with nonhuman creatures. Within this causal nexus, there is no human space of unconditioned novelty or total dependence (the former would render human knowledge radically insecure, the latter is corrosive on human freedom and so on morality). However, precisely within this network of relations human beings may and do have a precognitive awareness of being utterly *from* another, wholly dependent in every relative dependence and relative freedom. This awareness or feeling is the anthropological index of ‘religion’; the whence of this feeling is God. Crucially, this sense of radical reliance never penetrates the consciousness in isolation; it always attends concrete perceptions of and intentions towards the world.

And so ‘religion’ always takes shape in a culturally textured form—as this or that tradition of religious expression. In Schleiermacher’s typology of religious experience, Christianity, as ‘a monotheistic faith, belonging to the teleological type of religion’ belongs in a class with Judaism and Islam (‘religion’ here is, crucially, rendered in a genus-species categorical scheme); and yet it is ‘essentially distinguished from other such faiths by the fact that in it everything is related to the

⁶⁹ F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), ed. G. Meckenstock (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2001), p. 79.

⁷⁰ See K. Hector, ‘Attunement and Explicitation. A Pragmatist Reading of Schleiermacher’s “Theology of Feeling”’, in B.W. Sockness and W. Gräb, eds, *Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion, and the Future of Theology: A Transatlantic Dialogue* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 215–42 (222). Cf. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube: nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt* (1830/31), ed. M. Redeker (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1999), §3.

redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth'.⁷¹ On this account, Jesus is the uniquely and unsurpassably necessary point of historical reference for the Christian experience of God; the feeling of absolute dependence is, for Christian faith, inseparable from an awareness of the dynamics of sin and grace in human life as this is perfectly revealed and irreversibly transformed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. But for Schleiermacher, Christian theology can affirm the unique significance of Jesus without confessing his divinity in traditional incarnational terms.

For all their differences, Schleiermacher and Kant are united in a conviction that Christian theology can indeed retain a trinitarian understanding of God without sacrificing the intelligibility of the faith in a modern age. But they argue that it can do so only to the extent that the doctrine is placed on a new footing, phrased in a new idiom, and put to a new use. No longer is it to be conceived directly as a deliverance of divine revelation straightforwardly attested in scripture and received in faith as the sum of Christian doctrine. Rather, it appears as a capstone to a set of primary reflections on the structure of human moral agency or Christian religious experience. Henceforth 'God' is to be conceived as the source and guarantor of the moral law or the ultimate 'whence' of the feeling of absolute dependence; knowledge of God is thus strictly indexed to human self-awareness; traditional claims to knowledge of the divine life *in se* on the basis of scriptural revelation are foresworn as speculative, conceptually outmoded, and of strictly limited relevance. Whether Schleiermacher was justified in identifying the consciousness of being absolutely dependent as the essence of religion or the whence of this feeling as the God of faith remained a matter of controversy well into the twentieth century.⁷² But his decision systematically to defer treatment of the doctrine of the trinity to the conclusion of his theological system was at once indicative of a prevailing trend and widely influential.⁷³

⁷¹ Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, §11.

⁷² Cf. W. Herrmann, *Dogmatik* (Gotha-Stuttgart: Friedrich Andreas Perth, 1925), p. 12. For Herrmann, Schleiermacher rightly perceived that we are indeed aware that our lives are fully dependent on what are to us inscrutable forces. 'Damit aber, daß wir diese Tatsache erfassen, haben wir keineswegs schon Religion. Das Bewußtsein davon ist freilich eine Bedingung fuer die Entstehung von Religion; es gehört das auch zu ihrem Leben, aber es ist nicht für sich allein schon Religion. Jene uns unerfaßbare Macht über unserer Existenz ist auch nicht der Gott des religiösen Glaubens. Denn diese Macht steht auch dem Gottlosen vor Augen, wenn er an die Grenzenlosigkeit des Wirklichen denkt, an dessen gesetzmässigen Verlauf unser Dasein gebunden ist. Sie ist also Schicksal, nicht Gott.'

