

# ON CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Rowan Williams



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## PROLOGUE

'What is your methodological starting point?' I remember being thus challenged on the first occasion of my delivering a lecture in a German university. It may be thought by insular souls to be a peculiarly Germanic question; British theologians are a good deal more inclined to begin haphazardly and let the methodology look after itself. But the challenge is a serious and necessary one, and, in introducing these essays, I feel some obligation to sketch a response, even if it is unlikely to be much more satisfactory than the stumbling remarks I recall making to my colleague in Bonn.

I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God. The meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching what this community does – not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating or 'inducting', imagining and worshipping. The theologian emerges as a distinct and identifiable figure when these meanings have become entangled with one another, when there is a felt tension between images or practices, when a shape has to be drawn out so that the community's practice can be effectively communicated. But this does not mean that theologians do not exist prior to such moments. **A person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is theologizing, forming a reflectively consistent speech for God.** The believing artist or the liturgist or hymnographer is likewise engaged in a theological task. But it is likely to be only in crisis that people emerge who see their essential job as pushing forward the considerations of coherence and transparency that are already at work in more 'informal' ways. And of course, when this happens, the possibilities of crisis are actually multiplied: when you try to tidy up an unsystematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. What the early Church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version

of its language, in which the losses were adjudged too severe for comfort – or rather (since 'comfort' can't be quite the right word here), in which the losses were adjudged to distort or to limit the range of reference of religious speech. The question would arise of whether the same God was still being spoken of; or whether a new version of the believing community's speech allowed as much to be said as an older version.

In various ways, these are still the issues that surround the proper role of theology in the Church. It may not quite be true that – as some radical contemporary theologians would insist – a real theologian is always a 'heretic' because that is implicit in creative religious thinking; but the risk of conceptual conflict is certainly increased when theology comes to its visible and public expression. This is one reason for the deep suspicion with which churches habitually regard theologians. However, this suspicion overlooks the preconscious reflection, the ordering of experience, that is constantly going on in the Church, the 'informal' theology of prayer, art and holy action. It's no use pretending that there is a real and recognizable religious practice that does not include this – just as it's no use pretending that there is a reading of the Bible that is free of selection and interpretation. And what is more, from the other end, so to speak, the would-be professional theologian can so understand his or her task as to forget their practical and historical rootedness in the informal theologizing of the community as it develops.

With all this in mind, I propose a typology of theological activity that allows for some clarity about appropriate methods but does not embargo the delivery of believing utterances until the methodology is wholly clear. This typology owes something to Schleiermacher's in *The Christian Faith*, where he distinguishes between the poetic, the rhetorical and the scientific or 'descriptively didactic'. I believe we need three such categories; but I think we need to be clearer about their *interaction* than Schleiermacher seems to be, and clearer about denying that they represent an advance towards an ideal form of fully self-conscious reflection. So I shall suggest a threefold division into *celebratory*, *communicative* and *critical* styles.

Theology begins as a *celebratory* phenomenon, an attempt to draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used. It is typically the language of hymnody and preaching, as we hear it in the Church's early centuries – in the Odes of Solomon or the poetry of Ephrem Syrus, in festal homilies and certain kinds of scriptural commentary. But you could equally well identify it in Dante or Langland, in the conventions of Byzantine iconography and of the more intelligent modern choruses. Eastern Orthodox theology still tends to operate in this mode predominantly; but quite a lot of the work of a

sophisticated Western theologian such as Hans Urs von Balthasar might be characterized as essentially 'celebratory', in the sense that his intention is less to argue than to evoke a fullness of vision – that 'glory' around which his theology circles so consistently. Not that he fails to argue, or that he gives us nothing but impressionistic sketches; there is an *appropriate* rigour to this enterprise that will be familiar to anyone who knows anything about the composition of poetry or the attempt to find a proper aesthetic congruence in creative work.

The problem comes when that congruence becomes so densely worked that the language is in danger of being sealed in on itself. The cross-referencing of images and patterns, in more and more intricate ways, the displaying of an ever-more complex texture to the language of belief, will risk 'freezing' the reflective process and denying it the possibility of actively illuminating and modifying the concrete historical discourses of its environment, and of being renewed and extended by them. Theology seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought. This is what I mean by the '*communicative*': a theology experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment. Once again, the early Church furnishes examples of this in the colonizing of Stoic and Platonic territory by the Apologists or Clement and Origen; but the same process is at work in 'The Dream of the Rood' in the strange transformation of the crucifixion narrative into the conventions of Teutonic hero-lays; or – most spectacularly – in the scholastic appropriation not only of Aristotle but of Aristotle mediated by Jewish and Muslim commentators. More recently, the use of Marxist categories in liberation theology tells a similar story, as do contemporary essays in the theological reading of feminist theory (Irigaray and Kristeva, as read by a Sarah Coakley or a Graham Ward). The assumption is that this or that intellectual idiom not only offers a way into fruitful conversation with the current environment but also that the unfamiliar idiom may uncover aspects of the deposit of belief hitherto unexamined. In fact, it involves a considerable act of trust in the theological tradition, a confidence that the fundamental categories of belief are robust enough to survive the drastic experience of immersion in other ways of constructing and construing the world.

