



Discerning the Mystery of God

Brian D. Robinette

from the EDITOR

Imagine a student wants to attend your university and asks you to explain how it works. You might say, "A president runs the school, teachers provide training and knowledge in different disciplines, and administrators help with course advising, counseling, that sort of thing."

The newcomer nods; he now understands in a generic way how your school functions, but as yet knows nothing of the people themselves, who will be crucial for one's education. You might further explain, "I like and know the president and the goals we have set as a school and how we are treated." Or, "You have to take Dr. Smith, she is so great and has taught me so much. I am going to major in her subject area now." Or, "You should consider this fraternity and its moderator. They do service for others, are involved in school activities, and have a great spirit. I've made good friends there." Now the potential student knows something about the personal side, the heart and soul of your university. As a result, the student gets more enthused about this school as a good place to grow and to attain life's goals.

The word *God* is a generic statement of a divine deity, a word used by most anyone who believes in a higher power or transcendence in life. In this sense God can seem abstract, even generic, revealing little more than the above organizational summary describes a school. What matters about God is God's involvement in life, heart, and spirit, as well as how one can experience this God. The introduction by Daniel Finucane showed many examples of how God may encounter one's life.

In the Christian tradition, a long history of God's revelation connects with Judaism, beginning with Abraham (about 1500 BCE), and culminates in a new revelation in Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection for the salvation of all people. Jesus' revelation discloses a new way of knowing God in personal terms. God as "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" shows God's love, truthfulness, forgiveness, goodness, graciousness, and compassion for all people. This revelation is "personal" because through it God enters the deepest self and the world surrounding the self. For Christians, Jesus' words in sacred scripture reflect the obligation such relational love entails: "Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself."

Just as Christian tradition believes that God begins and ends humanity itself, so it is appropriate that this text begin with Brian Robinette's chapter exploring this "God of Love and Love of God," breaking into and sustaining one's life and one's world.

WONDERMENT AND PERPLEXITY: WAYS TO GOD, WAYS TO THEOLOGY

Chances are you are already a theologian—yes, a theologian. Here is why: you are capable of wonderment and perplexity, of surprise and doubt, of astonishment and anxiety, and no less importantly, of reflecting upon and giving expression to the ultimate significance of these things.

The fourth-century Egyptian monk Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) famously described the theologian as “one who truly prays.” Such a definition might seem a bit quaint today, perhaps too pious. If so, it might be that we have a deficient appreciation of what prayer is. If we imagine prayer as “talking” to God, whether out loud or quietly “in our heads,” we will not be wrong, but our understanding will be limited. Prayer, on Evagrius’s account, is much more attitudinal than verbal, far more an orientation of the heart and mind than recitation of words, however helpful formal prayers may at times be. At its most distilled, prayer is the opening of the whole human person in simple and sustained attention to that which most astonishes and perplexes, namely, the unfathomable mystery of God.

This mystery is not unfathomable because God cannot be thought or talked about. Theology is, after all, “God-talk,” from the Greek *theos* (“God”) and *logia* (“discussion”). More formally, theology is “faith seeking understanding,” as the twelfth-century Anselm of Canterbury put it. As we begin to reflect upon and speak about the unfathomable mystery that we name “God”—even if we dispute that any such God exists!—we are engaged in a more deliberative (i.e., theoretical or interpretive) act of theology. This is obviously very important to the present text, since, whether we are attempting to understand the

sacred scriptures (chapters 2 and 3) the meaning of Jesus Christ (chapter 4), the role of the church, Christian traditions, and the sacraments (chapters 5, 6, and 7), Christian morality and social justice (chapters 8 and 9), the relationship between world religions (chapters 11 and 10), or the mission of the church in our global context (chapter 12), we are using our intellectual capacities to interpret, analyze, and form judgments, however tentatively and open to revision, in ways that exhibit all the rigors of any academic discipline. And like any academic discipline, doing theology means imparting knowledge and a variety of skills to those who would interact with its major sources, figures, and themes. And yet what is most distinctive about the discipline of theology is that, in the midst of this often heady enterprise of “faith seeking understanding,” one can never finally comprehend the reality from which theology gets its name. That is, precisely in one’s effort to achieve a basic mastery over the concepts and methods of theology, God’s infinite mystery remains elusive, which therefore makes it impossible for theology to reach definitive, final conclusions. Rather, theology remains a continuous process of inquiry and discovery. Because the reality of God is inexhaustible, the work of theology is in principle never done. Indeed, the work of the theology is always beginning anew.

The realization that we might not finally be able to comprehend the ultimate “object” of theology may be a disconcerting one, at least initially. Perhaps it will be disheartening (and not a little shocking) to learn that a theologian no less learned than Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) could make this statement towards the beginning of his *Summa Theologica*: “Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.” This is an astounding admission of ignorance, not least because it comes so early in a text whose length and scope is virtually without parallel

in the his
that theol
human in
“object” at
other thir
its best or
to ask Th
say as mu
with the t
Wittgenst
be said cl
we must p
how God

Such
of all thec
say somet
practical a
is infinite
finally to
paradox l
springs fr
mystery. I
cal, theok
well, poin
Silence f
whom the

Wonde

With all
theology
abstract, p
grip on c
standable
the truth
430), the
remote; it
so often i
that lies j
a result o
with rou
remain d
thus clos

in the history of Christian theology. How is it that theology intends to be a legitimate area of human inquiry if its chief object is in fact no "object" at all, i.e., not a discrete "thing" among other things, not a "part" of the world, not even its best or highest part? And why (we might want to ask Thomas) does it take so many words to say as much? Wouldn't it be better to say, along with the twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence"? If we can only say how God is not, why say anything at all?

Such questions highlight the central paradox of all theological inquiry, namely, that it seeks to say something intelligible, meaningful, and even practical about a reality whose depth and breadth is infinite, and therefore beyond our capacities finally to comprehend. We can even deepen this paradox by saying that all theological inquiry springs from and abides in God's inexhaustible mystery. Even when at its most lucid and technical, theology is a form of discourse that, if done well, points language beyond itself to the infinite Silence from whom all words spring, and in whom they have their rest.

