

## CHAPTER 5

### *God*

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Religious Studies as a discipline would not, of course, exist if people had not used and reflected on the word 'God'; but where do we start in specifying the issues that might arise in defining the word, especially when its users have habitually shrunk from offering what would usually count as a full-scale definition? What I have aimed at in the pages that follow is an investigation somewhere on the borderlands of theology strictly so-called and the phenomenology of religious discourse, in order to clarify a little of the 'grammar' of God in the Abrahamic traditions of faith – those whose material origins lie, broadly, in the eastern Mediterranean regions and which ascribe something like personal agency to the divine, creative causality in respect of the entire contingent universe and providential love towards it. I am not claiming that this is the best place from which to begin constructing a theology. But perhaps it corresponds to what one tradition would have considered as the treatise *de deo uno*: i.e., considerations of the kind of issue that needs clarification if we are to be sure it is *God* we're talking about.

A wholly understandable reaction against a theology apparently beginning from considerations of God as a solitary, transcendent individual, capable of being considered independently of the history of divine engagement with human experience and history, has led to some impatience with such grammatical exploration. In the Christian world, this can mean a reaffirmation of a robust trinitarian discourse, systematically critical of abstract theism and tending to identify any *de deo uno* reflections with such abstraction: thinking of the unity of the divine nature can be seen as giving a kind of priority to some reality lying behind the concrete relationality of God to God as Trinity, let alone the relations of God with the world's history. This is occasionally linked with a more radical alienation from the tradition of grammatical investigation that, in the name of giving priority either to revelation or to experience, declines to affirm (and even regards as actively damaging) the common conventions of philosophical exposition of God's

transcendence – conventions common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>1</sup> And this revisionism may or may not be linked with a trinitarian agenda in Christian theology.

Thus a fair amount of new writing on the question of God pleads for one or another kind of modification of what might have been regarded as the classical norm for such talk. Influential feminist essays have posed questions about a language of divine transcendence that might be understood as simply transcribing a rhetoric of the superiority of mental to physical, and have argued in various ways for a more obviously immanentist account; and other, equally influential, voices have been raised in criticism of the language of immutability and impassibility, demanding a God who is not so much 'beyond' suffering and change but what we might (awkwardly) call an endlessly resourceful manager of suffering and change. These two sorts of challenge are, of course, less compatible with each other than they might appear, though they are often merged with one another by writers whose main issue is the supposed inadequacy of the classical model. A suffering and mutable God (such as is said to be found in the Bible) must be, in a very strong sense, a psychological subject comparable to ourselves; an immanent God is not obviously a subject in anything like this sense. The virtues of the mutable God are sometimes argued in terms of the need to say what must be said about God's compassion; but this is difficult to state intelligibly if God's subjectivity is not, at the level that matters, different from the totality of the experience of contingent subjects.

My purpose in these brief reflections, though, is not to mount a detailed critique of contemporary challenges so much as to ask a few questions as to how the 'classical' Jewish, Christian and Muslim model ever evolved, with particular emphasis upon my own Christian discourse, against its Jewish background. I shall be arguing that it represents a complex fusion between that narrative specification of the identity of God about which Hans Frei wrote so seminally<sup>2</sup> and the familiar considerations in the philosophical world about the grammar of transcendence, the kind of 'being' that could be ascribed to what was not an item in the world: Nothing specially new about that; but I hope to suggest that the fusion was something other than a confusion, and that the narrative identification of the God of Israel and of Jesus raises precisely the kind of questions that can't be answered without reference to those grammatical issues sketched in the philosophical tradition of antiquity. In other words, I shall argue that the patristic and medieval

<sup>1</sup> For an important discussion of this, see David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

reading of Exodus 3:14 in connection with a metaphysical preoccupation with what existence actually meant – the reading already canonised by the Septuagintal rendering of ‘I am who I am’ as ‘I am the one who is’ – is neither muddled nor opportunistic. It may become clearer how, in David Burrell’s words, ‘[t]he unity of God can hardly be comprehended as a purely philosophical assertion’.<sup>3</sup>

