

THOMAS M. DICKEN  
Rocky Mountain College

## GRAFFITI THEOLOGY: CRITERIA AND AN AGENDA

### I

The term “graffiti” has been used in several recent books and articles to suggest a different, maverick way of doing theology. It is my purpose in this article to introduce more specific definition into what is at this point a suggestive or metaphorical usage. Having explored several examples and suggested criteria for using the term, I will close by offering an agenda for future efforts at graffiti theology.

Marcella Althaus-Reid uses the image or metaphor of graffiti in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*.<sup>1</sup> The very titles of some of these works are inflammatory, as if the title itself can be a form of graffiti, subverting the more staid theological titles standing beside it on a shelf of books. Other recent inflammatory titles include *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*,<sup>2</sup> *Is God a White Racist?*,<sup>3</sup> *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*,<sup>4</sup> and *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God*.<sup>5</sup> Althaus-Reid refers to “the technologies of subversion,” such as graffiti, used by the poor in their resistance to dictatorships. The value of graffiti, of course, is that it does not require an advanced technology, such as state-controlled television. It can be done with pencils or crayons. She writes of the “disappearances” of subversive people that were pervasive under Pinochet’s reign in Chile. One technique was to draw silhouettes of loved ones who had disappeared. Such pervasive drawings became constant reminders of the disappearances. The empty silhouettes conveyed both the

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 97, 100.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> B. Jill Carroll, *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

absence and the presence of the missing. Althaus-Reid claims that women in certain South American cultures function as living graffiti, their very being protesting those who seek to control their status. This is obviously an even more complex usage of the term. It needs to also be said that Althaus-Reid's entire book is a form of graffiti, a constant, angry, erotic, strongly worded, unauthorized protest of the dominant religious establishment in South America.

John D. Caputo's *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* is another title that, as such, might be graffiti in a stack of theological books. Caputo seeks to develop the central thought that God should be seen as not only choosing "the weak things of the world," but exemplifying a weakness that contrasts with dominant theologies of an omnipotent God. He frequently uses the term "graffiti" to signal his style of doing theology, a style that is subversive of the "powers that be" in theological discourse. Perhaps his most compelling image, however, is of Jesus as himself a work of graffiti. Caputo writes of his way of doing theology, "which is composed of graffiti that defaces standard theological writing, like a body that is scratched, scarred, and defaced, marred by lines of hunger or persecution, wounded and bleeding.... (W)e imagine weak theology as a meditation upon God crossed out, cut and bruised, bleeding and bent in pain...." The explicit comparison of graffiti with the crucified body of Jesus suggests a very different sort of theology is needed, if one begins with a "crossed out" God.<sup>6</sup>

In a very different, though compatible, mood, Mark Scanbrette, in *Soul Graffiti: Making a Life in the Way of Jesus*, writes of the issues involved in carrying on a ministry to the street people, artistic community, and new age adherents of San Francisco. Traditional language and images simply do not penetrate this culture. Noting that Jesus' own ministry seems to have been more like graffiti, Scanbrette writes of communicating to a searching, non-churched and non-academic audience. Scanbrette notes that the phenomenon of "tagging," putting one's name or distinctive mark in public places, "is often seen as a way of marking territory or an attempt to claim personal space in the crowded metropolis." He notes, "Graffiti artists often leave messages for one another in their work, signatures that serve as a sign of respect or connection." Scanbrette is skilled at taking note of these kinds of spiritual issues, such as the search for personal space and community, involved in a graffiti culture.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar spirit, I have written of God as not only weak, but also homeless, present in unpredictable and surprising places. This is a deliberate contrast with the thought of an omnipresent God. The homeless God is a God who is modeled after the graffiti-life of Jesus, who "had no place to lay his head." I have claimed that such an approach to theology can only be done if one takes the stance of doing "graffiti theology."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Scandrette, *Soul Graffiti: Making a Life in the Way of Jesus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas M. Dicken, "The Homeless God," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 127-157.

It is clear that a mood and a metaphor are emerging. It is opposed to dominant and/or conventional theology. However suggestive the term “graffiti” may be, it can wander off into vagueness. Any metaphor can be so open-ended that it can become meaningless. In this essay, I seek to define with some precision what can be meant by graffiti theology. I propose criteria and an agenda for this approach. It is important that we learn from root examples that are typically referred to as graffiti. We can learn from street graffiti as we set about the task of theology.

A graffiti approach to God is fragmented, subversive, and unauthorized.