But there can come a point here where the passage through unfamiliar media of thought provokes a degree of crisis: is what is emerging actually identical or at least continuous with what has been believed and articulated? This is a question that prompts further probing of what the 'fundamental

categories' really mean. Is there a stable conceptual area in the discourse of belief that will always remain unaffected by mediation in other idioms? And, if not, what, if any, kind of continuity and coherence belongs to this discourse? This nagging at fundamental meanings is what constitutes a *critical* theology, alert to its own inner tensions or irresolutions. Already in the early Church, we find the apophatic tradition developing alongside the elaborations of doctrinal formulae: Pseudo-Dionysius is careful to deny that, for example, the apparent ascription of number to the divine subsistents places those subsistents in any kind of set of objects. They are neither three nor one 'in our sense of the words'. Negative theology remains one of the most basic forms of critical theology, sometimes doing no more than sounding a warning note against the idea that we could secure a firm grip upon definitions of the divine. But it is probably in the philosophical theology of Western modernity that this element comes into its own – whether through something like Hegel's dissolution and reformation of theological categories, or the relativizing of particular theological formulations in the light of a recognition of religious pluralism (as in the work of John Hick), or in the varieties of postmodern theology lately so abundant, or in the older debates from the 1950s and 1960s about the intelligibility of religious discourse, or in the methodological and typological essays of the Yale school (Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, David Kelsey).

Critical theology (which, as these examples illustrate, may be as easily conservative as revisionist) may move in one of two ultimate directions. The critical impulse may issue in agnosticism, even nihilism; it may issue in the 'atheous' theologies of Don Cupitt or Mark C. Taylor; it may more prosaically at least prompt a fairly thoroughgoing revaluation of dogmatic language (Maurice Wiles or, more radically, Gordon Kaufmann). On the other hand, it may move towards a rediscovery of the celebratory by hinting at the gratuitous mysteriousness of what theology deals with, the sense of a language trying unsuccessfully to keep up with a datum that is in excess of any foresight, any imagined comprehensive structure. And the cycle begins again.

I do not mean to suggest that whole theologies really fall under one or the other style. But the sense of what David Tracy has taught us to call a 'public' in theology unmistakably shapes the priorities and methods of theologians. It is legitimate in the celebratory mode to imagine a believing public and to employ methods of internal elaboration of themes, refinement of imaginative patterns, and so on, without too much attention to 'critical' – category three – issues of conceptual clarity. The communicative style may draw on a less rich native vocabulary than category one makes available, because it assumes a public to whom that vocabulary is basically strange. The critical theologian

should not be deflected by considerations of conventional piety from challenging and testing the language of celebration, or even the language of communication when this latter takes for granted a stable and unproblematic native tongue, never unsettled by the enterprise of translation. But to try and arrange these in some kind of hierarchy, to regard one as the true paradigm or the goal to which the others aspire, is a serious misunderstanding of the way in which theology works. It has a mobility to it that involves recognition of the weakness of any one mode in isolation; and it points to an essential restlessness in the enterprise of Christian utterance that reflects the eschatological impulse at its heart, the acknowledgement that the events of Jesus' life and death open up schisms in any kind of language, any attempt to picture the world as immanently orderly or finished.

Some of these sketchy observations are elaborated in what follows. I present this typology of theological voices in part to explain why the 'register' of some of these chapters is a bit unstable in ways which I hope will make sense in the light of this conviction about the mobility of the discourse. There are essays here that I should describe as primarily critical, others that are more biased towards the celebratory, and a few that have elements of the communicative or rhetorical moment. Several, I suspect, may be hard to classify (so they seem to me). And I have deliberately kept in some texts that are without footnotes or other learned apparatus because I believe they crystallize points made or adumbrated in more technical discussions, and thus illustrate a little of the movement from register to register, or public to public, that is part of the experience of many theologians, perhaps especially those, like myself, with responsibilities outside the academy. The danger of self-indulgent rambling is painfully real where there is such a diversity of style or mode or 'voice'; what is always hard is to find the right kind of rigour for each, because it is not the case (as remarked above) that the differences between these styles are differences between careful and carefree (or careless) talking. How far the risk has been avoided in what follows the reader will judge; but I hope the reader will bear in mind an underlying aim in these pages – to *display* modes of arguing and interpreting rather than to advance a single system. If – to anticipate the first chapter – there is such a thing as theological integrity, it is not to be reduced to insistence upon a monolithic and supposedly scientific mode of engagement with the material. Finally, the continuities or unities lie in a more elusive place; something to do with the coherence of a biography. If that implies that incoherence here is also an index of lived incoherence, that is an uncomfortably plausible connection: a reminder of the inescapable place of repentance in all theological speech worth the name.