⁷³ Cf. Herrmann, *Dogmatik*, pp. 102-3: 'Die Trinitätslehre hat immer mit der Tatsache zu beginnen, daß Gott uns in dieser dreifachen Weise [i.e., as the Father whom we can confidently entreat in prayer, the power of Jesus effectively at work upon us, and the Spirit who in us and in the communion of saints continually vanquishes the prevailing power of nature] sein einheitliches Wesen offenbart (ökonomische Trinität). Aber die kirchliche Theologie ist von da aus mit Recht zu dem Gedanken

Thus already in his 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel could observe that ‘dogmas such as those of the Trinity ... have been put in the shadows by theology itself’.⁷⁴ Whereas for Kant and Schleiermacher religion points to a divine reality beyond or behind history known as the postulated term of the moral law or religious experience, for Hegel the history of the religious-cultural life of humanity is immediately implicated in the divine reality. God is conceived as dynamic Spirit who arrives at its fullness in a movement of self-realisation through creative-redemptive self-abnegation. And it is in this way that Hegel can identify the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ at the centre of the Christian faith:

This incarnation of the divine Being, or the fact that it essentially and directly has the shape of self-consciousness, is the simple content of the absolute religion. In this religion, the divine Being is known as Spirit, or this religion is the consciousness of the divine Being that it is Spirit. For Spirit is the knowledge of oneself in the externalisation of oneself; the being that is the movement of retaining its self-identity in its otherness. This, however, is Substance, insofar as Substance is, in its accidents, at the same time reflected into itself, not indifferent to them as to something unessential or present in them as in an alien element, but in them it is within itself, i.e., insofar as it is Subject or Self. Consequently, in this religion the divine Being is *revealed*. Its being revealed obviously consists in this, that what it is, is known. But it is known precisely in its being known as Spirit, as a Being that is essentially a *self-conscious* Being. ... Spirit is known as self-consciousness and to this self-consciousness it is immediately revealed, for Spirit is this self-consciousness itself. The divine nature is the same as the human, and it is this unity that is beheld.⁷⁵

The passage illustrates three crucial aspects of Hegel’s project: First, reflection upon the relation between God and the world in Christian theology is centred on the doctrine of the incarnation understood as the self-revelation of the divine subject. Second, the language of Christian faith is secured through a process of translation in which the scriptural and traditional theological representations of God are systematically restated in more philosophically refined terms. Third, a commitment to a trinitarian understanding of self-actualizing, self-revealing Spirit is the ‘fundamental characteristic’ of Christian faith and the reason why it can be characterised as the

fortgeschritten, daß es in dem Wesen Gottes begründet sein müsse, sich in dieser dreifachen Weise zu offenbaren.’ According to Herrmann, the doctrine of the trinity fittingly may stand as the concluding gloss on an account of the trinitarian history of salvation as the work of the one God—as ‘ein Ausdruck des vollendeten Monotheismus’; but in its developed (Augustinian) form, the doctrine has obscured more than illuminated, suffering both a lack of conceptual clarity and a continual tendency towards polytheism. At its best, the doctrine recalls us to abiding humility before the eternal mystery.

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One Volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), p. 94. Here, Hegel has in mind not only Schleiermacher, but also a prevailing marginalisation of the doctrine of the trinity in pietism as exemplified by F.A.G. Tholuck.

⁷⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: OUP, 1977), §759.

‘consummate’ religion.⁷⁶ Hegel essentially holds that history itself bears the developing self-realization of the Absolute and that this self-realization is indeed the truth of the *content* of the Trinity;⁷⁷ the traditional doctrine of the three divine persons is taken up in an account of three ‘moments’ of the one absolute Subject; and what have traditionally been taken to be eternally realised relations within God now are identified with the stuff of history: there is no God behind or beyond history, but rather the self-realization of the Absolute *is* history. Signs of knowledge of the movement of the Spirit are present widely in human culture: ‘one can point to a countless number of forms in which the content of the Trinity appeared distinctly and in various religions’;⁷⁸ but nowhere is human knowledge of God transparent to the movement of divine self-consciousness as in Christianity, the consummate religion.