- (1) The messages on street graffiti are short, to the point, often puzzling phrases. One does not typically see detailed arguments, much less analysis of counter-arguments. Sometimes, as has been said, silhouettes may be used or paintings of faces, as on the “death wall” section of the Berlin Wall. We are in a situation today where we cannot produce ponderous, systematic, deductive approaches to God. Many of us simply do not believe that anyone knows as much about God as is claimed in major systems, such as those of Aquinas, Anselm, or Barth. Luther’s writings were often short pamphlets, addressed to specific occasions or debates, with heavy doses of his caustic personality, but also with passionate insight. Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison can be read as graffiti. Systematic theologies tend to become deductive, filling in any specific empty places with speculation, aiming towards a goal of completion. Graffiti theology makes specific, needed points. Systematic needs are subordinated to the passion for proclaiming.
- (2) Graffiti on billboards, walls of buildings, or inner walls of subways is subversive. It tries to overthrow or dig under. It does not represent a general consensus. It mars the way things are supposed to be and is ugly in terms of what we expected to see at that place. But it can be beautiful once our eyes have adjusted and we begin to look at the new reality. However, it is not graffiti if it does not have its moment of shock, unexpectedness, and ugliness. Graffiti theology is itself subversive, seeking to eat away at the dominant theology and at the dominant culture.
- (3) Graffiti is unauthorized. At the beginning, it is usually done in secret because it aims to disrupt, mar, and eat away. Graffiti theology is not done with the authorization of the dominant religious community. It is not written from within the protective confines of a church community. It does not speak for an established community. It does not take place within what Paul Tillich called a “theological circle,”<sup>9</sup> developing the theology of an established and dominant perspective. It may, however, be trying to speak *to* the dominant community.

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 8-11.

The present article is not itself an essay in graffiti theology. It is a critical, somewhat traditionally academic article, *about* the scope and definition of graffiti theology. However, I am very supportive of graffiti theology itself.

Once one gets a sense for graffiti theology, it is simple enough to notice some major past figures who can be fairly described as graffiti theologians. Some of them are now well established and influential. Efforts that at one time were fragmentary, subversive, and unauthorized can themselves become authoritative. Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are examples of figures, each of whom, at one time, seemed to be examples of graffiti theologians.

Martin Luther's writings included such things as theses nailed to the Cathedral door (at night, to be discovered the next morning), stray comments offered during table talk, and occasional graffiti-like pieces written in the heat of battle. It was Melanchthon and Calvin who wrote the all-inclusive systematic theologies of the Protestant Reformation. Luther is the quintessential Protestant, subversive of the well-established Roman Catholic Church. (The very concepts of "catholic" and "graffiti" seem to be contradictory.) So he wrote only with the authority of the Bible, but his was a highly selective Bible. The Apocrypha and the Book of James were dismissed, by his own authority.

Kierkegaard certainly wrote in a fragmentary way. Indeed, he titled his works using such terms as "Fragments" and "Postscripts." And, humorously, his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was much longer than the *Philosophical Fragments*.<sup>10</sup> Even when he did not declare his intent in unusual titles, it is clear he was writing in opposition to the Hegelian system and to any Christendom that threatened to swallow up the individual self. He wrote under various pseudonyms, offering perspectives by himself as Johannes Climacus or Johannes de Silentio. The content of his writing offered the perspectives of several life forms: the aesthetic way, the ethical way, and religiousness A and religiousness B. Though we can put together his prolific writings and come up with a Kierkegaardian perspective, that view is never a system. His writing is subversive of the dominant philosophical perspective and of the dominant church, seeking to include and acknowledge the resistant individual who was at risk of being obliterated. Kierkegaard spoke for the individual over against any inclusive or dominant culture. And, obviously, he spoke without authority. He wrote as an individual self, not as a theologian of the Lutheran church or as a Hegelian philosopher.

In the remarkable letters he wrote from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer hinted at a dazzling array of ideas. Though he had written substantial, rather traditional books before his imprisonment and eventual execution by the Nazis, it was a very few pages in a series of letters that changed

---

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

theological discourse. Though he did not live to develop them in detail, Bonhoeffer's suggestions about "religionless Christianity," the need to take responsibility in "a world come of age," Jesus as "the man for others," the "God of the gaps," the "powerlessness" and "weakness" of God, and other such things, have influenced Christian thought for several generations.<sup>11</sup> We never know for sure, of course, what Bonhoeffer might have done with these phrases, had he lived. In some ways, the power of these phrases derives from their epigrammatic nature.

Graffiti theology is best done in unusual modes of communication, such as letters, memoirs, the use of pseudonyms, theses nailed to a door, and table conversations. This tendency is similar to the techniques used by street graffiti artists.

During the years the Berlin Wall separated the city of Berlin into zones controlled by superpowers, people used the wall for graffiti. Fragmented, subversive, unauthorized drawing and writing appeared. More than any particular message on the wall, the wall itself became an enormous instance of graffiti. It became the howl of protest against the very wall itself and the power structure and set of assumptions that created the wall. The lives of people were controlled by a dominant culture called the Cold War. For years the wall was probably the largest, most-read and most-pondered collection of graffiti the world has ever known. Angry statements and drawings of protest were posted by those who were otherwise powerless amidst the conflicts of great powers.