## Part One

# DEFINING THE ENTERPRISE

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## Chapter One

# THEOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

### I

What makes us say of any discourse that it has or that it lacks 'integrity'? Usually we can answer this in terms of whether such a discourse is really talking about what it *says* it is talking about. This is not necessarily to make a pronouncement on the integrity or otherwise of this or that speaker, who may or may not know that the discourse serves a purpose other than what it professes. It would be quite in order to say – as a Marxist might – that eighteenth-century aesthetics was an integral part of the ideology of bourgeois cultural dominance, that what determined its judgements and strategies was a particular pattern of economic relations, without thereby saying that Johnson or Hawksmoor was a liar, or that Bach did not 'mean' it when he wrote *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* at the head of his compositions. Somebody perpetuating such an aesthetic today, when we know (according to the Marxist) so much about its real determinants, would be dishonest: they could not mean what an eighteenth-century speaker meant because they know what that speaker (on the charitable interpretation) did not – the objective direction, the *interest* in fact served by the discourse. The discourse is without integrity because it conceals its true agenda; knowing that concealment robs us of our innocence, the 'innocence' of the original speaker; for we know too that speech cannot be content with concealment.

Why is it so important that speech should not conceal its purposes? Discourse that conceals is discourse that (consciously or not) sets out to foreclose the possibility of a genuine response. By operating on two levels, one acknowledged and one not, it presents to the hearer a set of positions and arguments other than those that are finally determinative of its working. Thus the repudiation or refutation of the surface position leaves the body of the discourse untouched, since it will not engage the essential agenda. A

two-level discourse is one which steps back from the risks of *conversation* – above all from those two essential features of conversation, the recognition of an ‘unfinished’ quality in what has been said on either side, and the possibility of correction. During the years of the Second Vatican Council, a journalist reporting the views of various members of the British hierarchy on artificial contraception noted that some bishops argued against it by appealing to the supposed feelings of the ‘ordinary man’ (*sic*) or to the opposition expressed by secular writers such as Orwell; the journalist wryly observed that these points were equally irrelevant to the issue and to what had been going on in the bishops’ heads when they made up their minds. This irrelevance is precisely the retreat from conversation implicit in the concealment of purpose.

Such a lack of integrity in speech is manifestly a *political* matter. To make what is said invulnerable by displacing its real subject matter is a strategy for the retention of power. It can operate at either end of the social scale: in the language of those in control, which will be essentially *about* the right to control, and in the language of the powerless in the presence of the powerful, which takes on the images and definitions offered by the latter as the only possible means of access to their world, their resources. Of course, there are times when this becomes a deliberately ironic (and thus subversive) move on the part of the powerless, but it remains, as *discourse*, without integrity: it is still talking *about*, and negotiating its way in, the power relations that prevail, whatever it claims to be saying.

A hasty clarification may be in order. It is important not to see all this in a naively reductionist way, as if what was concretely being said was arbitrary, indifferent, systematically divorced from any sort of truth-telling. Potentially truthful forms of speech can be used as tools of control and can equally be detached from such uses. If it is possible to see and to argue with a real structure of thought in a discourse, this separates it from any crassly ideological bondage. Only if there is no such coherent structure is one dealing with pure ideology (in the sense of a language that is *fundamentally* preoccupied with power and completely successful in concealing this fact). Thus the validity of Marxist argumentation is not to be settled simply by pointing to its ideological use as a tool of this or that Communist bureaucracy; nor that of Freudian theory by pointing to the patterns of economic and professional power in the world of psychoanalytic practice, or the depoliticizing effects of psychoanalytic rhetoric in certain contexts – and so on. Integrity *can* be recovered by such schemata to the extent that they show themselves capable of conversation. To believe otherwise is to hold a philosophically rather crude view of the determination of theories by their deployment.