The God of Hebrew scripture in its canonical shape is a god whose identity is consistently clarified in terms of what he has done and whom he has known, called or spoken to; in the Exodus 3 passage, he is the god of the ‘fathers’ even before he is the ‘I am’ of the great self-declaration. The Exodus and covenant themes then add to this the specification that God is defined or self-defined as Israel’s covenant partner and thus also as the source of Israel’s law. Israel’s God is recognisable as the one who initiates the law-governed life of Israel, the one who gives regular, coherent, continuous unity to the distinctive life of this community. Everything that makes Israel the community it is has to be referred to the commands of God, given to Israel in the wake of the act of liberation by which this rather inchoate and ill-assorted group of people become independent. Here is the governing theme of (in particular) the Deuteronomic literature; and Deuteronomy itself (see especially chapters 4 to 6) stresses the oddity of what God has done in this respect. It is, says Deuteronomy 4:34, not a general characteristic of gods that they set out to create a new nation by a process of prolonged upheaval and suffering; this, it is implied, is what is signified by the uniqueness of the experience (4:33) of hearing God ‘in the midst of the fire’. And the whole of this process, divine decision and human testing, establishes (4:35) that this God is the only true God.

Much is regularly (and rightly) made of the connection between God’s freedom to set people free and God’s difference or transcendence; but there is another question to be thought through in this complex of theological narrative. God constitutes a people not simply by the creation of a discernible community but by the giving of law to that community. God is known and served by the keeping of the law, in every detail. But this establishes that God’s claims upon the human community are not the claims of a divine monarch to worship only, but are identical with the claims of justice between human agents and towards strangers (the latter a point well made in John Milbank’s essay on God in Jean-Yves Lacoste’s *Dictionnaire de théologie*). God is not an object competing for attention: to know God is to be involved in the entire range of actions specified by law; or, indeed, more

<sup>3</sup> Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God*, p. 111.

particularly, a writer like Hosea can put 'the knowledge of God' more than once as a parallelism for 'fidelity' and *hesed*, compassionate commitment (4:1, 6:6). The famous 'What does the Lord require?' passage of Micah 6:6-8 reinforces the same point: in no sense is the knowledge of God or the idea of action pleasing to God something that occupies a place of its own alongside other duties. There *are* cultic duties, their priority variously assessed and understood by different writers; but the canonical conclusion is that these are unintelligible outside a whole system of injunction about the form of the common life.

God's relation to the chosen community is thus not *an* element in the community's life, it is the constitutive fact for there being a community at all. To be a conscious participant in this community is to be able to recognise who God is, and to be outside that participation is to lack that skill – not because sharing in the community provides an initiate's knowledge of the divine in the normal cultic sense, but because the whole of the law-governed life is acquaintance with God. And if the identifying of God cannot be confined to what cultic activity prescribes, there is already a blurring of the idea that God's claim on the community's life is one among others – and so of the implicit idea that *God* is one among others. You cannot discharge God's claim by performing a determinate set of actions; you cannot therefore work on the assumption that responding to God's claim is something that can be enumerated along with the doing of other things. In this sense, cultic and social action alike both are and are not 'adequate' responses to God, since no one act or kind of act alone tells you what the nature is of the God to whom you are responding; that depends upon the entire pattern of 'lawful' existence that is enjoined upon the people of the covenant. God's priority in the life of the covenant community is not a matter of ascribing to God a greater significance than is possessed by anything else; God is that to which every action in some sense refers, that which every action manifests or fails to manifest; and, as such, an agent who cannot be compared with other agents.

Very cautiously and confusedly, this is, I believe, moving towards the fundamental recognition in classical Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) theology, that divine life can't be discussed in the terms in which we speak of finite activity, as a contingent and interdependent reality. It is this sort of consideration that makes possible and desirable the appeal by Jewish and Christian thinkers of late antiquity to the Platonic language of God as 'beyond being', God's nature as capable of being characterised primarily by the stripping away of the attributes of contingent agency. Action, for the agent within the universe, is always bound up with response, passivity

as well as initiative. But what determines the meaning of any human (any finite?) action, what determines what it communicates or 'carries', cannot itself be wholly determined by other actions within a system. The traditional ascription of impassibility to God, so very unpopular today, is not so much a radical departure from a scriptural God possessed of a psychology like ours as it is a somewhat abstract rendering of what is awkwardly understood in the definition of God as the source of law and covenant, that is, the source – for the community that embodies his 'name', his 'public identity' in the world's history – of the meanings that are to be ascribed to, or perceived in, every action and relation.<sup>4</sup>