Wonderment as Way to God

With all this talk about paradox and mystery, theology might begin to seem too remote, too abstract, perhaps too otherworldly to have much grip on ordinary life. Such a concern is understandable, though nothing could be further from the truth. To paraphrase Saint Augustine (d. 430), the chief difficulty here is not that God is so remote; it is that *we* are remote. It is *we* who are so often inattentive to the awe-inspiring mystery that lies just beneath our noses. It is *we* who, as a result of our many distractions, preoccupations with routine and excessive self-consciousness, remain dulled to the inner vitality of things, and thus closed off from the secret wellspring of our

lives. Perhaps there are moments, though, when the scales seem to fall off our eyes so that we can perceive the world in a fresh light, and with a spontaneous and renewed sense of gratitude. A quiet exhilaration may overtake us as we become awakened to the simple *thereness* of things, the fact that there is anything at all rather than nothing. Though we might not often formulate it in quite this way—"Why is there something rather than nothing?"—it is likely we all sense from time to time how wonderfully strange this world is, how awesome it is to be alive, to be sensing, feeling, thinking flesh, to be a part (albeit, a very small part) of a universe whose vastness, age, and complexity strains the imagination. It is no mere wordplay to say that what is most extraordinary is the ordinary. We only have to be sufficiently awake to perceive it.

If we find ourselves astonished by the immensity of the universe we inhabit, no less astonishing are the most simple and delicate of things that fill it. The English poet William Blake famously captured something of the enchantment of the particular in his poem "Auguries of Innocence":

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

No religion, no philosophy, no culture has a monopoly on this childlike sense of wonderment. It is no one's to possess; for surely the moment one tries to possess it, the spontaneity of gratitude it inspires vanishes. In fact, we may lose something of its immediacy and freshness as we grow older, as we slip into deeply engrained patterns of activity and thought, as we become absorbed in our projects and self-estimations, or as we suffer experiences in life that make us barricade ourselves for protection from hurt, perhaps to the point of despair. Even so, we might

think of our capacity for wonderment as something constantly to renew and cultivate, even a fundamental spiritual practice to accompany all that we do, think, and say. Not to undertake this practice is to risk premature death, or a kind of living death. Albert Einstein spoke of this very risk when he wrote that “the most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.” Einstein further spoke of this “mystery” as forming the basis of “true religiosity,” which for him meant a basic reverence for all life.

To be attentive to the extra-ordinary in this way is, I suggested earlier, nothing less than the heart of prayer, even if we might be unaccustomed to naming it as such. To open oneself to the world as though for the very first time is to become a person of wonder. Long before we have uttered a “religious” word, if somehow we have said “yes” to our very existence in gratitude and responsibility, we have already made the first and most primitive gestures towards prayer. Wonderment thus lies at the basis of all theology, even as theology will go on to inquire further about this wonderment, about its source and fullest realization, about its meaning and implications for how we are to live in its midst.

Perplexity as Way to God

If one of the fundamental characteristics of being human is the capacity for wonderment, surely another is the capacity for asking questions—big questions. Of course, we can ask questions of a factual or practical sort to assist in getting on with the business of life. The ability to do so, to be “problem solvers,” makes humans especially clever animals. But these are not the questions I mean. We can grow perplexed by things in a more comprehensive sense, in a way that sets us

on a quest to discover the meaning of life itself. We can ask questions of an *existential* sort, by which I mean those that lead one to explore the possibilities and significance of human existence. “What does it *mean* to be a human person?” we might ask. Given that there *is* something rather than nothing—a truly astonishing fact too easily taken for granted—is there a purpose to this something? Why is it all here, and why are *we* here as its witnesses, as self-aware and self-directing participants? Is there a transcendent origin and goal to this universe of which we are a part, and which might allow us to speak of a shared destiny with all things; or is the expansion of this bewildering universe, along with its ever-emergent properties and myriad forms, without any intrinsic and enduring worth? Is there a direction and aim to life, perhaps even a final fulfillment to its dramatic unfolding; or is the universe simply here in magnificent indifference to the hopes and sufferings of its creatures, leaving us with no more meaning, no more purpose than what we choose to create for ourselves?

The very fact that we can ask questions like these highlights just how peculiar human beings are. Though we obviously share the common lot of finite creatures, insofar as we are subject to the natural laws and evolutionary processes that give it shape, we human beings are unique in our capacity and constant need for asking questions of the most varied and expansive sort, including those about life’s ultimate significance. “Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature,” wrote the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, “but he is a thinking reed.” By “thinking,” Pascal does not mean the ability to solve problems. He means the ability and felt urgency for reaching out towards things beyond our ability to presently imagine or grasp, for inquiring about life and death as a whole—in a word, for reaching out towards infinity. We are finite creatures who have a taste for transcendence, a yearning for limitless reality; and it is just the propulsive force

of asking q
in the forr
fests such i

This
greatness,
being a tir
neverthele
this parad
It is a pa
Hebrew B

When
wo:
the m
list
what
of t
morta
Yet yo
Gc
and ci

Corr
and, in the
the creato
tures of d
103 starkly
creatures i
to becom
forms the
express th
made by C
a capacity
utterly dej
yet we bea
ness towan
“image an
There
take away
divine my
discernme

of asking questions, of casting our very existence in the form of open-ended inquiry, that manifests such infinite thirst.

This paradoxical unity of smallness and greatness, of finitude and boundless desire, of being a tiny creature in a vast universe that we nevertheless seek to comprehend and transcend: this paradoxical unity is what makes us human. It is a paradox memorably expressed in the Hebrew Bible:

When I look at your heavens [God], the
work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you have estab-
lished;
what are human beings that you are mindful
of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than
God,
and crowned them with glory and honor
(Ps 8:3-6)

Compared to the immensity of creation, and, in the psalmist's view, the everlastingness of the creator God, we are as nothing, mere creatures of dust whose days are like grass, as Psalm 103 starkly puts it. And yet our nature as human creatures is to reach out for what surpasses us, to become open to the limitless mystery that forms the milieu of our lives. A theologian might express the matter along these lines: we are made *by* God, and made in a way that exhibits a capacity *for* God. We are creatures who are utterly dependent *upon* God for our very being, yet we bear in our finitude a fundamental openness *toward* the infinite reality of God, in whose "image and likeness" we are made (Gen 1:26).