Having integrity, then, is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final. It does not seek to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response. And it does all this by showing in its own working a critical self-perception, displaying the axioms to which it believes itself accountable; that is to say, it makes it clear that it accepts, even within its own terms of reference, that there are ways in which it may be questioned and criticized. It is a skill that may be learned rather than a system to be accepted. It sets out a possible framework for talk and perception, a field for debate, and so a field for its own future transmutations. When it resists debate and transmutation, claiming that it may prescribe exactly what the learning of its skills should lead to, it is open to the suspicion that its workings are no longer answerable to what they claim to answer to: the further determinant has been added of the need to safeguard the power that licenses this kind of talk; and thus integrity disappears.

Religious talk is in an odd position here. On the one hand, it is making claims about the context of the whole moral universe, claims of crucial concern for the right leading of human life; it is thus not likely, *prima facie*, to be content with provisional statements. On the other hand, if it really purports to be about the context of the moral universe, it declares itself to be uniquely ‘under judgement’, and to be dealing with what supremely *resists* the urge to finish and close what is being said. How is the context of the moral universe to appear in our speech without distortion? If it is represented as something whose operations have been securely or finally charted and whose authority can be straightforwardly invoked by this or that group of speakers, what is in fact happening is that such a discourse is claiming to define ‘the moral universe’ itself. Yet all speakers speak from a perspective, social and historical, and their words are *part* of the universe they claim to see as a whole. Since that is so, it will be right to suspect that the claim to understand and to speak for the global context of your own speaking is essentially a claim to power and a prohibition of free response and continuation. So it looks as though religious discourse is doomed to continual betrayals of its own integrity, making claims that actually subvert themselves, that cannot but display their own ‘ideological’ character. To understand what religious language is doing is indeed, in this perspective, to become incapable of believing it. To appeal to a total perspective is to betray the dominative interest at work in what you are saying, for there can be no conversation with a total perspective. And if what cannot be answered (or rather, cannot be conversed with) cannot honestly be said in the first place – because it will be a statement about the

speaker's power, not about what the speaker claims to be talking about – it seems as though integrity in religious discourse is unrealizable.

This is very nearly true, and it is essential for anyone wanting to talk theology to know it. If there is a reply to be made (if, that is, this account is not to become itself in turn a totalizing ideological proscription of religious language), it must be in part through a probing of the notions of 'total perspective' and the 'moral universe', and in part through the tracing of how various traditions of religious speech and practice concretely and consciously deal with the central tension.

We swiftly assume that to talk about a 'moral universe' is to be able to set out a system of connections in our behaviour, locating every kind of moral determination in a comprehensive pattern that will show its status and significance. A systematic secular account of this, such as early Freudianism, offers to interpret appearances, to reveal their inner logic, the 'script' they are enacting. Religious accounts, supposedly, relate that interpretation to a context over and above the sum total of worldly interactions: their 'script' is the will of God. But in practice, both secular and religious attempts to speak of a moral universe commonly work as *strategies* for responding consistently and intelligibly to the world's complexity rather than as exhaustive interpretations; which suggests that we can read the religious account as claiming that it is in learning to respond to our ultimate origins and 'calling' that we learn to respond truthfully or adequately to the world. To say that a religious discourse is 'about' the whole moral universe may be simply to say that it offers a sufficient imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity without evasion or untruthfulness; only when divorced from this context of a kind of imaginative skill does religious discourse fall into the trap of pretending to be a comprehensive system for plotting, connecting, 'fixing' and exhaustively accounting for the range of human behaviour. In other words, religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God's point of view* (i.e. a 'total perspective').

But how then does it establish itself as dealing with the wholeness of the moral universe? How does it talk of God as context and origin without slipping into the 'total perspective' mode? Only, I suggest, by showing *in* its workings what is involved in bringing the complexity of its human world to judgement before God; not by seeking to articulate or to complete that judgement. A religious discourse with some chance of being honest will not move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing: it will be trying to give shape to that response to the particular that is least evasive of its solid historical otherness *and* that is also rooted in

the conviction that God is to be sought and listened for in all occasions. For the Christian tradition, as for the Jewish, this means that depicting the wholeness or unity of the moral universe, or the world as a moral unity, is bound up with depicting histories of truthful response to the world – a 'wholeness' of perception and action, in which the resourcefulness of the discourse in enabling unillusioned vision is concretely set out. Christian reflection takes as normative a story of response to God in the world and the world in God, the record of Israel and Jesus. In that record, what is shown is the way in which imperfect, distorting responses to God so consistently generate their own re-formation, as they seek to conform to the reality of what it is and was that called them forth, that they finally issue in a response wholly transparent to the reality of the calling; and this culminating response creates a frame of reference, a grammar of human possibilities, believed to be of unrestricted significance, an accessible resource for conversion or transformation in any human circumstance. It generates the willingness to repeat the story to the ends of the earth, as the unifying shape of a life wholly given to God. 'The world as a moral unity' means here 'the world as capable of finding community in the shared likeness of Jesus' response to God'.