German artist Gerhard Richter has created three enormous slabs of paneling, now hanging in the St. Louis Art Museum, that are themselves inspired by the Berlin Wall. Richter's untitled work is not based on any photograph or other attempt to make his creation represent the wall in any literal way. But one can ponder more and more deeply the layers of dark, brooding, anguished color that Richter has provided. The surface of these panels is polished and reflective. The mirror-like effect is characteristic of much of Richter's work, providing a context within the room in which one is observing the work. There is a subdued suggestion of one's own presence and context, so that a person simultaneously goes more deeply into the layers of paint and into his or her own concrete setting. The viewer is forced to reflect on the reflection. What is the status of graffiti when it becomes a significant piece of high art, ensconced in the respected culture of the museum? What is the relation between the original graffiti on the Berlin Wall and Richter's art, inspired by the Wall? If Jesus is, as John D. Caputo has suggested, to be understood in his very being as graffiti, how are we to understand the reality that his image has become the controlling icon of a powerful, culturally dominant religion? How are we to write graffiti theology if the only way it will be heard is to use the conventions, vocabulary, and academic aura of dominant theology?

---

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 196-197.

## II

The techniques of graffiti can be used for a wide variety of purposes. In this article, I am specifically addressing the topic of graffiti theology and, in particular, graffiti theology inspired by the story of Jesus. The early movement that was inspired by Jesus itself used graffiti. The simple outline of a fish, hastily scribbled on a wall, was a use of graffiti to say that the followers of Jesus were there.

By "Jesus," I mean the shape of a life and the outlines of a teaching that have come down to us over the centuries. Often, we are first told about this by someone to whom the story matters deeply. The life and teachings I have in mind are, for the most part, formed by the Synoptic Gospels. This life and teaching has had an impact on some of us; I acknowledge it has had an impact on me. I do not, however, mean the same thing by this as others mean by "the historical Jesus." There is significant worthwhile debate about what we can actually know about what Jesus really said and did, as well as about the shape of his life. Historians tend towards a minimalist view of what can be reliably known about the historical Jesus. Many of us heard a "story" about Jesus before we began to ponder the historical Jesus issue. Obviously, each one of us renders that story and its impact in differing ways. (Scholars also describe "the historical Jesus" in differing ways.) In truth, I am more interested in the transformative story than I am in the details that might pass a given historian's scrutiny. I have in mind something like what Paul Tillich called "the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ." Tillich was more preoccupied with the biblical picture of Jesus than with the historical Jesus as such. As Tillich put it, the biblical picture came from somewhere; if someone created it, then that person is the source of the story that matters.<sup>12</sup>

Tillich's own use of this story is different from my use. Tillich was concerned with the story of a life in which the essence of human life and the existence of a particular life were not estranged. In other words, Tillich's own technical vocabulary about sin as estrangement, the distinction between the created essence of humanity and the fallen existence of humanity, and other key ideas in Tillich's thought, are centered on and resolved in the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ. Having acknowledged that I know this, I will not return to Tillich's usage. My use of the story of Jesus is to ground a personal way of life, to insist on the priority of the poor and the powerless in public policy decisions, and to provide a context for final or ultimate meaning.

To claim a narrative about Jesus as a guide to the ultimate is to engage in a close reading of that narrative. It is a different sort of close reading than those done by scholars seeking to appropriate the "historical Jesus." That sort of reading

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 97-118. Thomas M. Dicken, "The Biblical Picture of Jesus as the Christ in Tillich's Theology," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, Volume XXV, No. 1, 1968-1969, pp. 27-41.

requires a certain skepticism and distance. I speak of a close reading that embraces the possibility that one's life might be redirected by the narrative, that one might be healed or empowered or lured by it. It is to read with both fear and hope.

The story of the woman who was caught in the act of adultery and brought before Jesus is an example of my approach. The story itself is problematic. It is found only in the Gospel of John (chapter 8:1-12), while I am relying primarily on the Synoptic Gospels for the "story." The account is not even found in the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel. Yet it is a much beloved story within the larger story that gets told about Jesus. It fits seamlessly into the other stories. Perhaps it is a story that circulated within the oral tradition, the story that was told rather than the story that was read, and was added to John's account at a later date by a scribe. That is not my concern. I am interested in what Jesus did when they brought the woman to him, pointing out that the law called for her to be stoned to death. Jesus knelt down and wrote something on the ground. As one interested in graffiti theology, I would love to know what Jesus wrote (either in actual history or in the circulating story). A word or so, a short phrase, but certainly something that could be read by those standing around. After this moment of graffiti, Jesus said the healing words, "Let him who is without sin among you throw the first stone." Sometimes it is forgotten that, as the accusers began to slink away, Jesus knelt down and wrote more words on the ground.

A graffiti approach to Jesus is opposed to the dominant kenotic theology. Kenotic theology assumes we have some significant understanding of God independently of Jesus. God may be, as Anselm put it, that being "than which no greater can be conceived." God might be similar to the account of God in the Hebrew scriptures. The crucial issue of kenotic theology is that even though Christ "was in the form of God," he did not count "equality" with God a thing to be grasped. He "emptied" himself (this emptying is the key to the vision of kenosis) and took on the form of a servant, being obedient even unto death on the cross. Therefore, God has "exalted" Jesus, so that at his name every knee should bow (Philippians 2:5-11).