There are at least three main points we can take away from this preliminary exploration of divine mystery and the theological work of its discernment. The first concerns the *intimate*

relationship between God and humanity in all theological activity. Although it is crucial to stress the fundamental difference between God and creation—a point whose further significance we shall explore momentarily—it is no less crucial to appreciate that inquiring after God is also (and necessarily) inquiring into the meaning of the human condition. If it is true that we are made by and for God, as Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions all affirm, then it is also true that any further discovery into the reality of God entails a deeper discovery of ourselves, since God is the ultimate fulfillment of human desire. The human being is structured, so to speak, in such a way as to be open to the inexhaustibly rich reality of God. This insight can help us appreciate why theology is, as the twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner characterizes it, a process of "awakening and interpreting the innermost things in [human] existence." Theology should not be thought of as acquiring information that is alien or extraneous to human life, but a further plunging into the "ultimate depths" of that life.

Second, we should also understand that *when we are asking questions of ultimate significance, even when (and perhaps especially when) we are not sure of the answer, just then we are asking questions about God, at least indirectly.* When we grow perplexed about our lives and our worlds, perplexed about what constitutes the good life, perplexed about whether ultimate truth and justice exist, perplexed about why our world is filled with so much beauty and creativity as well as evil and decay, perplexed about the worth of human life in the face of suffering and death—when we find ourselves moved by such questions, even if sometimes we work to ignore or suppress them, we are, in fact, being moved by theological questions. This is why earlier I wagered that you are a theologian.

Third, one of the best ways to understand *the nature of the theological enterprise, at least in the more formal terms that animate the pres-*

ent text, is to see it as *an activity that makes these questions more explicit and rigorous*. To join in the work of theology is to engage a conversation that has already been taking place, a conversation with a tradition (or traditions) filled with sacred texts, historical events, rituals, legal codes, ethical practices, and peoples who have contributed diversely to discerning the shared mystery of our lives. Though engaging the work of academic theology will entail the acquisition of basic skills and a basic familiarity with major texts and concepts, to participate in such an effort is to take up a simple invitation to help you make what you already do, as a person of wonder and questioning, more reflective and articulate.

DISCERNING THE MYSTERY: THE GOD OF ISRAEL

Perhaps we are now better able to appreciate how wonderment and perplexity are ways to God, and thus points of entry into the diverse tasks of theological inquiry. One reason why this is important to highlight is that it reminds us that as we engage the richly diverse traditions of the Judeo-Christian heritage, we are engaging peoples who have been similarly moved. This is too easily forgotten. With the accumulation of history, texts, and doctrines over many centuries, we might be led to believe that when these traditions speak of God, what "God" refers to remains a fairly settled matter. So when, for example, the Nicene Creed (325 CE) of the Christian faith declares, "We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen," we might assume that the reality of which this confession speaks is made fully comprehensible to those who confess it. This is hardly the case.

Recall the quote from Thomas Aquinas above: "Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means

for considering how God is, but rather how He is not." What this statement means to emphasize is that in all our efforts to imagine or speak of God, whether we say God is "one," a "father," "almighty," or a "creator," we will fundamentally distort that reality if we do not simultaneously insist on the limitations of our imaginations. Every affirmative statement about God ("God is 'x'"), Thomas asserts, no matter how subtle or sublime, no matter how long revered in our theological traditions, will lead to serious distortions and false confidences if not accompanied by a robust negation ("God is *not* 'x', at least not in any way we can finally grasp"). Lest we reduce God to a mere object of comprehension, in which case God would not truly be God, we must learn to un-say all that we say; or better, we must deny that our images and ideas fully coincide with what they signify. The reason for such intellectual humility is not because God is *unintelligible*. Theology is not a brand of anti-intellectualism. Rather, it is because God is *inexhaustibly* intelligible, an infinite and dynamic reality who, while inviting the utmost capacities of our hearts and minds, nevertheless exceeds and saturates those capacities. Like a light whose intensity is perceived as darkness by unadjusted eyes, so is the infinite actuality of divine presence perceived as a kind of absence to finite minds. Thomas puts the matter this way: "Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect [such as a human being], because of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light."

If Thomas's manner of expression adopts some technical language with which you may be unfamiliar ("pure act" and "potentiality," for example), we need not look very far in the Jew-

ish and Ch
basic sentin

WHAT'S TRANSC NEARNE

Consider the
important a
Old Testam-
ity as proph
Israel's histc
bush (a sym
a flock of st
Mount Sina
sight so arre
unconsumec
curiosity, ar
hears a voice
the future le
come no fu
his sandals
he has une
sense of ast
described h
Moses cove
as the God
self-manifes
instances ir
more signifi
which litera
the Greek p

While

Moses imr
crucial abo
communica
cover in th
from being
God of Ak
passionate
Hebrew pe
matic exch

ish and Christian Scriptures to find the same basic sentiment.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE TRANSCENDENCE AND NEARNESS OF YHWH

Consider the example of Moses. In one of the most important and frequently cited passages in the Old Testament (Exod 3), Moses, whose personality as prophetic leader and lawgiver looms large in Israel's history, encounters the sight of a burning bush (a symbol of divine presence) while tending a flock of sheep at Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai) in the Sinai desert. What made the sight so arresting was that the bush was ablaze yet unconsumed. Drawn towards the spectacle out of curiosity, and perhaps some trepidation, Moses hears a voice calling, "Moses, Moses!" "Here I am," the future leader of Israel responds (v. 4). Told to come no further, Moses is instructed to remove his sandals out of reverence for the holy ground he has unexpectedly approached. Filled with a sense of astonishment—the "holiness" of God is described here as inspiring unspeakable awe—Moses covers his face as the voice self-identifies as the God of the Hebrew people. Such divine self-manifestation, of which there are numerous instances in the Old Testament (though none more significant than this), is called a *theophany*, which literally means a "showing" of God (from the Greek *phainein*, "to show").

While this "blinding light" does not grant Moses immediate comprehension, something crucial about God's character is nonetheless communicated in the encounter. What we discover in the narrative's unfolding is that, so far from being a remote and indifferent deity, this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a compassionate presence who seeks to liberate the Hebrew people from their captivity. In a dramatic exchange between God and Moses, God

first acknowledges the unjust treatment of the Hebrew people by the Egyptians, under whose dominion they were currently serving as slaves. "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings" (v. 7). This link between divine mystery and compassion, or between God's transcendent freedom and loving regard for humanity, makes clear that any affirmation of God as "almighty" in scripture, as with the later Nicene Creed, has nothing to do with the brute force of a capricious cosmic tyrant; it has to do with God's will and ability to redeem human beings from bondage and non-identity, to restore humanity to its original dignity and blessedness.