The biblical record does not consist only of narrative – or, rather, it is the *kind* of narrative it is (in other words, a story of the re-formation of human responses to God) because it weaves together history and liturgy: the God perceived in the life of Israel is constantly addressed as well as talked *about*. The same interweaving can be observed, more dramatically, in Augustine's *Confessions*, and works in the same way. The language of worship ascribes supreme value, supreme resource or power, to something other than the worshipper, so that liturgy attempts to be a 'giving over' of our words to God (as opposed to speaking in a way that seeks to retain distance or control over what's being spoken of: it is in this sense that good liturgy does what good poetry does). This is not to say that the language of worship itself cannot be starkly and effectively ideological; but where we find a developing and imaginative liturgical idiom operating in a community that is itself constantly re-imagining itself and its past, we may recognize that worship is at some level doing its job. That is what the overall canonical structure of Jewish Scripture puts before the reader; and, insofar as the New Testament portrays the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as something which opens up an unprecedentedly direct and undistorted language for prayer, praise, 'sacrifice', and so on, it is to be read as reinforcing the same point. The integrity of a community's language about God, the degree to which it escapes its own pressures to power and closure, is tied to the integrity of the language it directs *to* God.



## II

Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders itself to God: it is in this way that it becomes possible to see how it is still *God* that is being spoken of, that which makes the human world a moral unity. Speaking of God is speaking to God and opening our speech to God's; and it is speaking of those who have spoken to God and who have thus begun to form the human community, the unrestricted fellowship of holiness, that is the only kind of universal meaning possible without the tyranny of a 'total perspective'.

How, then, is our language surrendered, given to God? The first and most obvious category in our language that speaks of this is *repentance*. To admit failure before God is for speech to show the judgement of God – or rather, exposure to the judgement of God – in the simplest of ways. But given this rather banal observation, we can, on the basis of what has so far been said, generalize the point. Religious discourse must articulate and confront its own temptations, its own falsehoods. It is, in other words, essential to theology that theologians become aware of how theology has worked and continues to work in the interests of this or that system of power. To acquire such awareness is neither to dismiss theological utterances clouded with this particular kind of ambiguity as worthless, nor to entertain the fancy that there could be a theological discourse with no trace of 'interest'. Nor is it an undifferentiated repudiation of power as such, but simply the recognition that not all power articulated in theological language attempts either transparency to God's power (God's endless resource and accessibility) or the *giving* of power to those addressed (the resource of God offered for liberation or renewal). Theology has to study its own workings, not in narcissism but in penitence. It is one reason why it is more than ever vital to have what we so often lack at the moment, a theological view of the Church's history. New theologies constructed by what was the invisible underclass of earlier generations (women, the developing world) have plundered the Egyptian storehouses of sociology and psychology, often without discrimination, to identify the interests in which our discourse has worked. This task needs constantly to be renewed in a properly *theological* idiom, if it is not to become a new ideological bondage: the critique thus developed has to be related afresh to the fundamental story of belief, rather than staying at the level of reductionist secular suspicion, however crucial a tool this is in alerting us to the problem.

But there is a further dimension, less obvious but perhaps more practically

significant. One of the temptations of theology has been – at least in the modern era – to suppose not so much that there is a normative content for theological utterance, but that there is a normative *style*. This is, of course, a version of discourse about power: in proper reaction to what can look like self-indulgent or uncritical devotional and liturgical language, theologians can fall into the assumption that the mode of critical austerity in their utterances is something to which other people's speech should conform; or else, faced with a plurality of ambiguous utterances, the theologian seeks prescriptively to reduce the disturbingly wide range of meanings and resonances that exist in the more 'primary' religious talk of story and hymnody. In either case, the theologian risks breaking off one of the most crucial conversations he or she is likely to be involved in, conversation with an idiom *deliberately* less controlled, more concerned with evocation and suggestion. The theologian needs to affirm theologically the propriety of different styles, and to maintain exchange and mutual critique between them. The repentance of theological discourse can be shown in the readiness of any particular version of it to put in question not only this or that specific conclusion within its own workings, but the adequacy or appropriateness of its whole idiom. This is again, perhaps, to look to the plurality of style and genre in Scripture as a model of the collaborative enterprise that speaking of God *can* be.