This is an inspiring story, one that many of us have heard. Yet, it is a puzzling story. What is God? Is God what we see in Jesus? Or is God what we already knew God to be? Is God what Jesus emptied himself of? But then, what was that emptying all about? Does it all get waved away after Jesus is exalted? Why did Jesus persistently call God "Abba," an unusual name for God even if it is not unique to Jesus, if he was not trying to give an unusual and provocative image of God (perhaps a graffiti image)? Do the shape of Jesus' life and the themes of his teaching give us a clue to understanding God? Then why does the good stuff or the accurate understanding only seem to begin when Jesus is exalted?

In contrast to this kenotic and "exalted" vision, some today are seeking to develop a graffiti image of God as weak, foolish, and homeless. This image has roots in Paul's own language about God choosing "the weak" and "the foolish" things of the world, to shame the strong and the wise. How do we find coherence

in these seemingly different claims? Who is God after all? Is the story of Jesus to be taken seriously as an image of what God is really like? This question seems foundational if we are to move on to other issues.

How can I tell a story about a storyteller? Especially if the storyteller is not simply better than I am at telling stories, but also one whose stories have helped make me who I am. I will nonetheless make the effort.

Jesus' style of teaching involved parables and what might be called enacted parables or acted-out parables, such as washing his disciples' feet or riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (John 13:1-11; Mark 11:1-10). The parables are based on ordinary or everyday people, events, and circumstances, but they also have an aspect that is surprising, assumption-battering, hierarchy-breaking, incommensurate with anything else. One does not receive a moral from the parables so much as a gasp.

Jesus was able to tell stories that shifted his hearers' understanding of the world around them, the world in their midst. Robert Funk wrote of Jesus as "Precursor," one who taught others how to tell stories in an unusual, provocative way so that things shift right before our eyes. The odd stories of Franz Kafka or Jorge Borges, for example, have a similar power.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' teachings were clearly subversive and without authority. He could quote the received law, but often he would then say, "But I say unto you...." There was no authority for his words other than "But I say...." (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

The parables have received an enormous amount of attention from scholars. I do not mean to undertake a summary of recent scholarship nor do I have my own pet theory. The parables evoke Abba's presence in the everyday world of ordinary people, enabling them to see what that world might look like if seen in light of Abba's presence and expectations.

We have been taught to think of God as great, abstract, and orderly. The parables speak of God as small, precise, and excessive.

Much of the dominant language about God speaks of God as "great": omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. For some people, that simply is what God is. They can hold that image in their minds, even while ignoring or disbelieving in God. The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, however, speaks of God in intimate terms. (Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is a literary jewel, though I first picked it up simply because the title intrigued me.<sup>14</sup> The novel is set in the context of recent Hindu life. However, the term is also relevant to the God of Jesus' parables.) Abba is a God whose rule or presence in our world

<sup>13</sup> Robert Funk, *Jesus as Precursor* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1997).

is best described in terms of a father with two sons (Luke 15:11-32), a foreign businessman who takes time for a victim by the roadside (Luke 10:30-37), an employer who pays what seem to be unfair wages to some of his day workers (Matthew 20:1-16), a woman who is cleaning house (Luke 15:8-10). Abba is known in intimate settings and ordinary circumstances.

The dominant image of God is also of a source of order. The very word “primordial,” which I use later in this paper to describe the ultimate source, refers to a prime or first order. Yet Abba seems to be a source of disorder. People are confused about their pay. Hierarchies are overturned. The first are last. The lord becomes a foot-washing servant. David Tracy’s fine book *The Blessed Rage for Order* described the state of theological thought for an earlier generation (my generation!).<sup>15</sup> Even though I understand that Tracy borrows his title from a line of a poem, I have often wished someone would write of God’s rage for disorder. Creation seems to involve mutations as well as replication of DNA. The very word “rage” itself seems to evoke a sense of disorder. Abba is a God of excess, of feasting, gluttony, and too much wine (Matthew 11:19), of inviting strangers from off the street (Luke 14:13-24), of being cleansed by a woman of the streets (Luke 7:36-39).

The greater our image of God, the more abstract God seems to be. Many people seek a God who is the creator of all things. As one tries to conceive this, increasingly abstract images seem to be necessary if *all* things are to be generated by God. It is similar to seeking a “theory of everything.” In today’s world, our minds inevitably drift to mathematical images, if the source of all things is to be applicable to and able to account for everything. What, other than mathematical formulae, might be relevant to all things? Yet the God of Jesus is specific and concrete. Abba notices each sparrow, counts the hairs on our heads, and hears incessant prayers (Luke 12:6-7; Luke 11:5-10).

Jesus often used hyperbole in his teaching, deliberately and comically exaggerating as he spoke, for instance, of the tiny mustard seed growing quickly into an enormous plant (Mark 4:30-32). The traditional, dominant theology speaks of God as the greatest conceivable reality, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, without any trace of humor. There is never a hint in such theology that the whole thing is humorous or comic, that its exponents are trying to make a point by hyperbole.

Since graffiti is subversive, it is usually done in secret, typically in the darkness. The next morning, there are rumors, often conflicting rumors, about who did the graffiti and what it would possibly mean. These are Easter-style mornings, when no one knows exactly what happened or who is responsible.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 3-14.