Evidently perplexed about this God now summoning him to lead the Hebrew people out of Pharaoh's Egypt, Moses inquires further: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (v. 13). With a response that only deepens the mystery, yet in a way emphasizing faithful presence, God declares, "I am who I am." And again: "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" And yet again: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites: The Lord (Yahweh), the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; and this my title for all generations" (vv. 14–15).

The name "Yahweh" is in fact a form of the verb "to be" in Hebrew, thus the variations "I AM" and "I am who am." While the name Yahweh (written YHWH, and thus also known as the *tetragrammaton*, or "four letters") has given rise to much philosophical and theological speculation throughout history, we can modestly underscore two interrelated aspects for its continuing significance in Jewish and Christian theology.

The first is that the name highlights divine *transcendence*. That God is "I AM" (or "I am who

am") means, at the very least, that divine reality is not determined by anything other than God. In contrast to creatures whose existence is finite and dependent, divine reality is not dependent on anything but itself. Later in Latin theological tradition this will be described as God's *aseity*, which means that God exists from God's own self (from *a*, "of," and *se*, "self"). God does not depend on the world in order to be God, though the world depends entirely upon God for its very being. Divine aseity is another way of affirming God's radical otherness. God is wholly other than the world, not something "alongside" or a "part" of the world of finite creatures. To speak of God this way—which is hard to do consistently—requires us to deny that any of our images or concepts, or even the sum of them, manages to grasp the reality of God. Though we may affirm many things about God, and indeed theological speech can at times be a riot of words, we will also need to say that God is *not* this and *not* that; God is not a creature, not something we can add up among the items in the universe, not anything we can fully imagine or comprehend. Divine aseity is therefore closely related to divine *ineffability*, which means that God is "inexpressible." The transcendent reality of God draws human language to itself while remaining beyond all expression. Like a bush aflame yet unconsumed, the holy mystery of God resists all domesticating thought and speech.

Secondly, the name Yahweh signifies that God is present and active in history. While "I am who am" may suggest something abstract and static, as though divine transcendence implies airy indifference to the world, on the contrary, the Hebrew verb "to be" (which here strongly suggests "being *for*") signifies God's faithfulness to Israel, a faithfulness materialized through Yahweh's deliverance of the Hebrew people from their captivity. Yahweh is the one who calls new things into existence, the one who makes the impossible possible, the one who "brings out" (through the event of "exodus") those enslaved

and left for dead. If "I am who am" highlights divine transcendence, then this transcendence is also a drawing near in profound intimacy, a compassionate being-with and being-for, a faithful presence working within history for its redemption. Indeed, this is the central point of the narrative as it continues to tell the story of Moses' return to Egypt and his confrontation with the imperial power of Pharaoh. As the Hebrew people flee their captors in the dead of the night, they pass through the waters of the Red Sea, escape into the Sinai desert, and eventually arrive at the mountain where Moses first encountered Yahweh. Through the further meditation of Moses, Yahweh establishes a covenant (a formal bond of mutual commitment) with the Hebrew people requiring of them a pattern of life uniting right conduct with right worship, as decreed by Yahweh's commandments (the Law). And so, through the transcendent agency of God the Israelites are freed *from* bondage and non-identity (exodus) and freed *for* new identity and responsibility in relationship to each other and to their God (covenant). From within this bond of relationship the Israelites will embark upon a long journey through the desert and enter the land of Canaan, or the "Holy Land," where they will begin to settle and prosper as a nation. Exodus, covenant, Law, and land: these are the concrete means by which Israel will discern and inhabit the divine mystery, a mystery whose transcendence and compassionate nearness is expressed by the name "Yahweh."

CREATION AND THE ONE GOD: FROM NARRATIVE TO CONFESSION

With the story of exodus and covenant we have the most central of Israel's narratives. This narrative, as well as the lived experience it enshrines,

shapes imagin traditions, and doctrinal stat Christian theo story of exodu tive" of Israel to which it re Israel's histor associated wit early (appro BCE). Rathe sense that it, variety of ora the Old Test of identity a understanding Israel are in r narrative wor constantly int in their histor As they grow gratefully to stability, as th ing periods o consider the as a whole— which by no turies later, th the lens of patterns of r a process tel of theologic that it entail experience, and critical r

We see biblical unde sider the way shape. Althc that these s they were n Israel's histo the "Priestly

shapes imagination and discourse in the biblical traditions, and from it the later confessional and doctrinal statements about God in Jewish and Christian theology will emerge. We might call the story of exodus and covenant the “primary narrative” of Israel. That is not to say that the events to which it refers are prior to all other events in Israel’s history—though, to be sure, the events associated with the exodus and covenant are quite early (approximately mid-thirteenth century BCE). Rather, this narrative is primary in the sense that it, and its ongoing retelling through a variety of oral and textual traditions coalescing in the Old Testament, provides a grounding sense of identity and meaning, a narrative focus for understanding who God is and who the people of Israel are in relationship to God. From inside this narrative world, so to speak, the Jewish people will constantly interpret former and subsequent events in their history, its triumphs as well as its disasters. As they grow perplexed about events, as they look gratefully to God during times of prosperity and stability, as they question God’s faithfulness during periods of trial and even catastrophe, as they consider the origin and final purpose of creation as a whole—through such theological stirrings, which by no means are irrelevant to us many centuries later, the people of Israel will look through the lens of their primary narrative to discern patterns of meaning, purpose, and promise. Such a process tells us a great deal about the nature of theological inquiry more generally, namely, that it entails a constant interweaving of present experience, historical remembrance, narration, and critical reflection.

We see this interweaving at work in the biblical understanding of God as creator. Consider the way the creation stories in Genesis take shape. Although it is quite natural to assume that these stories were composed first, in fact they were not composed until fairly deep into Israel’s history. For example, what scholars call the “Priestly narrative” (Gen 1:1–2:4) was not

composed until some six centuries after the time of Moses, during or after the Babylonian Exile (586–539 BCE). (For more on the history and authorship of Genesis, as well as the rest of the Pentateuch, see chapter 2.) What this means, among other things, is that although the Bible opens with “In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth,” such words already reflect many centuries of Jewish history and experience. No wonder, then, that we can hear echoes of the exodus and covenant in the creation stories. For example, as God is described as drawing forth dry land from a watery chaos on the third day of creation, we might be reminded of the Israelites being freed from their Egyptian captors and delivered through the waters of the Red Sea into a land of their own. Similarly, the creation account depicts God’s creative act as a word of command (“Let there be . . .”), for not only does this highlight God’s sovereignty over the chaos of the pre-creational void, but it is this very word that called Israel to covenantal relationship and provided commandments for its corporate life. Just as God “speaks forth” the being and identity of the Hebrew people through exodus and covenant, so does God speak all creation into being from non-being. Creation and covenant are, within the Hebrew imagination, internally linked.