Here we begin to move into a second area of reflection on 'giving our language to God'. Bible and liturgy use the metaphor of the 'sacrifice of praise'; as if the language of ascribing worth, beauty and desirability to God represented some sort of *cost* to us. So it does: praise is nothing if not the struggle to voice how the directedness of my regard depends on, is moulded by, something irreducibly other than itself. It is my speech seeking to transmute into its own substance something on whose radical difference that very substance depends; so that it must on no account *absorb* it into itself, as that would be to lose the object's generative power. The transmutation is a re-forming of the language, not the disappearance of the praised object into existing patterns of words, foreordained responses. It is, as David Jones said of all art that is in any sense representation, a 'showing forth under another form'; and for this to be serious, it entails some sense at some stage of loss of control, unclarity of focus. A celebratory work that simply uses a repertoire of stock techniques that direct our attention not to what is being celebrated but to the smooth and finished quality of its own surface is a failure. So with the language of praise for God: it needs to do its proper work, to articulate the sense of answering to a reality not already embedded in the conventions of speech; to show the *novum* of God's action in respect of any pre-existing human idiom.

There are several ways in which this may happen – glossolalia as a language of praise is one clear instance. But in the articulate literature of praise, the evocation and celebration of a natural order that has no immediate ‘relevance’ to the human is a central aspect of address to God. This is what is at work in certain strands of the Wisdom tradition of Jewish Scripture, and is most sharply and paradoxically expressed in the ‘anti-Wisdom’ of Job 38–41, in which the inaccessibility of the world’s order and the arbitrariness of creation (‘God hath deprived her [the ostrich] of wisdom’, Job 39.17), the otherness of the material world (‘Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom?’, Job 39.26), locates the language of praise in the context of what it cannot absorb or exhaust. The ‘irrationality’ of the world becomes the raw material for words about God, not as an explanatory device but precisely as a final context.

More specifically, praise in the Judaeo-Christian tradition looks to the saving presence of God, in those events that are understood as forming the particular historical difference of the tradition – the events we call ‘revelatory’. The Christian sacrifice of praise is, above all, the Eucharistic recapitulation of Jesus’ passion and resurrection, and the act that introduces believers into the whole process of praising God is likewise an enactment of the paschal event. In both these sacraments, words and actions are given over to be moulded to the shape of a movement in history, so that the time in which we speak is taken up in the time of ‘God’s action’. Here the action of praise necessarily involves evoking a moment of dispossession, of death, in order to bring the *novum* of God into focus: baptism speaks (though conventional Western versions of its symbolism obscure this) of a loss, of a disappearance, of a submerging of identity; the Eucharist – apart from its actual penitential episodes – identifies the worshippers with the unfaithful apostles at table with Jesus, and enacts (again in muted and barely visible form in much of our liturgical practice) a breaking which is seen as signifying the ‘cost’ to God of our restoration to wholeness, and so, obliquely, the moment of our own loss of God (the loss of a God whose power answers to our perceived needs and definitions).

The praise of God is thus not a matter simply of euphoric fluency; because of its attempt to speak to and of the reality of God and not simply to collapse back upon itself as a mere articulation of religious emotion, it involves ‘the labour, the patience and the pain of the negative’, a dispossession in respect of what is easily available for religious language. This dispossession is, at its simplest, the suspension of the ordinary categories of ‘rational’ speech; at a more pervasive level, it is a dispossession of the human mind conceived as central to the order of the world, and a dispossession of the entire identity

that exists prior to the paschal drama, the identity that has not seen and named its self-deception and self-destructiveness. In praise, God is truthfully spoken of by learning to speak of the world in a certain way, and of the self in a certain way; by giving over what is said to the pattern of creation and redemption, a pattern moving through loss and disorder to life.

To use a word like ‘dispossession’ is to evoke the most radical level of prayer, that of simple waiting on God, contemplation. This is a complex area: let me venture some dogmatic assertions. Contemplation in its more intense forms is associated with *apophysis*, the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of any form, verbal, visual or gestural, to picture God definitively, to finish the business of religious speech (the acknowledgement that is at work in praise as well), and the expression of this recognition in silence and attention. Contemplation is a giving place to the prior actuality of God in what is misleadingly called ‘passivity’: misleadingly, because it is not a matter of suspending all creaturely activity (as if that were possible) in pure attention to the divine void.