This comment leads me into the concluding paragraphs of this section. I comment here on a subject about which I do not know anything, nor do I have any informed hunches. However, thinking about graffiti can lead a person into unexplored territory. On the evening of November 9, 1989, I watched on television as people took any instrument they could find and chipped away at the Berlin Wall. People climbed over the wall from both directions. It took several weeks to totally eliminate the wall, other than a slab or two that remain to this day as a reminder. But by the next morning, people knew that things had changed. They knew there was no longer, for any practical purpose, a wall. The graffiti was disappearing. Things changed overnight. If graffiti hangs around too long, it becomes a cliché. Sometimes its disappearance has its own story to tell.

Though I do not make any claims about it, I cannot help but think of the story of the empty tomb on the first Sunday after Jesus' death. If Jesus' crucified body, marred and mangled, with someone else's "INRI" graffiti sign placed above it, is a crucial example of living graffiti, the story of the empty tomb is itself an extraordinary story of a profound transformation that can take place when graffiti disappears.

My concern here is not with the end of the Cold War or the Resurrection. My interest here is in the nature of graffiti and its forcefulness. I do know that graffiti becomes stale or a cliché or irrelevant if it isn't covered over, emptied, or torn down at some point.

If the crucified figure of Jesus is seen as itself a form of graffiti, as Caputo suggests, then the story of the empty tomb is a kind of graffiti-undoing-graffiti. The Berlin Wall and the crucified Jesus are perhaps the two most awesome bits of graffiti in history. That being so, the joyful, intense, communal destruction of the Wall and the empty tomb become crucial statements about the graffiti they replace.

The Gospel of Mark, in its present form, ends with the story of the women finding an empty tomb, but saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. This is very different from the other accounts, which record various appearances of Jesus. The story of Jesus as it has an impact on me is similar to Mark's account. It concludes as graffiti should conclude. It makes a point, but doesn't fill in all the empty spaces.

### III

We do not actually *know* anything important about anything important. We live surrounded by deep mystery. My claim is that there is a deep link between skepticism about human ability to know the ultimate and an approach that takes Jesus of Nazareth as a model or clue for a vision of our ultimate context. Such skepticism is a necessary condition for taking the story of Jesus seriously. The two are deeply implicated in one another.

In the dominant Christian theology of kenosis, the actual suffering servant life of Jesus is not revelatory of God. Jesus, it is proposed, emptied himself of all that made him equal with God during his earthly life, then was exalted by God after his death on the cross so that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord. This is a triumphalist view of God and of Jesus. Then, it must be asked, what is the significance of the non-triumphalist life and death of Jesus? The solution some take is to posit the need for atonement. Humans are sinful and need to be atoned with God. A complex (and, I would say, incomprehensible) theology has Jesus' servant death be a sacrifice offered to God, to mend the relationship between God and humans. There is, therefore, a deep link between kenotic theology and Anselm's sacrificial theory of the atonement. There is a deep relationship between a view of God as great and the kenotic view of Jesus. What gets lost in these shuffles is Jesus' own earthly life.<sup>16</sup>

This leads us back, by way of contrast, to the deep link between skepticism about what we are able to know about the ultimate or primordial theory of everything and the earthly life, teaching, and death of Jesus.

Skepticism is too modern a word to describe the setting of Jesus' own life and ministry. The concern, in Jesus' time, for the coming of the Messiah was the equivalent of what I call skepticism. The equivalent at Jesus' time was distressed uncertainty about God, resulting from the tension between remembered events and promises of God to the chosen people and the actual circumstances of Jews in more recent history, including the era of Roman domination. The uncertainty led to the hope and expectation of a Messianic Age, the coming of a New David. There were conflicting views of what the signs of the Messianic Age might be. When would God act? Where was God now? The silence or absence of God was the critical issue. This confusion about where God was, about when God would act, about what might be expected from the Messiah, about how the Messiah would be known, is the first century equivalent to what I mean by skepticism: a loss of a sense of groundedness.<sup>17</sup>

I do not especially care whether or not Jesus was or is the Messiah. That is not my language. As a skeptic, I have no opinion about whether God "sent" Jesus. I am more interested in the fact that Jesus presented himself to people as one who could say "But I say unto you....", as one who sometimes did unexpected things, as one who conveyed to people the sense that the absent God was present (*i.e.*, that the reign of God had drawn near), and whose impact was such that he ended up crucified. I do not know what went on within the depths of his inner being.

There seems to be a deep human need to understand the final or ultimate nature of things. Many theists speculate about a primordial God who is the source of all things. Those who are of a more naturalistic bent search for a Final Theory.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas M. Dicken, "The Homeless God", *Journal of Religion*, April, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 203.