This link helps to explain why the creation story in Genesis 1 exhibits important differences amid similarities with parallel creation stories of its time, particularly the *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation story dating from the late third millennium BCE. Like the *Enuma Elish*, the order of creation is said to emerge from the formless void of the waters. Unlike its Babylonian counterpart, however, which characterizes the act of creation as the result of a violent rivalry among the gods (reflecting the polytheism of the broader Mesopotamian culture), the Priestly narrative emphasizes the transcendence and unity of God, as well as the primordial goodness of creation. God is not simply a god among other gods, but *the* creator God who

ghlights
endence
ntimacy,
ig-for, a
y for its
point of
story of
rotation
. As the
e dead of
ers of the
and even-
loses first
her medi-
covenant
ent) with
a pattern
it worship,
ents (the
ent agency
ndage and
ew identity
each other
within this
will embark
rt and enter
and,” where
as a nation.
ese are the
discern and
stery whose
nearness is

TO

nant we have
s. This narra-
e it enshrines,

brings all things into existence. Moreover, God's creative activity has nothing to do with rivalry, either with other gods or with creatures. Rather, God creates freely, without compulsion, without external necessity, without calculated motive, and endows creation with an original blessing: "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (v. 31). "To be" is to be blessed. Scripture would tell us that creation is, at its very root, a free gift of the one God, who takes delight in it. Such gratuitous creation, such unexpected and felicitous excess, is the wellspring of all astonishment. None of this has to be, not a single thing; and yet here it all is, a free gift of the creator God who artfully brings into existence that which had not previously existed.

Here, then, we have some appreciation of how the particular historical experience of God as Yahweh—as the one who liberates, the one who makes impossible things possible, the one who brings forth identity from non-identity and establishes relationship out of alienation—opens up a rich perception about God as creator. From the encounter with God as the one who redeems, the Israelites gain a distinctive understanding of the God who creates, and vice versa. This mutuality between creation and redemption is therefore key for understanding the significance of Jewish monotheism.

Although, to be sure, the emergence of monotheism in Jewish tradition reflects a long and ambiguous history—the numerous temptations to idolatry recounted in the Old Testament attest to this—the story of creation, as we find in Genesis 1, provides unambiguous (if poetic and hymnic) affirmation of God's sovereign unity. Such insistence, which obviously lies at the heart of all three "Abrahamic faiths" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), finds another memorable and frequently referenced formulation in the Book of Deuteronomy. Composed to represent Moses' final discourses to the people of Israel before his death, this condensed statement, known as the

Shema of Israel, functioned like a primitive creed, i.e., a formal confession of the people's faith. It is a confession that the Christian Nicene Creed will later echo ("We believe in one God"): "Hear [*Shema*], O Israel: The Lord (YHWH) is our God, the Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deut 6:4–6). Notice here that the affirmation of God's oneness is not merely a reasoned philosophical position, however philosophically significant such an affirmation might be; it is a testimony of personal and corporate commitment to the God who liberates and creates. It is *this* God, and not any other, who delivers the captives and reestablishes relationship; and it is *this* God, and not any other, that the ancient Israelites (and modern heirs of their faith) confess as the creator and Lord of all things. The monotheism this confession represents, then, is trustful and loving, not merely a speculative proposition. It is a confession that was to be "lived into," to be deepened through a pattern of life, as the rest of the passage makes clear: "Recite [these words] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (6:7–9). In other words, in all one's departures and arrivals, in one's rest and activity, in one's relationships and times alone, the mind and heart ought to be orientated to the living mystery of the one God. Such is the life of prayer.

LIVING THE TRIUNE MYSTERY: THE GOD OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Thus far we have been unpacking, gradually and through appeal to scripture, the meaning of the first lines of the Nicene Creed: "We believe

in one God,
heaven and e
As is hopefu
is a confessio
from the La
Though a fe
of the Chris
like the *Shen*
rooted in hi
through narr
concisely ex
who brings
creative and
limit ("almig
is not a crea
is neither th
scendent So
and earth").
flow, and it i
move, and ha

One asy
we have yet
God as "Fa
make more
Christian di
discourse ab
fold pattern
ter with Je
Resurrectio
Spirit, who
life of the se
about God
puzzle abou
a framework
competently
reality in hi
which the cl
revealed in
tory and int
we see how
from lived e
articulate in
dynamic na

the significance of this doctrine is not to issue abstract statements about God that have little relation to concrete human existence. It is, rather, a language that articulates in a rich and vibrant way our conscious and active participation in divine life. In short, the doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with *theōsis*, or what the ancient church called the “divinization” of creation.

PARTICIPATION IN DIVINE LIFE: SCRIPTURAL WITNESS AND CREEDAL FORMULATION

Irenaeus of Lyons, who is widely regarded as the most important theologian of the second century, summarized the Christian theology of the Incarnation by saying that “God became what we are in order to make us what He is.” Echoing Saint Paul’s affirmation that through Christ we are “adopted” as sons and daughters of God (Eph 1:5), Irenaeus’s simple formulation finds frequent and various reformulation throughout succeeding generations of early church theologians, including the well-known instance of fourth-century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria, whose work on the divinity of Christ was important to the First Council of Nicea (325). (It was the Council of Nicea that ultimately led to the Nicene Creed under consideration.) As Athanasius puts it in his *On the Incarnation*, the eternal Word (or *Logos*) of God “was made man so that we might be made God.” It is a radical statement to make, though it should be properly understood. To be “made God” (the Greek term for this is *theopoiēsis*) is not to be taken in the sense that human beings become God as such, for only God is God by nature. Rather, the idea is that human beings might, through invitation and cooperation with grace, “participate” in God’s nature, i.e., might become more and more like God, in whose image and likeness

in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen.” As is hopefully clear by now, to say “we believe” is a confession of faith. (The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means, “I believe.”) Though a formal doctrine (or official teaching) of the Christian church, this creedal statement, like the *Shema* of Israel, is a corporate testimony rooted in historical experience and articulated through narrative and conceptual reflection that concisely expresses devotion to the one God who brings all things into being, and whose creative and regenerative capacities are without limit (“almighty”). The Creed asserts that God is not a creature among other creatures—God is neither this nor that—but the infinite, transcendent Source of all things (“maker of heaven and earth”). It is from this mystery that all things flow, and it is in this mystery that all things live, move, and have their being (Acts 17:28).