Specifically for the Christian, this is reinforced by what is implied in incarnational faith. Already in the New Testament, the involvement of divine action in the life of Jesus is something that is not restricted to specific areas of his biography or understood as episodic inspiration. Paul can describe Jesus as simply the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24) – that is, he can write as though Jesus were as a whole to be characterised as God's action, admittedly a very strange way of speaking. John's formulation of the Logos made flesh (John 1:14) works in much the same way: at the foundation of everything in the world is an active relation to God, a relation designated as Logos, 'word', 'structure', 'expression', a relation so intimate that the Logos is concretely the way God acts both to establish the universe and to direct the universe towards himself; this relation is embodied without reserve or qualification in the human life that is about to be narrated, the life of Jesus. But the implication is, as in Paul, that this is not a life episodically inspired by God, let alone interrupted by God at moments of crucial importance. God is not 'in' Jesus as an element in his biography, but as what the entire biography expresses, transcribes or communicates. The divine life which is eternally realised in the Logos is not an overwhelmingly important dimension of Jesus's life, but the deepest source of that life's meaning in all the actuality of its historical and narrative detail. Thus both the action and the passion of this life are held together as one coherent phenomenon by, ultimately, the act of God; and the presence of that act in the history of Jesus of Nazareth is not an element or moment alongside the contingencies of the history. It is the point that is laboriously clarified in the Christological debates of the early Christian centuries and remains a focal theme in the Christology of high scholasticism. The pervasive and determinative work of divine action in Christ takes nothing from his specific

<sup>4</sup> A fine and exhaustive treatment can be found in Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark (Continuum), 2000).

human identity, replaces no aspect of the outer or inner integrity of a finite agent.

One of the boldest and most extraordinary contributions to theology made by Michel de Certeau was to note that in modern intellectual discourse the 'religious' no longer marks off a clear and discrete area of study. 'Comprendre, en sciences humaines, c'est avoir, par méthode, à surmonter la régionalisation des faits religieux'.<sup>5</sup> Speaking about religious phenomena is always describing social and psychological facts and processes; to use terms like 'God' and 'grace' is to conceal (in his words) the conditions of the production of these phenomena. Religious language does not describe a set of independent things, but offers an 'equivocal' account of their significance<sup>6</sup> – or, more accurately, of their *reality*. Theology's temptation is to introduce such reality into the systems of the world's processes, to bring the secret substances 'behind' the world's process into the light of day. But this would be only to reduce what theology talks about to the level of all other subjects of human discourse. Theology has to learn to work differently, or at least to understand its own difference. Instead of being the language that brings hidden things to light, it is more, for de Certeau, a language that points to and holds on to what is 'un-said' in the various regions of 'scientific' language, the various analyses of the world's processes – not least by pondering out loud about the very nature of scientific process as always facing what is *not yet* thinkable in the terms already fashioned. Thinking constantly confronts otherness – a truth that is, de Certeau argues, more than ever visible in the human sciences of modernity (ethnology, psychoanalysis, sociology, new historical methods), though it is true of all the sciences in their fashion.<sup>7</sup> If there is always a tension between the thinkable and the unthinkable, the same and the other, thinking Christianity will have the same character. And, although we have to advance cautiously here, de Certeau seems to be suggesting that Christianity does offer a kind of methodological clue to how we think, if only because its fundamental narrative is so conspicuously one of absence: it rests on an absent body, not a graspable set of teachings and institutional rules laid down by a 'normal' historical founder.<sup>8</sup>

De Certeau can be read – quite inadequately, I believe – as another exponent of the triumph of 'neutral' modern epistemology, of the all-sufficiency of secular reason and explanation. This is to miss both the post-modern and the biblical edge of his thinking – as well as the powerful Hegelian echoes.

<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.    <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208–9.    <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211ff.

To say that religion has lost its territorial integrity is not to reduce religious discourse to an optional gloss on a world that is already accurately described by secular reason (we could turn for illumination here to Nicholas Lash on *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*<sup>9</sup>). It is certainly not that a grid of universal explanation has been imposed on the world: quite the contrary. The various practices of interpreting and structuring, tracing processes in the world, intertwine and sometimes prompt each other, sometimes simply confront each other in non-communicating plurality. No discourse can offer a systematic way of relating the regions of thought to each other. Thus, the 'real' is, says de Certeau, always receding, always 'lacking'.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely not something capable of exhaustive secular description; but equally the lack which is marked in scientific discourse is not a gap capable of being filled, because the 'un-said', the not-yet-thought, is something quite other than a specific problem within the system. As for Hegel, so for de Certeau, thinking has to become newly conscious of itself in acknowledging its own movement through contradiction, a confrontation with an otherness that is always being assimilated and always escaping and repositioning itself.