Noted astrophysicist Freeman Dyson writes, "A Final Theory means a set of mathematical rules that describe with complete generality and complete precision the way the physical universe behaves. Complete generality means that the rules are obeyed everywhere and at all times. Complete precision means that any discrepancies between the rules and the results of experimental measurements will be due to the limited accuracy of the measurements." Dyson, in reviewing Steven Weinberg's *Lake Views: This World and the Universe*, writes that Weinberg believes that such a Final Theory "is an already existing reality that humans will soon discover. It is a real presence, hidden in the motions of atoms and galaxies, waiting for us to find it." Dyson's own view is very different. "I find the idea of a Final Theory repugnant because it diminishes both the richness of nature and the richness of human destiny. I prefer to live in a universe full of inexhaustible mysteries, and to belong to a species destined for inexhaustible intellectual growth."<sup>18</sup>

I think I am on the side of Freeman Dyson in this debate, but I am not really qualified to make a judgment about the science involved. Dyson's approach to life and science sounds like more fun, but I want to stress a different point. Even if one accepted the theory of everything, there would still be points some of us would want to make. We would still want to project stories and images and myths and moods onto everything. We would want to suggest a world, much as great novelists create a world and we nod as we read them. At the very least, after we had comprehended the theory of everything, we would almost certainly want to comment on it, perhaps by saying "The world is really going to be boring from now on." That would be still another perspective on everything.

It is hard not to believe that, after everything is explained, there will nonetheless be thoughtful people who see the issue as one of living in a cave, as Plato did, and other thoughtful people who see the critical moment as one of walking into a dark wood, as Dante did. And those are also additional perspectives on everything. There is, inevitably, a possible infinity of "theories of everything," since such theories are pluralistic, sometimes, but not necessarily, conflicting with one another. Loren Eiseley used to tell stories about evolution that gave a different (though not contradictory) vision of evolution than what was available in technical writing about evolution. He told a story about the "immense journey" of evolution.<sup>19</sup>

There may perhaps someday be a unified "theory of everything." Some people hope that a mathematical template will serve as the overarching, all-inclusive theory of it all. Even if this feat is accomplished, there will remain a deep human need to impose another sort of vision on reality.

How do we arrive at a picture or an image or a narrative or a concept of the world, as such, in and of itself, as the world really is? How do we move from narrative to ontology? There is no doubt that we create worlds. Annie Dillard

---

<sup>18</sup> "What Price Glory?" *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*, New York: Vintage Press, 1959.

writes primarily of fiction as a way of creating a world. "From any work of fiction we may derive an interpretive view of the world." For the most part, the world described in fiction is essentially the human, inward, or social world. Nonetheless, there is clearly a difference between a Thomas Hardy novel and a Flannery O'Connor novel, a difference that goes beyond an interpretation of simply a human world. There is, in each case, a suggested and presupposed vision of how the deepest, most inclusive world works. Visual art can have the same effect, pointing to a contingency, a meaningfulness, a wound, or a randomness in the very nature of things.<sup>20</sup> It is human nature to try to make sense of things. We use words and ideas and strokes of paint and violins to suggest the way things may ultimately be. But which of these efforts is the correct or true projection? Dillard writes, "Do art's complex and balanced relationships among all parts, its purpose, significance, and harmony, exist in nature? Is nature whole, like a completed thought? Is history purposeful? Is the universe of matter significant? I am sorry; I do not know."<sup>21</sup>

Nor do I know. Are we encapsulated within our own language? Or can we break through? If we are trapped by our own representations, then how do we tell the story of our own trappedness?

Into this mixture, I want to add the graffiti-thought that Jesus is not God incarnate. Rather, God is the ultimate, all-inclusive, or primordial Jesus.

If we already know a great deal about God, then Jesus' own life and teachings become trivialized. Some would claim that we already know that, as Anselm would put it, God is a reality "than which no greater can be conceived" (and that this can be proven through a rational, ontological argument). We therefore know that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. Nonetheless there is a conflict with the world as we experience it and we may call that "the problem of evil." Some claim that it is therefore appropriate to modify a few things, such as God's omnipotence, by saying that God can only accomplish things by "luring." My claim is that if we already know all that, there is not much for Jesus to do, other than perhaps offer a handy symbol of God's suffering. However, Jesus is merely a symbol of this, since we have already deduced the reality of God's suffering (as an aspect of God's omniscience about the suffering in the world). In essence, I have described the outlines of process theology's view of God, as expounded by Charles Hartshorne and other process thinkers. They end up with a lightweight view of Jesus, to whom some process thinkers nod courteously.<sup>22</sup>

I am not proposing that Jesus is God incarnate, a view to be sandwiched into a larger scheme of things. I am suggesting that Jesus offers a life and teachings that provide the material for a vision or root metaphor of the ultimate.

---

<sup>20</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003); Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Annie Dillard, *Living By Fiction* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 152-163.

We will need to rethink many things if the graffiti image of God as small, excessive, disorderly, intimate, homeless, weak, comic, a servant, specific, upside down, and last rather than first, present rather than omnipresent, and foolishly forgiving is to replace the view of God as that than which no greater can be conceived, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.