One aspect of the above creedal statement we have yet to examine is the affirmation of God as “Father.” Doing so requires that we make more explicit the Trinitarian character of Christian discourse. As we shall see, Christian discourse about the one God takes on a three-fold pattern as a result of the historical encounter with Jesus Christ—his life, death, and Resurrection—and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who draws creation into the dynamic life of the self-giving God. Trinitarian language about God is not concerned with a logical puzzle about how “one” can also be “three,” but a framework for making sense of and speaking competently about God’s self-communicating reality in history. As with our sketch above, in which the character of the transcendent God is revealed in and through the particulars of history and interpersonal relationships, so too will we see how the doctrine of the Trinity emerges from lived experience and narrative reflection to articulate in conceptual terms the relational and dynamic nature of the one God. Importantly,

ive creed,
s faith. It
ne Creed
1”): “Hear
H) is our
Lord your
your soul,
ords that I
art” (Deut
n of God’s
ilosophical
ficant such
ony of per-
e God who
nd not any
eestablishes
t any other,
ern heirs of
nd Lord of
fession rep-
ot merely a
fession that
d through a
ssage makes
children and
ne and when
d when you
and, fix them
d write them
on your gates”
epartures and
one’s relation-
d heart ought
ery of the one

STERY: FAITH

ing, gradually
he meaning of
d: “We believe

they are made; might live more deeply into the infinite mystery through the ongoing practice of the faith. This is possible, observe Irenaeus and Athanasius, because God has become one of *us*, has accommodated God's own reality to our human situation in a supreme act of self-giving love. From a Christian point of view, this act of condescension (or *kenōsis*, which means in Greek, "self-emptying") is the definitive moment of divine revelation.

Scriptural Witness

As will be further discussed in chapter 4 in relationship to the study of Christology, numerous passages in the New Testament, and indeed the entire structure of the Nicene Creed, exhibit a *descent-ascent* pattern to account for God's self-bestowal in Jesus Christ and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in history and in the church. Specifically, God's Word (or *Logos*) is described as "entering into" or "descending into" our world in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life and death express in historically concrete form the compassion and humility of God. Obviously this spatial imagery is metaphorical, and yet it means to convey that the invisible, transcendent God has become "visible" or "manifest" in our world in an unprecedented way. As Saint Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians, Jesus is the "image of the invisible God," the one in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:15, 19). Here too we have of an instance of theophany, though now in the person of Jesus Christ. (Scholars sometimes substitute the term *christophany* to speak of an "appearance" of Christ.) The corollary to this descent pattern is the imagery of Christ's "Resurrection" and "ascension" after his death. Having entered into the depths of our human condition in order to take on our suffering and alienation, even to the point of death on the cross, Jesus is raised from the dead

and "greatly exalted" by God the Father, who gives him "the name that is above every name" (Phil 2:5-11).

In other key passages Paul speaks of Jesus' Resurrection and exaltation as a work of God's Spirit who now indwells believers so that they too might be "raised" to new life, both now and in the future. Consider this classic passage from his letter to the Romans: "If the Spirit of [God] who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, [God] who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom 8:11). Although here we do not yet have the formal doctrine of the Trinity, at least not in the way that subsequent generations will make more conceptually precise, we nevertheless see a threefold pattern to Paul's characterization of salvation. The (Holy) Spirit of God (the Father) raises Jesus from the dead, and now this Spirit dwells within believers so as to transform them in and through divine life. As Paul puts it in the same letter, the Spirit of God lives within believers and cries out "*Abba, Father!*" so as to make them "children of God" (8:15-17). We should note here that this cry of "*Abba!*" (or "*Father!*") is the Aramaic name Jesus frequently used to speak of God throughout his life and ministry, and therefore a decisive factor for the language of "*Father!*" in Christian language about God. This passage therefore makes the daring claim that God's Spirit draws us (through "*adoption!*") into the relationship Jesus himself had with his Father.

We see similar patterns of descent and ascent in other New Testament writings as well. In the conclusion of the Gospel of Luke, for example, God the Father is said to raise Jesus from the dead, while the risen Christ sends the Holy Spirit to his followers as promised by the Father (Luke 24:49). Luke's sequel, the Book of Acts, depicts the Apostle Peter as speaking of this fulfilled promise as follows: "This Jesus

God raised u
Being theref
and having r
of the Holy S
both see and
the imagery o
the threefold
ity: God raise
"exaltation" t
the commu
it then anim
described as
in the world
the conclusio
"sending" is c
as the risen
make discipl
the name of
holy Spirit, a
that I have
I am with y
(28:19-20). I
porated into
the regenera
within Chris
participation
bers of the cl
and extend n

Creedal F

Looking, fir
Nicene Cree
movement a
for although
content that
and believe
characterize
tifying activ
work of Fat
Creed tells
sants are th
of and respo

God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear" (Acts 2:32–33). Notice again the imagery of the risen Christ's ascent, as well as the threefold pattern in characterizing divine activity: God raises Jesus from the dead, and from this "exaltation" the Holy Spirit is "poured out" within the community—that is, the church—which it then animates. The Spirit of God is therefore described as extending Christ's historical mission in the world through the work of the church. In the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, this work of "sending" is crystallized in the Great Commission, as the risen Christ proclaims, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (28:19–20). Now given a new identity, and incorporated into the body of the risen Christ through the regenerating waters of baptism—baptism, within Christian practice, is a sacramental sign of participation in Christ (see chapter 7)—the members of the church are bonded together to share in and extend new life to others.

Creedal Formulation

Looking, finally, at the overall structure of the Nicene Creed, one sees just this descent-ascent movement at work. This is significant to observe, for although the creed bears within it doctrinal content that specifies what the church confesses and believes, it exhibits a narrative shape that characterizes the creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity of God in a threefold way, as the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed tells a compact drama, one whose confessants are thoroughly self-implicated as subjects of and respondents to God's triune activity.