Equally, for de Certeau, if one can speak of revelation at all, it is in terms of what brings to speech that absence which makes possible the shifting space of prayer and witness that is Christian life. God's act is never identified with a segment of history that will stand still under scrutiny (de Certeau's convergence with Barth would be valuable to explore here). The founder has disappeared, surrendered himself to the absent Father, become part of the divine absence itself, so that, in the Church, there is never a single all-sufficient source of authority in which and in which alone the founding reality is decisively embodied.<sup>11</sup> At every point in the Christian narrative, meaning recedes from anything that might be read off the immediate and contingent and appears only in the ways in which the whole of a story consistently evokes the absence that makes space for us. It should be possible to see how this converges with what has already been said about God's act in relation to the scriptural narrative of the formation of a corporate practice referred in its entirety to God as agent in a sense that cannot be accommodated in terms of the world's interactions.

I am proposing that this kind of understanding is the most effective possible transcription into contemporary intellectual terms of the belief that God is 'pure act'. The superficial paradox that we are invited to speak

<sup>9</sup> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, esp. chs. 5, 10 and 12.

<sup>10</sup> De Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, p. 198. <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 215–18.

at one and the same time of divine absence and the fullness of divine activity should not alarm us if we have read our Bibles with attention. Divine action can be 'pure' only if it is in no sense in 'negotiation' with specific agencies. And so far from this leaving us with a God uninvolved in creation's life – as the polemic of revisionist theologies so often suggests – this allows some grasp of what is being claimed in saying that God is 'pure' *giver* (and therefore that any talk of God's favour or grace or goodwill must be a way of honouring the primacy of God's action rather than a drama of seeking and winning a desired reaction). The removal of the religious from the status of a category among others, like the denial in Hebrew scripture of a single privileged area for acting so as to gain or retain divine favour, is not a way of privatising or marginalising what faith speaks of (though it may require, as de Certeau bleakly and frequently suggests, a certain honesty about the actual *social* marginality of the voices of faith at the present time): it allows what religious discourse purports to be about to retain its place at the source of communicative action while proscribing any battles to secure a place among other places for 'the religious'. The encounter with God, paradigmatically seen in the life and language of the 'mystic', always moves us towards a non-place: the mystic's actual worldly identity becomes an inscription of otherness – in the dissolution or paradox of the mystic's language and in the sense of mystical awareness as the growth towards a joy generated by nothing but the life of the other in the self.<sup>12</sup> By being an individual in this world whose pattern of life and language insistently subverts and fractures itself in reference to this alien joy, the mystic occupies a place that is not determined or defended (or defensible) and so gives the only sort of content that can, in contemporary intellectual terms, be given to the language of God as *actus purus*.

There are a lot of questions raised by this – not least the issue discussed by F. C. Bauerschmidt in his 1996 article on de Certeau,<sup>13</sup> whether de Certeau is adequately clear on how the non-place of the mystic is also a space of corporate practice (even if that space cannot be identified with the territory of what is unambiguously religious in the world). I suspect that a fuller untangling of what de Certeau says about the practice of confronting and accepting otherness would in fact lay bare a more specific theology of the Church and its characteristic moral practice than might initially appear if we concentrate primarily on the anonymous or contested

<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume 1: the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 176–7, 197–200.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Abrahamic Voyage: Michel de Certeau and Theology', *Modern Theology* 12.1 (January 1996), pp. 1–26.

or simply inarticulate nature of believing life as sketched by de Certeau. The point of discussing him in the context of a reflection on the grammar of God in contemporary theology is that he, more than any other recent analyst of religious language, offers both a way of making fresh sense of some aspects of classical Christian discourse about God and a set of implicit questions about what might be entailed in abandoning that discourse in favour of one more immediately sympathetic to some aspects of the late modern mindset.