Two points need to be made. (1) The traditional, dominant view has its own problems. Its major problem is the so-called problem of evil, a problem that is called into being by that tradition's own definition of God. The abstractness of the traditional view may seem to be comprehensive (much the way that mathematics can seem to include everything), but any truly comprehensive view needs to also include the small, intimate, specific things, the very things with which Jesus begins in invoking the presence of God. (2) It is not obvious that the final theory of everything needs to be monistic, with one God, one formula, or one force explaining everything. There is a tradition in American thought, for instance, of pluralistic systems of explanation, by such thinkers as William James and Paul Weiss. People who are good at that sort of thing can develop a pluralistic view that includes God. I have, in another article, made my own modest attempt to suggest how that might work.<sup>23</sup> My point in this essay is that, among the things that need to be explained and that might help in explaining, is the God of small things.

So far as I can tell, the only time that Jesus made a comment possibly relevant to a "theory of everything" was when he pointed out that God makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike. The claim that God numbers every hair on our heads may also be pertinent. The first sounds more like a comment on forgiveness than a metaphysical speculation. The latter sounds more like another example of an intimate God, a God of small things.

So I suggest the story of a weak, foolish, and homeless man and claim that this is also an aspect of what the world is like. It is a story of Abba, an easily ignored, comic, and restless God.

A crucial difference between Abba and the dominant view of God in philosophical theology is the contrast between presence and omnipresence. Abba is an intimate God who is experienced as present. Abba is a loving, forgiving, empowering, renewing presence, often seeking out usually neglected beings, such as the poor. This presence is central in Jesus' teachings and whenever there has been a renewal of a sense of God directly defined and empowered by Jesus' life, teachings, and death. The dominant view of God, however, is of an omnipresent God. In theory, God could be "present" in an intensive way in all places, and therefore omnipresent. However, those who define God as omnipresent tend to arrive at this view in a deductive way, deriving it from a definition of God. Omnipresence tends to be an abstract presence in all points of

---

<sup>23</sup> "Skepticism, Pluralism, and the Presence of God", forthcoming Spring 2012 in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

physical space. I am not aware of serious attempts to explore the presence of God, in the intense and intimate way I am describing it, in the context of philosophical or theological discussions of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

#### IV

Graffiti theology inspired by the story of Jesus needs to attack the dominant, incomprehensible philosophical theology of God, in the name of the weak, foolish, and homeless God, or, as it may also be put, in the name of Abba, an easily ignored, comic, and restless God. However, I am not sure the weak technique of graffiti theology needs to be used against the Christian church (in its manifold manifestations) since it is already a frail institution, struggling with its own inadequacies. I am more interested in using graffiti against the prevalent culture, surprising people with unexpected questions, startling assertions, and troubling suggestions. The great thing about graffiti is that anyone can use it; it is either free or very cheap. I am primarily interested in graffiti in the name of Abba.

I am not especially interested in using a spray can of paint on a vacant wall. I suggest instead that some very sophisticated artists and thinkers need to be encouraged to use occasional bits of graffiti in their cultural work to startle their publics into a different kind of perception. I have already mentioned the way artist Gerhard Richter interacts with the Berlin Wall. I think especially artists, musicians, fiction writers, poets, playwrights, political commentators, and economists have the possibility of doing this.

A case study might be helpful. The artist known as Caravaggio was a graffiti artist in my sense of the term. He was, of course, one of those rare artists who changed the direction and the assumptions of Western art in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A discussion of his use of chiaroscuro, intrusive perspective, realistic portraiture, development of a "gallery" art, and many other contributions would quickly take me beyond my depth. I am interested here in what might be called the graffiti aspect of his work. In much of his earlier work, there is an implied homoerotic dimension that challenged the limits of what artists could do. However, here I am concerned with his explicitly religious scenes, most of them based on biblical accounts. Caravaggio worked from life studies of models, many of them friends from what we might call "street people," including prostitutes. Caravaggio's own life involved violence, some of which is reflected in his several scenes. The result is that such saints as Thomas, Paul, Peter, and Matthew, as well as both Mary, mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene are strikingly real, even disturbing, images. Mary the mother of Jesus is depicted with dirt on the soles of her feet after her death, undeniably dead, with a woman pulled from the river probably serving as her model. Saint Peter famously has dirt under his fingernails as he is being crucified. More importantly, the face of Thomas as he probes the wound in Jesus' side is a real face, with rapt attention to the details of Jesus' resurrected, very human body. Sophisticated buyers of Caravaggio's homoerotic art knew what they were getting. But some of the patrons of

churches were disturbed by the realism of his art. Several of his altarpieces were rejected and sometimes ended up in the hands of private collectors. Even those great works that we now see in the side chapels of Roman churches were controversial. This is an example of fragments of Caravaggio's art being unauthorized and subversive, in other words, graffiti art. It was not the innovation in art that constituted graffiti. It was the challenge to assumptions about what was going on in biblical stories.

However, Caravaggio is background to what I want to say about a graffiti-style challenge to contemporary culture. After all, though there are graffiti-like aspects to his work, Caravaggio was accomplishing that work at the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I describe his work merely as background to a contemporary bit of graffiti. Michael Fried's Mellon Lectures, published as *The Moment of Caravaggio*, is an engrossing work of art criticism and art history.<sup>24</sup> His lectures show the transformative power of Caravaggio's work. Fried discusses such themes as the depiction of absorption, chiaroscuro, and theatricality. Fried, like any great teacher, notices things in the paintings he discusses, aspects that I had missed, and enables me to notice them and become absorbed in them. He is especially enlightening as he discusses the embodied artist before a canvas, the absorption of the artist and his break from or interruption of his absorption, and how that preoccupation with the work of painting figures into what ends up on the canvas. The reader is enabled to look intensely at the paintings in a way that had not been possible before.