In the first section, already detailed in this chapter, God is affirmed as one, as Father, as almighty, and as creator. In the second section, the creed affirms that this one God, through the eternal Word (or *Logos*), enters into human history by becoming human. Jesus Christ is, for Christians, the definitive revelation of God in the world, showing precisely in the warp and woof of creation the infinite compassion of God. There is no limit to God's self-emptying love, not even the horror of death through crucifixion. ("For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate" highlights the historical specificity of the divine gesture.) God's creativity cannot be squelched by death, but overcomes even that which would separate people from God and each other through the gift of Jesus' Resurrection, the "new creation," as Saint Paul often puts it. The risen Christ is "ascended into heaven"—that is, he opens up the whole of creation to new and eternal life in God—and is now the definitive standard by which all human life is judged. Jesus Christ is therefore not only the fullest revelation of God's love for humankind (this is the "kenotic" movement of God towards us by assuming our humanity) but is also the fullest realization of human existence as made in the image and likeness of God (this is the "transcendent" movement of humanity towards God). And so, the self-giving of God to humanity and the self-giving of humanity to God utterly converge in the person of Jesus Christ. This convergence is what makes possible redemptive "participation" in divine life, namely, *theōsis*.

The third section of the creed speaks of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing life of the church in the world. By saying that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son, with whom [the Spirit] is worshipped and glorified," the creed affirms that it is truly God who indwells and animates the church in its worldly mission. The Spirit who hovered over the waters at the

dawn of creation ("the author and giver of life"); the Spirit who stirred the holy prophets of Israel; the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead to renew all of creation from sin and death: this same Spirit draws the diverse members of the church into reconciliation with each other so that together they may become agents of transformation in the world. The "indwelling" of the Holy Spirit therefore does not imply a self-enclosed or exclusionary form of life, but opens up human belonging to an "outward" and self-giving mission of connectivity and embrace.

The entire drift of the creed affirms that Christian life, to the extent it is energized and shaped by divine life, is dynamic, relational, and self-giving. And as will become clearer in later chapters, such a life, insofar as it is lived well, has little to do with withdrawing into the backwaters of an elite club; it is a challenging, even risky way of life that entails two movements at once: ongoing spiritual formation with others in community, and a commitment to fostering reconciliation and justice in a world that desperately needs it.

CONCLUSION: TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY TODAY

This chapter has traced a path of discovery that began with a consideration of divine mystery in terms of wonderment and perplexity. To follow wonderment and perplexity is a process of discernment, or what is called "theology." Divine mystery is never exhausted by human discernment, which therefore makes us always beginners in its undertaking. Theological reflection is at its best when it continually rediscovers the original impulses of wonderment and perplexity that stimulate it. It is also at its best when it engages rich traditions of those who have lived and discerned the mystery throughout history. Theology can therefore be thought of as an ongoing

conversation, extending over many centuries and always broaching new experiences, questions, and insights, so as to assist its practitioner in the task of living the mystery in the present and towards the future.

As has been shown, the Old Testament gives distinctive shape to that task through, among other things, the elaboration of its primary narrative, which emphasizes the historical dialogue between God and the people of Israel through the themes of creation, exodus, and covenant. The Christian Scriptures are thoroughly steeped in this primary narrative, though they reframe its central features in response to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom Christians affirm as God's definitive self-manifestation to human beings. The church understands such self-emptying on the part of God as simultaneously the fulfillment of human existence, whose transformative (or "divinizing") effects are extended in the church and the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians therefore discern and live according to the infinite mystery of God in a triune way, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This language takes on a narrative shape, as both the New Testament and Nicene Creed show, though it is possible also to specify aspects of that language in more conceptually explicit ways. This close relationship between story and doctrine is crucial to remember, since too often doctrines can become detached or even isolated from the lived experience that first nourished them.

Significantly, this insistence on the close relationship between experience and concept, history and doctrine, narrative and theory, is a central feature of many contemporary theologies of the Trinity. Numerous theologians today continue to argue for the need to reconnect our sometimes abstract formulations of doctrine with lived experience and narrative reflection. This chapter concludes, then, by briefly

indicating commonly explicit and

1. The unit in talk at

This chapter things at or when proper has spoken and consequent and concept mystery. In cannot grasp object of from Thor of God can by finite n excessive "E" "darkness." cal theolog spoke of C size just th insistence (that God n dialogue an contrary, m God's tran: God to be ation, whic This is on doctrine of transcende and nearne sion in bec tion." Trini (apparent) transcende life *with* I profoundly "outpourin; life in God makes pos:

indicating four ways contemporary theology commonly seeks to make this connection more explicit and thorough.

1. The unity of transcendence and immanence in talk about God.

This chapter has stressed two seemingly contrary things at once, but which are not contrary at all when properly understood. On the one hand, it has spoken of God's otherness, or transcendence, and consequently the limits of human images and concepts in the attempt to apprehend divine mystery. Insofar as humans are creatures, we cannot grasp God like we might some common object of experience. Returning to the quote from Thomas Aquinas, the infinite actuality of God cannot be absorbed or comprehended by finite minds, and so in some sense God's excessive "light" appears to humans as a kind of "darkness." The influential, fifth-century mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite spoke of God's "dazzling darkness" to emphasize just this paradox. On the other hand, such insistence on transcendence in no way denies that God might be able and willing to enter into dialogue and relationship with creatures. On the contrary, many theologians would assert, it is just God's transcendence that makes it possible for God to be intimately near or involved with creation, which is what we mean by "immanence." This is one of the crucial implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. It affirms at once God's transcendence and immanence, God's otherness and nearness, God's infinity and loving compassion in becoming finite "for us and for our salvation." Trinitarian discourse means to keep these (apparent) opposites in creative tension. The transcendent God *becomes* human to share divine life *with* humans, to draw all creation more profoundly into God's infinite mystery. Such "outpouring" and "returning" is the rhythm of life in God, which the Holy Spirit continuously makes possible. Only by keeping transcendence

and immanence in closest unity is one able to avoid thinking of God as a remote and indifferent deity, or, conversely, as indistinguishable from creation. As presented in the creed, God is infinitely "more than" creation, yet this "more than" keeps creation in its triune embrace.