In rough summary: Hegel presents us with a precise counterpart to the account of the knowledge of God we encounter in Kant and Schleiermacher. For the latter, historical phenomena may represent but do not contain the divine presence; God remains, as it were, ‘behind’ his historical appearances. In Hegel, the current of thought tends (in a vastly long and complex course of argument) towards a quasi-pantheistic identification of God and history; the triune self-realization of the Absolute is the singularly real. Taken as representatives of general trends in nineteenth-century trinitarian theology, Kant and Schleiermacher tend towards a sharp distinction between God *in se* and God *ad extra*, between the so-called immanent and economic trinity.⁷⁹ Hegel, on the other hand, collapses these two notions together, so that it becomes—so Hegel’s critics argued—impossible to conceive of God without the world or properly to ascribe a proper integrity and relative independence to creation.

In characterising the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions, Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel commonly rely upon a developmental discourse to argue that Christianity is the ‘highest’—perhaps even the unsurpassably highest—stage of human religious history. For all three, Judaism represents in some sense the most significant religious ‘other’, distinguished from Christianity as a

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Lectures*, 83, n. 17.

⁷⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 425.

⁷⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 430.

⁷⁹ On the origins of the terminological distinction between ‘immanent’ and ‘economic’ trinity in the middle decades of the nineteenth-century, see R. Stolina, ‘»Ökonomische« und »immanente« Trinität? Zur Problematik einer trinitätstheologischen Denkfigur’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 105(2):170-216.

‘lower’ form of monotheistic religion. Kant and Schleiermacher both suggest that Judaism’s own internal possibilities, particularly its putative legalism,⁸⁰ made it incapable of any higher synthesis;⁸¹ and Schleiermacher went so far as to argue that ‘Christianity would not have been received by the Jews even as much as it was, had they not been permeated by ... foreign elements’ i.e., by the cultural forces of Hellenism.⁸² And for both Kant and Schleiermacher, in a move that is determinative for many accounts to follow, Judaism and Christianity are *formally* related as instances of the general type ‘religion’. For Hegel, while Judaism does bear a kind of ontological weight because of its constituency in the self-realization of Absolute Spirit (as evident in its theological insights), there is otherwise little or no internal connection between Christianity and Judaism, and the latter remains limited by its nationalism and the abstract nature of its law.⁸³ To many later readers, these figures seemed largely incapable of treating Judaism as a witness to any distinctive truth of abiding significance. And many of their heirs struggled to regain any concrete sense of the significance of Judaism for the Christian doctrine of God.

Trinitarian theology, religion, and the religions

The judgment of twentieth-century theology on the achievements of Schleiermacher, Hegel, and their heirs, has not been uniformly positive. Provoked by what he perceived to be the entanglements of the Protestant churches in a materialist, individualist, and militarized culture, Karl Barth developed a powerful critique of modern Protestant theology, tracing its proximate roots to a resurgent modalism that left Christian claims about God without a basis in reality.

Gerade der Antitrinitarismus kommt unvermeidlich in das Dilemma, entweder die Offenbarung oder die Einheit Gottes zu leugnen, und darum ist die alte Kirche, ist noch Calvin so scharf gegen ihn vorgegangen. Behauptet er nämlich die Offenbarung, ohne doch die wesentliche Gottheit des Sohnes und des Geistes anerkennen zu wollen, so kann er einfach nicht anders, als in der Offenbarung irgendwie ein Drittes, das nicht Gott ist, zwischen Gott und den Menschen hineinschieben. Antitrinitarismus heißt in jeder Form, sofern er nicht Leugnung der Offenbarung ist, Vergötzung der Offenbarung. ... Er wird mit den *Monarchianern*, *Modalisten* und *Sabellianern* (hier

⁸⁰ Cf. Kant, *Religion*, p. 187 (6:167), where Kant distinguishes Judaism as ‘statutory’ from Christianity as ‘moral’.

⁸¹ Cf. e.g. Kant, *Religion*, p. 163 (6:137).

⁸² Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, p. 60.