The classical literature on this, above all the great Carmelite doctors, but to some extent the early Jesuits as well, envisages a process which *begins* with drastic interruptions of ‘ordinary’ speech and action, conscious policies of asceticism or detachment, sometimes issuing in what might well have to be called temporary pathological states, periods of suspension of the ordinary habitual workings of mind or body. There is a *strategy* of dispossession, suspicion of our accustomed ways of mastering our environment: a search for prayer beyond deliberate and ordered meditation, the expectation of failure in coping with the ‘truths of faith’ when trying to use them for the stirring of devotion, essays in physical privation or isolation, scepticism or hostility towards internal and external props of devotion (pious sensations or edifying images). In conjunction with such a strategy, we may of course expect a measure of emotional strain or disturbance, profound and even frightening depressive symptoms. All this is preliminary (most misunderstandings of St John of the Cross arise from a failure to notice this, with the consequent complaint that nature and grace are being set in opposition). The fruition of the process is the discovery that one’s selfhood and value simply lie in the abiding faithful presence of God, not in any moral or conceptual performance; which is a radical affirmation of the *goodness* of nature. For St Teresa, this is the discovery of the King in the central chamber of the ‘interior castle’; for St John of the Cross, more subtly, it is the simplification of the three ‘faculties of the soul’, the three components of conscious, intentional life – memory, understanding and will – into the three theological virtues – hope, faith and love.

For both, the state of ‘union’ to which the entire process moves is one in

which 'God' has *ceased* to be the interruption of our earthly action, because the self acts out of an habitual diffused awareness that its centre is God. The self is *fully* conscious (even if only at a rather elusive level) that it is the object of an unchanging creative love, conscious that for it to be itself is for it to be dependent on God's presence at its root or centre. To act from its centre is to give God freedom in the world, to do the works of God. The self, we could say, has attained integrity: the inner and the outer are no longer in tension; I act what I am, a creature called to freedom, and leave behind those attempts at self-creation which in fact destroy my freedom. As Teresa puts it, Martha and Mary unite: truthful, active and constructive love issues from and leads into patience and silence, or, better, is constantly *contemporary* with patience and silence.

The work done in the dispossession of Christ's cross is finished only in the communicating to human beings of the divine liberty in their fleshly and historical lives – in the shorthand of doctrinal language, the sharing of Jesus' risen life. The contemplative process is ultimately a reconciliation with, not an alienation from, creatureliness, from the life of the body in time: Teresa considered it one of the marks of the unitive state that one no longer wished for death. Contemplation, in other words, is a deeper appropriation of the vulnerability of the self in the midst of the language and transactions of the world; it identifies the real damaging pathologies of human life, our violent obsessions with privilege, control and achievement, as arising from the refusal to know and love oneself as a creature, a body. The contemplative is thus a critic of the ideological distortion of language in two ways: negatively, as exposing some of the sources of our fears and obsessions, positively as looking to a fusion of 'inner' and 'outer', or, rather, a dismantling of that dichotomy as normally understood. The self as liberated from the need to be in control of the transactions in which it is involved does not require the subterfuges of escape from direct conversational speech which constitute the erosion of integrity already described.

### III

It would be possible to elaborate the point further, looking at other facets of prayer: thanksgiving involves the recognition of oneself as a recipient of unplanned benefits, intercession acknowledges the reality of the need of others and one's own relative powerlessness in respect of their future; both can speak of that displacement or dispossession of perspective that we have discussed in relation to penitence, praise and contemplation. But this is enough

to bring into focus the significance of prayer for an honest theology. Prayer of the kind I have been trying to describe is precisely what *resists* the urge of religious language to claim a total perspective: by articulating its own incompleteness before God, it turns away from any claim to human completeness. By 'conversing' with God, it preserves conversation between human speakers.

Religious practice is only preserved in any integrity by seriousness about prayer; and so, if theology is the untangling of the real grammar of religious practice, its subject matter is, humanly and specifically, people who pray. If theology is itself a critical, even a suspicious discipline, it is for this reason. It seeks to make sense of the practice of dispossessed language 'before God'. It thus lives with the constant possibility of its own relativizing, interruption, silencing; it will not regard its conclusions as having authority independently of their relation to the critical, penitent community it seeks to help to be itself.

This has some consequences for the way theology conceives its practice. If theology is understood primarily as a 'science' in the common understanding of that term, it will assume that its job is to clarify, perhaps to explain; it will seek to establish procedures for arguing and criteria for conclusions; it will be interested in whether or not there are good reasons for saying this or that. For an empirically based science, the only interruptions that matter are those of new phenomena not catered for in previous schemata. But the history of theology does not look very much like what this account might suggest; and, on the basis of what I have been trying to outline, we should not expect it to. There is a rigour and a discipline appropriate to theology, but it is the rigour of keeping on the watch for our constant tendency to claim the 'total perspective': it is almost a rigour directed *against* the naive scientific model. Theology will probe those aspects of religious practice which pull in the direction of ideological distortion, those things which presuppose that there is a mode of religious utterance wholly beyond the risks of conversation, a power beyond resistance, a perspective that leaves nothing out. It will challenge the fantasy that such things are available to human beings; but it will also challenge the notion that these are the terms in which *God* is to be imagined.