2. The relational reality of God, and the communal character of Christian life.

Another key point of emphasis in contemporary theology is the relational character of God. Christians most certainly affirm God as one ("We believe in one God"). However, Christians should not think of divine unity as somehow opposed to relationship. Here too Trinitarian discourse means to keep apparent opposites in creative tension. In God perfect relationship *is* perfect unity. God is not an isolated, static, and supremely self-satisfied "ego" that surveys all things from an unapproachable perch; rather, the Christian tradition understands God as a relational, dynamic, and self-giving reality who freely wills to create out of superabundance. As Pseudo-Dionysius is also famous for asserting, "The Good is self-diffusive," meaning that God is an infinite fullness of relationship that is most itself when it gives itself away. God the Father eternally expresses the Word in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and so is an eternally dynamic flow of relationship. This is truly profound in its implications. If people are made in the "image and likeness of God," this means that humans are most truly themselves when they are self-giving with and for others. Concretely this means that the Christian lives more richly into his or her vocation insofar as it is lived in community. As many contemporary theologians argue, such an insight cuts at the heart of modern individualism. The human person is a thoroughly porous creature, one born out of and for participation in a broad array of interpersonal and social relationships. Though living in relationship makes Christians vulnerable to one another, the voca-

tion of the Christian is to heal damaged relationships, to bring reconciliation where there is hurt, and to bring justice and wholeness where there is suffering and alienation. To be so engaged is, in fact, to draw creation more richly into the heart of the triune God. By stressing this point, contemporary theology seeks to recover the practical, social, and even political implications of Trinitarian theology.

3. The awareness of metaphor in gendered language about God.

Recent decades have witnessed significant reflection and debate among theologians regarding gender-specificity in language about God. For many centuries masculine-based metaphors and pronouns were dominant, even “normative” when speaking of God, as is obviously true for the use of Father and Son in Trinitarian discourse, although the Holy Spirit has sometimes been thought of as gender-neutral or even feminine. But since the latter half of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of men and women have questioned the normativity of masculine God-language since it seems to imply that men are more “representative” of God than women. Citing the social inequality this allocation of language seems to reflect and underwrite, a growing number of Christian theologians argue that God language must become more “inclusive,” either by supplementation with feminine imagery and pronouns or, alternatively, through avoidance of gender-specification when possible. There are, as one might suspect, many possible stances to take on this highly complex and sensitive issue, which goes to show just how important social and cultural change is in how we imagine and talk about God. No doubt the question has arisen, and even become urgent, as a result of rapid and profound changes in gender relations over the last century or so. The issue is particularly challenging for Christians since Jesus himself, obviously a man living in a patriarchal society, used the term *Abba*

(“Father”) to address God—though, as is also pointed out by numerous feminist theologians, Jesus challenged many patriarchal sensibilities in his day, not least through his close association with women in his ministry. In any case, no matter where one finally stands on this issue of ongoing debate, the problems it raises require discernment about the limits of human imagination and language when it comes to the mystery of God. If, on the one hand, the ultimate vocation of language is to speak out of and to the reality of God, on the other hand, one must always do so knowing that no language, whether masculine, feminine, or gender neutral, manages to capture the transcendence of God.

4. The importance of engaging other views of God creatively and dialogically.

Finally, and related to the above point, contemporary theologians are intensely engaged in reflection over the unique challenges that arise when encountering persons from other religious and cultural traditions, and therefore when encountering differing (and sometimes radically alternative) views of divine mystery, including those who are indifferent or even hostile to notions of God. What makes our pluralist age unique is not that people now have so many differing views of God—such has always been the case—but that today we live in such close proximity with such differences due to the massive mobilization of populations made possible by advances in communication and transportation. More now than ever, we are aware of how distinctive histories and cultures shape the ways humans imagine their place in the world, and thus how context-sensitive one’s view of ultimate reality is. Faced with such ambiguity, people may buckle down and cling to their cultural and religious heritage; we might think of fundamentalism as one kind of response to growing pluralism. On the other hand a sense of futility or even cynicism regarding the search for truth can set in, making the

very notion of
hopeless or a
kind of respor
damentalism
is the more ch
seeking unity
religions to ar
or falsifies leg
be committed
while also re
ness, and be
(See chapter
tianity’s relat
world.) If, fo
that Jesus Ch
of God in hi

Questio

1. What is t
theology?
2. What thi
discernm
activity?
3. What is :
are closel
Exodus 3
4. What is :
and how
of God a

Questic

1. Have you
“Why is
ing?” Wf
such a qt
2. Do you t
compatit

very notion of discussing “ultimate reality” seem hopeless or arbitrary. Relativism can be another kind of response to pluralism. Between rigid fundamentalism and ephemeral relativism, however, is the more challenging (though creative) path of seeking unity *in* difference. Without reducing all religions to an abstract unity in a way that ignores or falsifies legitimate differences, it is possible to be committed to a particular religious tradition while also remaining open to the truth, goodness, and beauty of other religious traditions. (See chapters 10 and 11 for more on Christianity’s relationship to other religions of the world.) If, for example, a Christian is convinced that Jesus Christ is the definitive self-disclosure of God in history, this will not mean therefore

that the mystery of God cannot be found richly and compellingly in other religious traditions. Indeed, to remain hospitable to the mystery of God no matter where it is found is essential to any truly theological undertaking. For the Christian, the understanding of God as Trinitarian actually inspires and informs this openness to otherness, since the God it affirms is relational and dialogical. The idea of the infinite mystery of God has a corollary: people will always be able to discover more about God. For the Christian, the triune character of that mystery means that one will discover more about God in the context of relationship, even when (and perhaps especially when) one encounters persons very different from oneself.

Questions about the Text

1. What is the central paradox of all Christian theology?
2. What three major points characterize the discernment of divine mystery in theological activity?
3. What is a *theophany*, and what two aspects are closely associated with its instance in Exodus 3?
4. What is Israel’s “primary narrative” in brief, and how does it shape Israel’s understanding of God as liberator and creator?
5. What is the meaning of *theōsis*, and how is it central to the doctrine of the Trinity? Explain your answer by referring to the “ascent-descent” pattern in key passages from scripture, as well as the structure of the Nicene Creed.
6. What implications follow from the Christian understanding of God as “relational” and “self-giving,” especially in terms of the church’s role in the world?

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever thought of the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” What sort of feelings or thoughts does such a question elicit from you?
2. Do you think theological reflection is compatible with doubt? Why or why not?
3. What are some other examples of a theophany in scripture, or perhaps in other religious contexts? How do people today typically speak of encounters with the divine, and are such accounts similar or different from celebrated instances in the past?