What might such questions look like? Say we allow ourselves to speak of God as changeable and capable of suffering – not just as a rhetorical moment, a conscious deployment of myth, but as a systematic principle. If we really mean what we say, the implication is that there are agents or agencies that are strictly external to the agency of God; even if we grant that God is in some way the ultimate source of their existence, creation – as it were – bestows on them a life on the other side of an ontological frontier such that they may modify not only each other but their source. But this is bound to have at least two significant effects. If the source is in this way modifiable, is it still possible to say that it is unequivocally the source of the meanings constructed or enacted in the world? And if it is not to be thought of as source, it has to be thought of as standing with, negotiating with or even contesting other possible meanings. Does this lead us back into the trap so eloquently characterised by theologians like John Milbank and James Alison as a capitulation to 'foundational violence'? That may be putting it rather extremely; but in the sense that an *irreducibly* plural understanding of how human meanings are ultimately created and sustained leaves us with an inevitable element of contest, the concerns are real. And to claim that the divine action can be trusted to prevail (following some varieties of process thought which privilege the resourcefulness of love while allowing a kind of passibility to God) is only to claim that, in the long run, God has more resource than other agents. The story remains one of contest and victory rather than the complex convergence imagined by classical theology and spirituality between growth in integrity and actualisation as a creature and conformity with the 'will' or 'purpose' of God. And thus conversion, sanctification and so on become precisely the kind of issues they are regularly represented as being in modern, emancipatory theological rhetoric: they are about power, who has it and who doesn't, who has more of it, what counts as power and so on.

This in turn has implications for the understanding of the contemplative practice and experience that de Certeau discusses. In his brief but revolutionary account of what Teresa of Avila is doing in the writing of her *Interior*

*Castle*,<sup>14</sup> he demonstrates how Teresa's models of the soul as castle, crystal and diamond cannot be reduced to a single momentary representation: there is no way of depicting the soul as Teresa speaks of it. The image 'already has a narrative structure'; the soul *is* the action or motion of the text that unfolds its reality, and God's presence in and to the soul is capable of being spoken of only in this movement, this structure. To show how God is there in the soul, how the soul is the place of this divine other, you have to relate a history and lay out a sequence of metaphors, to 'shape' yourself in speech, as opposed to providing a description at a distance of what the soul and God are like. In so doing, you show a self becoming 'other than itself', a self that is the site of what was earlier called alien joy. The ordering of a life story exhibits 'what cannot be there . . . , unless it be in metaphors and passages. In this way, [Teresa] can equally affirm that the castle is the book or the soul, that she is the author or that God is . . . , and that she is speaking of the writing, the soul, or prayer.'<sup>15</sup> What prompts or directs the ordering is all that makes the soul a stranger to itself – anguish, ecstasy, the interweaving of the two that is characteristic of Teresa and others – and refuses a graspable and lasting identity. It is another aspect of what de Certeau writes about in the pages on *rupture instauratrice* in *La faiblesse de croire*: no aspect of the Christian system of speech and practice represents alone or in itself the absent 'transcendent' origin; the events that make Christian life possible; only together do they evoke this absent ultimate resource, 'not without each other'. Once again, God is spoken of truthfully only in the entire complex of talk, narrative, action.

But if God comes to be characterised as an agent among agents, all of this becomes enormously problematic. It is not clear how contemplation can be conceived in such a context as an embodiment of the other in the self, since two agencies are bound to be confronting each other within a contested 'territory'. When one triumphs, that constitutes a clear representation or inscription of God within the world. Once again, there is an underlying issue about power, about the risks of identifying some area of the world's discourse unambiguously with God. Or, if there is no guaranteed 'triumph' for God, if contest is perpetual and unresolved, we are stuck with a metaphysic (the fact that it is commonly presented as a kind of alternative to metaphysics is irrelevant) in which what is unambiguously good has no necessary relation to how things fundamentally are, or are thinkable. Good becomes a function of the will, separated from 'nature', as in the familiar forms of debased Kantianism, and from intellect. If the former problem

<sup>14</sup> *The Mystic Fable*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 192–200.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

(God as an agency confronting others) tends to a reduction of God to an item in the world, the latter allies the reality of God to the workings of an 'inner' life, detaching God from the processes of learning that take place in a material and historical environment. In plainer terms, while the former interprets God's existence as being on the same footing as that of contingent realities, the latter moves towards evacuating talk of God's existence of all content.