Yet, again, that is not my point. I am interested here in a very few pages that interrupt Fried's fascinating exposition. The rest of the book is itself an absorbed and absorbing scrutiny of painting at a particular moment of history. But Fried interrupts his scrutiny to direct attention to a different dimension of that moment. Fried writes of something more ultimate than even painting. Borrowing from Stanley Cavell's writing on Shakespeare, Caravaggio's near contemporary, Fried writes of "an inchoate sense of loss of a previous habitation of or at-homeness in the world, owing to historical developments crucial among which Cavell cites the rise of the new science and a consequent shaking or displacement of faith in God...."<sup>25</sup> It is no longer a matter of uncertainty about the possibility of knowledge. Rather, "the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world." Cavell interprets Shakespeare's tragedies as staging "the world's withdrawal or recession—the loss or, at a minimum, the radical undermining of a previous ground of being."<sup>26</sup>

The skepticism that mostly affects Shakespeare's tragedies is skepticism as to whether we can truly know or trust other people. It is a skepticism about "other minds." Yet the context of this skepticism about others that leads to tragedy is the "groundless world" that began to permeate the western world.

---

<sup>24</sup> Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Fried, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Fried, p. 105.

Cavell claims that it is this new groundlessness that surrounds Shakespeare's tragedies. Fried borrows this thought to provide a context for Caravaggio's work. He writes of "the nakedness of that dependence on the figure and/or story of Christ for the very possibility of 'deep' meaningfulness." There is a parallel between Cavell's interpretation of what is being "worked through in and by" Shakespearean tragedy and Caravaggio's religious paintings. Caravaggio may have had an element of graffiti in the way he painted his scenes. More importantly, the entire shaking of the world of faith by the time of the Catholic Counter-Reformation suggests an uncertainty or groundlessness in the very attempt to secure faith. The attempt to secure faith led to many of Caravaggio's commissions, which were in turn controversial because of their own graffiti aspects. As Fried puts it, speaking of Caravaggio's rejected works, "(I)t is not as if the Catholic content of his religious pictures was always sufficient in itself to secure their intelligibility."<sup>27</sup> We do not know, other than what we can surmise from the paintings themselves, what Caravaggio's own faith might have been. Nor do I know what Fried's own faith might be. It is quite possible that all of us share some of Shakespeare's, Caravaggio's, Cavell's, and Fried's sense of an "undermining." These few pages that interrupt the essays about painting force the reader to confront his or her own ultimate uncertainties.

Fried returns to the subject of Caravaggio's painting. Yet within a few pages Fried is writing of Caravaggio's painting of the Supper at Emmaus, when the disciples suddenly recognize the stranger who has joined them on the road. He is recognized as he breaks the bread at supper. This scene, Fried writes, "challenges the viewer to acknowledge Him as well, that is, to respond to the beardless man as if he were *recognizably* the figure of Christ."<sup>28</sup> Fried's words help us to realize that we are ourselves confronted with a basic question as to what we actually think of these paintings. And what we actually think of Jesus.

In a few interruptive pages, Fried shifts the discussion from a wonderful exploration of Caravaggio's painting to even deeper, more troubling issues, about what we actually think. We cannot maintain a cautious distance from the paintings. This is what I mean by graffiti in cultural creations.

Reviewing the work of artist Paul Thek, Peter Schjeldahl writes, "Observant Catholicism keeps turning up as a clean little secret among late radical artists—Warhol, Yves Klein, and Robert Mapplethorpe, in addition to Thek."<sup>29</sup> Warhol's provocative series of paintings of the Last Supper of Jesus offers graffiti observations about both Christianity and a capitalist culture. Mapplethorpe aggressively acknowledged the reality of marginalized people. I can imagine an economist writing of the implications for the poor in an analysis of the economy, or a playwright developing issues of the exuberant worth of small things and forgotten people. The story of Jesus is still around and still has power. I am suggesting one tactic for surprising people with it.

---

<sup>27</sup> Fried, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Fried, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, "Out-There Man: Paul Thek Rediscovered," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 1, 2010, p. 116.

THOMAS M. DICKEN holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Yale University, where he worked primarily with H. Richard Niebuhr and James M. Gustafson. Most of his teaching career was spent at Rocky Mountain College, Billings, Montana. He has published in such journals as Process Studies, The Journal of Religion, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Religion and Literature, Journal of Religious Thought, Soundings, Iliff Review, *Judicature: Journal of the American Judicature Society*, and others. He lives in Versailles, Kentucky with his wife Nancy, where he watches trees, birds, squirrels, and rabbits, and tries to make sense of things.

©Thomas M. Dicken.

Dicken, Thomas M. "Graffiti Theology: Criteria and an Agenda," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 82-99.