⁸³ Hegel, *Lectures*, pp. 371-74.

finden wir *Schleiermacher* und in seinen Spuren so ziemlich die ganze neuere Theologie) unter Beibehaltung der Wesensgleichheit der Personen in der Trinität doch nur eine Offenbarungsökonomie, in den Personen nur Erscheinungsweisen sehen, hinter denen sich Gottes eigentliches eines Wesen als etwas Höheres, Anderes verbergen würde. Als ob die Offenbarung geglaubt werden könnte und dürfte mit dem Hintergedanken, daß wir es in ihr nicht mit Gott, wie er ist, sondern nur mit Gott, wie er uns erscheint, nicht mit seinem *τρόπος ὑπάρξεως*, sondern nur mit seinem *τρόπος ἀποκαλύψεως* zu tun hätten, als ob Gott Gott wäre in seiner Offenbarung, wenn er sich nicht in ihr offenbarte als der, der er ist von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit und in aller Tiefe seines Wesens.⁸⁴

Thus Barth sought to recover a basis for Christian speech about God in a trinitarian doctrine of God's self-revelation—one that admitted no 'gap' between God's eternal being and his act. Both his sense that the pressing problem in modern theology is a kind of dualism that undermined Christian confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ—his lingering worry about a 'God behind God'—and his attempts to develop a christologically focused account of the eternally free and boundlessly capacious grace of God towards sinful human beings proved enormously influential. Barth himself did not countenance a simple turn from Schleiermacher to Hegel; but a sense that the doctrine of the trinity functions to hold the language of being and history, the eternal life of God and his immediate involvement in the world, in the closest possible connection runs throughout much of the writing of the period. Here we may note Karl Rahner's claim that there 'must be a connection between Trinity and man' and his famous attempt to formulate this connection in the thesis that 'the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity'.⁸⁵

This reconsideration of fundamental questions about the relation of the trinitarian life of God and the creative and saving activity of God in the world has taken place alongside a further intensive reconsideration of the shape of God's enacted faithfulness to his people—one occasioned not least by the deeply troubled history of European and global Judaism in the twentieth-century. Contemporary Christian theology accordingly is marked by a wide-ranging endeavour to recapture the significance of a distinctively Christian identification of God as trinity whilst

⁸⁴ K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf 1927*, ed. G. Sauter (Zürich: TVZ, 1982), pp. 208–10.

⁸⁵ K. Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 22.

bringing this doctrine centrally to bear both in reconsideration of the relation between Christianity and other religions and in critical theological evaluation the very notion of ‘religion’ itself.⁸⁶ We may discern in this work at least two complementary trajectories of thought.

The first centrally entails the Christian theological analysis of the reality and validity of non-Christian religions. We may take as an example of this line of approach a 1956 essay by the French Jesuit Jean Daniélou, *Dieu et Nous*.⁸⁷ Lamenting the lack of sustained attention to the history of non-Christian religions as a matter of *theological* concern, Daniélou also regretted the fact that popular discussion of the relation of Christianity to other religious traditions tended often to pursue strategies of assimilation, identifying Christianity with its cultural form and drawing it into the closest possible relation to other forms of observed human religious behaviour.⁸⁸ Thus Christianity is treated as ‘a phase in the religious evolution of mankind’ or simply as one religion among many, all commonly grounded in the transcendental unity of religion. For Daniélou, such historicist and idealist-pluralist analyses are profoundly unsatisfying, trading on a category mistake:

We utterly reject such evolutionary and syncretistic theories. Christianity cannot, any more than Judaism, be described as a manifestation of an immanent evolution of the religious genius of mankind, of which these two are merely the relatively higher expressions. They are interventions in history of a transcendent God who introduces man into a domain which is radically opposed to him.⁸⁹

Christianity is not another episode in the history of religion but, with Judaism, an element in the history of revelation, a history authoritatively attested in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The foundational acts of this history—exodus, Sinai, incarnation, Pentecost—are unique and unrepeatable; and in the divine wisdom, they cohere as a unified whole. This whole is the history of salvation, gradually unfolding as ‘a course of divine instruction’ in which humanity is drawn first to recognise God as the transcendent creator and ruler of all things and then to

⁸⁶ Talk of ‘religions’, ‘faith traditions’ and so on is, of course, theologically fraught. The use of such terms here is merely convenient.