The classical conventions of speaking about God are precisely devised to steer between these two positions. To say that God is pure act, or that God is being itself, that God is *esse*, or *non aliud*, with all that these imply about the inappropriateness to God of language about change or suffering, is to register the difficulty of ascribing *existence* to God, if our talk of God is indeed grounded in the kind of history that Jews and Christians relate. Two factors have made a difference to the present possibility of reclaiming these conventions (which is why a perspective like that of de Certeau is so suggestive as a way of recovering these concerns in a quite other idiom). The first is summed up by Joseph O'Leary.<sup>16</sup> The language of absolute being, *ipsum esse subsistens*, and so on has become problematic in the wake of the dissolution of those elements in earlier metaphysical discourse that worked against a univocity in speaking of being. When 'being' has become a more unproblematic and territorialised concept than it is in Platonic and early medieval (including Thomist) thought, the risk is of seeing God as possessor of an unlimited quantity of it – or as a synonym for the totality of what there is. God is either a supreme individual or an all-pervasive quality or force in what exists. We forget in such a context the inseparability in Aquinas of the language of pure act and the language of God's 'excess' in respect of being. What was, to use O'Leary's expression, a 'strategy' for indicating God's freedom from circumscription may become in a changed intellectual environment a narrowing theoretical construct which has lost sight of how the classical language intends to evoke a unique difference (the true sense of Cusanus's *non aliud*, of course). In short, the language of 'being' has become muddied; O'Leary speaks of its having lost its 'radiance'. Readers of Jean-Luc Marion will recognise some convergence of themes here: for Marion, the separation between being and God is what permits the reading of being as gift and 'icon', a reality that does not *represent* what is other to it but is a space for God's self-donation in the events in which God deals with us. But O'Leary is in fact rather cautious about Marion's project, arguing that Marion is at best cavalier about the *extended* social and historical processes

<sup>16</sup> *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), ch. 6, esp. pp. 188–90, 197.

whereby the name of God appears, concentrating instead on the luminous, timeless act of God in the eucharist; so that his focus upon love and gift as the words needed to speak of a God beyond, prior to, or other than being threatens to become abstract.<sup>17</sup> John Milbank further questions whether Marion is not himself caught in the early modern misapprehension that assumes a univocal sense for being, thus missing the nuance typical of the entire Platonic tradition by accepting too uncritically the Heideggerian insistence on the ideologically malign character of ontology.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the point remains: the language of being has come to be charged with these ambiguities, for good or bad reasons, and this is bound to affect any attempt to articulate persuasively the concerns of classical theology in classical terms. But the second modern and post-modern development that makes a difference here is, I suspect, one that works obliquely in favour of the classical emphases, and that is what we might call the new sense of the politics of discourse. Revisionist models of divine life in terms of passibility and so on have commonly been innocent or simplistic about this. The typical protest on behalf of emancipatory concerns has been that the traditional view sets in philosophical concrete a hierarchically ordered model of reality in which mind is privileged over feeling, spirit over body, male over female and so on; God's transcendence (including, for some writers, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*) as expressed in the classical 'attributes' places God in irreconcilable opposition to a world of chance and vulnerability. God becomes a metaphysical transcription of unexamined power structures in the world.

In this framework, the obvious but naive resolution is to salvage divine credibility by refusing the classical grammar of transcendence, so as to relocate God with and in the world's vulnerability. It is a strategy given much persuasive power by the undoubted fact that the rhetoric of Christian proclamation from the very beginning apparently does just this, insisting (as in I Corinthians) on God's adoption of the weak as vessels of grace and of course, above all, on the mortality of Jesus as the supreme vehicle of God's transforming work. But there is a misunderstanding here: Paul's language is professedly a way of asking where we might expect to discern God in the world's experience, and displaying how God's actual presence upsets those expectations. To read it as endorsing a projection onto God of the vulnerability of subjects in the world is, ironically, to remove the upset by removing the paradox. If God as such is vulnerable in the sense that we

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 186–91.

<sup>18</sup> John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 46–9.

are, God becomes a case of contingent passibility and discerning God in the cross of Jesus or in the action of grace in the poor, the voiceless, the failed and the spiritually incompetent is no longer surprising. What has been changed by the emancipatory move in theology is the locus of power and of suffering, not the nature of power relations themselves. To put it a little mischievously, it is like the demand made by sections of the British public in the wake of the death of Princess Diana that the Queen should show public signs of grief. What consoles is that the powerful should become vulnerable ('interesting and weak like us' in W. H. Auden's telling phrase). And what is left unchallenged is how power is conceived. The difference of transcendence as specified in the Christian narrative is eroded.

