

THE RETURN OF METAPHYSICS: IS THIS THE WAY FORWARD?

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ABSTRACT

The history of the relationship between Christian theology and metaphysics is a complex one. The present contribution argues that Christian theology and metaphysics do not have the same subject matter. Christian theology is concerned with the gospel, with God's word, and therefore also with certain aspects that pertain to ontology (God's being or essence, as manifested in God's act), whereas metaphysics pursues an inquiry into the question of 'being' as such, at times independently from a concern for being-in-act. Certainly, theologians can learn much from such inquiry, especially with regard to terminological precision, and therefore a dialogue may be beneficial, but theologians should not let their subject matter be replaced with the theme(s) of metaphysics.

Keywords

Metaphysics; Ontology; Theology; Being; Essence

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'From knowing God's Way we come to know God's essential divinity – and not the other way around.'¹

1. Metaphysics and Ontology

Christian theologians should be weary of metaphysics, but they should engage in ontology. Even if they may not be searching for 'new ontologies' (what might be 'new' about them, one wonders?), they are

¹ Kornelis H. Miskotte, *Biblical ABCs*, Collin Cornell and Eleonora Hof ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic/Lexington Books, 2021), 80.

certainly called to *think always anew* about the *kind(s)* of ‘ontologies’ that matter to Christian theology: first and foremost the being or reality of God in relation to the being or reality of the world, of human beings, and of creation as a whole. This, in a nutshell, is my position on the question of metaphysics and ontology in relation to Christian theology, and of course the real work only begins as I unpack further these opening statements.

Metaphysics is a notoriously fuzzy word, with a long and rich history, including a recent history characterised by several attempts at overcoming it. Trying to reach a provisional definition makes sense.² By metaphysics, I understand reflection about being *qua* being, being ‘as such’, as well as about the ground of ‘being’.³ And so metaphysics is one way of thinking and talking about ‘being’, and about ‘what is’, *as such*. As Jean Grondin has suggested, metaphysics aims to think about ‘being and its reasons’ (‘l’être et ses raisons’).⁴ I would venture that metaphysics is one region within the larger field known as ontology since ontology is not merely concerned with what being is ‘as such’ but rather with many different versions and instances of ‘being’, including being-in-act or being-as-manifestation, or the truth or beauty of ‘being’, for instance.⁵

² One very useful resource here is: Jean-Marc Narbonne and Luc Langlois ed., *La métaphysique: Son histoire, sa critique, ses enjeux* (Québec-Paris: Presses de l’Université Laval-Vrin, 1999). See also: Philippe Capelle-Dumont et al. ed., *Métaphysique et christianisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2015).

³ As John Milbank puts it, in metaphysics ‘the highest being, or first cause, is identified as a perfect instance of what is fundamentally knowable, namely a ‘being’, while beings themselves are accounted for through the causal efficiency of the highest being [...]’ John Milbank, ‘Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,’ *New Blackfriars* 76, n°895 (July-August 1995): 329 (325–45). Metaphysics posits a ‘continuous ontological scale that combines the world and its first principle in a single order.’ Giulio Maspero, ‘Life as Relation: Classical Metaphysics and Trinitarian Ontology,’ *Theological Research* 2/1 (2014): 36 (31–52). Or, to put it differently, and more broadly, metaphysics is the project of a knowledge of the first and universal principles of all beings: ‘le projet d’une connaissance des principes premiers et universels de tous les êtres.’ Fabienne Baghdassarian, ‘Introduction’ to Aristotele, *Métaphysique: Livre Lambda* (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 29.

⁴ Jean Grondin, *Du sens des choses: L’idée de la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013), 32.

⁵ Somewhat similarly, David Bentley Hart distinguishes between ‘purely *metaphysical* questions regarding the relation between the Absolute and the dependent, and [...] the still more fundamental *ontological* questions regarding the difference between divine and human being or the difference between God as God and each of us as *this* particular being [...]’ David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 102.

Christian theology, properly understood, as practised by some of its most significant thinkers, and as distinct from philosophical theology (which of course has an utterly different stance on the question of metaphysics!), should not be interested in ‘being as such’, but instead in God, creation, and human beings as creatures. Being ‘as such’, being *qua* being is a philosophical theme, a philosophical abstraction with which Christian theology does not need to directly concern itself, unless one engages in the kind of philosophical theology which certainly is worth pursuing in its own right and which, undeniably, enjoys its own legitimacy and validity.

We should not imagine too quickly that when practitioners of metaphysics talk about ‘Being’ with a capital ‘B’, they are talking about God as confessed by Christians.⁶ In some striking passages, Aristotle may have conceived of God as ‘life’, but this did not lead the philosopher to think of God as desiring anything or even as relating to anything, as Giulio Maspero has pointed out.⁷ As I see it, Protestant theology in modernity, following in this regard the 16th-century Protestant reformers, was right to criticise metaphysical discourses. It correctly wished instead to base theology on the interpretation of the specific message of the Scriptures, taking into account the rich tradition of biblical interpretation as well as using the resources of humanist culture, which included philosophical resources, to be sure. These philosophical resources, however, were studied and taken into consideration in a critical manner so as to let them enrich, but not dictate, the process and the results of scriptural interpretation.