⁸⁷ J. Daniélou, S.J., *Dieu et Nous* (Paris: Grasset, 1956), here cited from the English translation of Walter Roberts: *God and Us* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1957).

⁸⁸ Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 79: ‘Many men do, in fact, acknowledge God’s existence, but refuse to admit any positive revelation. They do not recognize in the fact of Christianity any original reality radically distinct from religion in a general sense.’

⁸⁹ Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 10.

know the mystery of God's life as trinity.⁹⁰ Attuned to the scriptural witness to the *mirabilia Dei*, Christian theology takes as its task not the attempt to identify a place for Christianity within the religions of the world so much as understand 'the theological status of the history of religion, the place of the history of religion in the history of salvation'.⁹¹

Daniélou found in the Thomistic maxim that grace does not destroy but perfects nature (*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*) the ground for what he considered a more positive account of non-Christian religions than was offered in much patristic theology and in Protestant theology after Barth.⁹² 'It is indeed a principle of the revelational sequence', he argued, 'that a new revelation does not destroy, but takes over the values of the previous revelation'.⁹³ And this becomes the touchstone for Daniélou's narration of the religious history of humanity from early 'cosmic religions' (inchoate responses to the revelation of God in the created order), through the emergence of monotheistic faith on the basis of God's special revelation to Abraham and to Israel, to the 'supreme revelation of God' in the Son and Spirit. In this account, 'the whole history of salvation may be considered as a gradual unveiling of the ineffable Trinity', a slow instruction in the truth that 'the Trinity of Persons constitutes the structure of Being, and that love is therefore as primary as existence'.⁹⁴

This first trajectory is distinct from but may inform a second, which we may simply call Christian involvement in interfaith dialogue. The contexts and ends of such conversation may be variously construed: as a missionary enterprise, intending the conversion of the religiously 'other'; as an act of Christian witness in a pluralist society, an exposure of Christian faith to others and just so to God; as an exercise in hospitality, one undertaken for its own sake as a non-instrumental human good, but one which nevertheless may exemplify a civility and generosity that tends towards greater political-social understanding. Again, this dialogue may take many forms: the

⁹⁰ Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 81; cf. 119: 'It was first necessary that faith in the unity of God, in monotheism, should be profoundly rooted in a human race always inclined towards polytheism, in order that, at the heart of that unity, the Trinity of Persons could be revealed without any danger'.

⁹¹ Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 12.

⁹² Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 11; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia q. 1 a.8. See further the reflections on variations within recent Roman Catholic theology on the relation of nature and grace and its bearing on Christian theologies of the religions in G. D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 102–4.

⁹³ Daniélou, *God and Us*, p. 20.

⁹⁴ Daniélou, *God and Us*, pp. 118–19. The fundamental theological orientation of Daniélou's analysis anticipates the important statement of the Second Vatican Council on the church's relation to non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate* (see Tanner, *Decrees*, 2:968–71).

establishment of formal routines of interfaith exchange in state-sponsored institutions; regular communal gatherings dedicated to mutual exploration and instruction in religious texts and themes;⁹⁵ a simple readiness to encounter religiously interested others as and when occasion arises.

The political and cultural dynamics motivating and nourishing such practices of interreligious encounter complex and fluid; the prospects for genuinely transformative and pacific interfaith dialogue are unclear. Christian theology, precisely insofar as it confesses Jesus Christ as its risen Lord, observes and engages in such projects with a certain confidence, knowing that all such endeavors are governed by one who intends good for his people. It also will render its confession with a sense of high responsibility, knowing it will render an account to its risen Lord for its every word. And so in venturing to speak of God in a situation of religious pluralism, it will engage intensively with the history of Christian theological reflection upon the identity of God, seeking instruction and consolation in the communion of saints. And it will offer the (always partial, provisional) results of its investigations as a sign of its gratitude, its need, and its hope. In that way, it may make a small contribution to the life of faith and to the present flourishing of God's world.

⁹⁵ Note here especially exercises in 'scriptural reasoning', on which see, e.g., D.F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, eds, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).