And, as I have been consistently arguing, such a theology in fact leaves us with a more, not less, politically problematic model, in which God occupies the same conceptual space as we do, so that our relation with God is never wholly free of contest. If that is the model we are using, we shall have difficulties coherently explaining why the gospel creates substantive and distinctive community: on the traditional model, the non-rivalrous relation with God (pure act, *non aliud*), by shaping the self as a 'place of the other', in de Certeau's words, challenges a territorial account of the self, in such a way that the *created* other finds place in my self, and my 'interest' is shifted from an individual focus to one that prescribes reciprocity and involvement. Leave God as an agent among others, and the fundamental miracle of the self's fruition in the unequivocally other, that which is so different as to be *non aliud*, different from all differences, never happens. Contest, violence, rivalry, is allowed to remain ontologically basic, without a 'difference from difference' that permits the formation of a revelatory community.

My argument began with the biblical theme of the formation of a community as constitutive of the naming of God in the world – a community which, by tracing its entire law-governed character to God and refusing a merely religious revelation, began to raise the conceptual question of how to imagine a 'non-territorial' God. The evolution of belief in Jesus Christ as 'bearer of simultaneous divine and human identity' represents an intelligible outgrowth of the same understanding and raises the same issues. Thus, I have proposed, when Jewish and Christian (and, I must suppose, Muslim) thinkers undertake the meta-narrative job of clarifying the grammar of their discourse, they reach for the radical language of transcendence available in the Platonic world – both the Middle Platonist disciplines of *aphesis*, the 'taking away' of predicates of contingency, and the venerable but constantly puzzling idiom of God's transcendence of 'being'. That they do so is not, I

believe, a betrayal of revealed or scripturally founded faith but an attempt to render more adequately the radical implications of that faith. To return to the insights of David Burrell, referred to at the beginning of this discussion, we have to recognise that clarification of the grammar of 'God' is in fact not easily separable from the study of how religious languages are formed and learned; which in turn should remind us that there are theological questions that need examining *by way of* history and phenomenology; that theological clarification may be had – without questioning the autonomy of theology – from 'religious studies'.

So we shall not straightforwardly recover 'classical' insights simply by repeating the familiar tropes of classical theology, however lucidly rendered (though it does no harm to remind an intellectually careless theological public of what the tradition actually does and doesn't say). Since we have become sensitive to the politics of our language, it may well be that an analysis of the implications of our theology in respect of power will prove the most fruitful way towards recovery. I have discussed de Certeau at some length; the presence of Girard in the background will have been, I am sure, equally obvious. Their significant contribution to contemporary theology is surely to have begun this task: de Certeau in his seminal notion of the contemplative self as a 'non-place', a non-territory, in virtue of its relation to God, and his account of foundational absence in the origins of faith; Girard in his analysis of the Christian and Jewish narrative as a dissolution of human assumptions about foundational violence. Questions remain for both, which this essay has had no space to examine in detail; but the methodological importance of this approach is what matters if theology – in the strictest sense of discourse about God – is to avoid a degeneration into sentimental mythology, unexamined narratives of a supernatural individual.

To conclude with a more immediate Christian theological and ecclesial point: the implication of all this is also, of course, that the recovery of what I have been arguing is the pivotal concern of classical theology is impossible unless the believing community takes seriously its own character and acts accordingly. In a church that is in many ways deeply wedded to 'territorial' preoccupations, it is unlikely that the gift and promise of the non-territorial God will be clearly discernible. In other words, a church that is concerned about its internal politics will not transform the political in the way that is in fact made possible by Jesus. The desire to secure purity and control in the Church (which can be a preoccupation as much of 'progressives' as of 'traditionalists') looks to a territory in which believers may see in one another a reassuring sameness; and when believers are looking at one another to test that assurance, they are less likely to be attending to the

foundational absence on which the life of the community rests. And if the contemplative life is central in some way to the integrity of the Church at large, it is because of this: not to point to 'values' above and beyond the concerns of the world, not to pass judgement on the unspiritual conflicts of the Church or society, but to witness to the way in which a life may be constructed in which all acts are referable to God and in which the consequent 'deregionalising' of the life of the spirit, life before God, impacts increasingly upon the understanding of prayer. It is to do with the poverty and wealth of the everyday; with the fullness and emptiness of faith.