Even if unanswerable power is denied to men and women, ascribing it to God is still to remain under the spell of the same fantasy and to use the myth of absolute power and final speech against the world of historical learning and communion. Theology can remind the world of religious discourse that it offers not a total meaning but the possibility of a perception simplified and unified in and through the contingencies of human biography: not the con-

quest but the transformation of *mortal* vision. God is there not to supply what is lacking in mortal knowledge or mortal power, but simply as the source, sustainer and end of our mortality. The hope professed by Christians of immortal life cannot be a hope for a non-mortal way of seeing the world; it is rather the trust that what our mortality teaches us of God opens up the possibility of knowing God or seeing God in ways for which we have, by definition, no useful mortal words.

Theology of this sort nags away at the logic of our generative religious stories and rituals, trying to set out both in its speech *and* in its procedures what the logic entails. It will understand doctrinal definition as the attempt to make sure that we are still speaking of *God* in our narratives, not about the transactions of mythological subjects or about the administration of religious power. Theology of this sort does not bring in alien categories for either the defence or the criticism of doctrinal statements, but is willing to learn from non-theological sources something about the mechanisms of deceit and control in language. It is there to test the truthfulness of religious discourse, its fidelity to itself and its openness to what it says it is about; but it does not do this by trying to test the 'truth' of this or that religious utterance according to some canon of supposedly neutral accuracy. Establishing the truth of a religious claim is a matter of discovering its resource and scope for holding together and making sense of our perceptions and transactions without illusion; and that is a task in which the theologian *as* theologian has a role, but not a uniquely privileged one (as if he or she alone were free enough from the heavy clay of piety to see between the words of believers into the life of God).

Theology needs to make connections, to search out and display unities or analogies (good biblical interpretation has always sought to do this), and – borrowing the phrase from Dietrich Ritschl's *Logic of Theology* (London, 1986), – to 'try with overall outlines' (p. 92). But, as Ritschl immediately goes on to say, it should be abidingly conscious of its peril in this regard. It can draw us away from the particularity of real objects in their actuality – real history, real materiality, real pain, seduced by the promise of explanation, of total perspective; and then it is in need of 'prophetic interruption', the showing of its own powerlessness 'by the suffering of a child, the rehearing of a biblical story, the long-neglected perception of the danger of war in our time' (p. 95). Theology can be no more and no less (and not otherwise) 'systematic' than the processes of faith to which it is answerable, and if it is confident of itself in ways divorced from this, it loses its integrity. It can learn again from its foundational language – or from other discourses struggling with how to speak truthfully of a moral universe. 'To give back to theology a

tone and atmosphere worthy of its subject matter, to restore resonance to its speech, without empty piety or archaic biblicism, the qualities of venture, slowness, and strain, which mark Heidegger's procedures are required. It is the opposite qualities of safeness, haste and ease which mark most theological discourse today, and that is a measure of its failure to attain the essential.' So says Joseph O'Leary in *Questioning Buck: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis, 1985, p. 33). 'Venture, slowness and strain': but we should not romanticize idle inarticulacy or take refuge in the 'ineffable' quality of our subject matter. Talking theologically, talking of how religion avoids becoming the most dramatically empty and power-obsessed discourse imaginable, is necessary and very difficult. It is out to make the discourse of faith and worship both harder and more authoritative (more transparent to its origin). And to do this it needs to know when it has said what it can say and when it is time to shut up.

At the end of Iris Murdoch's *Henry and Cato*, the enigmatic and clever Brendan, priest and scholar, is on his way to India. He explains to Cato, ex-priest and accidental murderer, the tormented centre of the book's world, why he is going.

'I was getting too addicted to speculation. I sometimes felt that if I could hang on just a little longer I would receive some perfect illumination about everything.'

'Why don't you hang on?'

'Because I know that if it did come it would be an illusion – one of the most, oh, splendid. The original *felix culpa* in thought itself.'

'That sounds like despair.'

'The point is, one will never get to the end of it, never get to the bottom of it, never, never. And that never, never, never is what you must take for your hope and shield and your most glorious promise. Everything that we concoct about God is an illusion.'

'But God is not an illusion?'

'"Whosoever he be of you who forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."'

'I don't believe you've given up theology at all. Theology is magic. Beware.'

'I know.'

'I must go and catch my train to Leeds.'