In the footsteps of Albrecht Ritschl, but also taking the lead on the question of the relation between theology and metaphysics in the 1870s, Wilhelm Herrmann argued that

[...] the unmoved mover precisely lacks what is characteristic of the religious concept of God. The same is true of the relation of the human being toward the highest reality as Aristotle presents it: the specific aspects of religion are absent. [...] this divinity is for the human being no more object of love than the air it breathes and the land it cultivates. The human being’s

⁶ ‘The Aristotelian first mover and the world belonged to a single metaphysical order that philosophical thought could explore. On the contrary, one can only know the ontology of God through that which has been revealed. [...] This ontology finds its foundation above, not below’ G. Maspero, ‘Life as Relation,’ 46–47.

⁷ G. Maspero, ‘Life as Relation,’ 35.

relation to this divinity cannot be qualified as religious, for the human being is not related to it through any bond of reciprocal interest.⁸

One should think and talk about God ‘within the limits of religion’ alone, according to Wilhelm Herrmann.⁹ Religion calls for a specific way of talking and thinking about God: one grounded in a particular relation to God or a particular ‘interest’ in *who* God is *for us*, and not merely in *what* divinity might be like in itself or as such. Certain Reformatory accents are present behind Herrmann’s reluctance to engage in metaphysical discourses. We may recall Calvin’s distinction between *who* (*qualis est*) God is and *what kind* of divine object God might be (*quid est*). ‘What is God? People who pose this question are merely toying with idle speculations. It is more important for us to know of what sort God is and what is consistent with God’s nature.’¹⁰ We may also remember the strictures of Martin Luther with regard to metaphysical thinking, for instance on the theme of ‘sin’.¹¹

Calling for a return to Scripture is, of course, insufficient. That philosophical elements never were absent from the Reformers’ interpretation of Scripture, or from ours today, is clear, and we should not be

⁸ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Die Religion im Verhältniss zum Welterkennen und zur Sittlichkeit: Eine Grundlegung der systematischen Theologie* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1879), 126 (my translation); see also 102. See also Wilhelm Herrmann, ‘Die Metaphysik in der Theologie,’ *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Fischer-Appelt (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 4. According to Albrecht Ritschl, to say that God is absolute, *causa sui* and *finis sui* is to say nothing about *who* God is, it is ‘a purely formal concept without content,’ an object that is ‘deprived of all specific qualities.’ A. Ritschl, ‘Theology and Metaphysics: Towards Rapprochement and Defense,’ (1881), in *Three Essays*, Albrecht Ritschl, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 166. An absolute God is ‘a metaphysical idol.’ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁹ See Brian A. Gerrish, ‘Theology Within the Limits of Piety Alone: Schleiermacher and Calvin’s Doctrine of God,’ in *Reformatio Perennis: Essays on Calvin and the Reformation in Honor of Ford Lewis Battles*, ed. Brian A. Gerrish and Robert Benedetto (Eugene: Pickwick, 1981), 67–87; reprinted in Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (London: T&T Clark, 1982), 196–207.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.2.2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 41 (rev.). ‘Itaque frigidis tantum speculationibus ludunt quibus in hac quaestione insistere propositum est, quid sit Deus; quum intersit nostra potius, qualis sit, et quid eius naturae conveniat scire.’ *Institutio christianae religionis 1559*, ed. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel, *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*, vol. 3 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 3rd ed. 1967), 35.

¹¹ See for instance Luther’s commentary on Psalm 51, in *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955), vol. 12, see e.g. 339–41, on Psalm 51:4; *Weimar Ausgabe* 40.II,369,19–23 – 370,34–35.

oblivious to that fact. Moreover, the fact that Scripture itself points us in the direction of ontological (some would go further and say: metaphysical) claims is equally true.

But reaching some clarity on the intention of theology, on what theology's aim might be, is crucial, and on this point, I am convinced that its aim cannot be to establish a metaphysic or to 'revise' metaphysics – although, depending on the 'revision' which is proposed, one's hesitations might be alleviated to a considerable extent, since our more important 'battle' does not lie on the preliminary questions concerning the possibility of metaphysics in Christian theology but on the very claims that we make in relation to the heart of the matter (but of course, the two are related, and the preliminary questions should be treated in light of the heart of the matter, as Karl Barth suggested¹²).

The aim of Christian theology is to reflect on what the Christian faith is 'all about', namely: God's revelatory act toward Israel and the world, through God's Word, that is – as Christians further explicate – through God's Son, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The crucial term 'act' is significant in this statement: 'God's revelatory *act*' is what Christian theology focuses on centrally. This is not to say that 'being' is suddenly dismissed, as some may then be tempted to suggest! God's revelatory act tells us something crucial about who God *is* and how God *is* – not about 'being as such', it seems to me, but about the being *of God*, about the being *of the world* and all the creaturely realities that make this world what it is. Commenting on the fourth gospel, Thomas Aquinas wrote:

The root and fount of the knowledge of God is the Word of God, namely Christ: 'The Word of God on high is the fount of wisdom (Sir. 1:5):' But human wisdom consists in the knowledge of God. This knowledge is derived to human beings from the Word, because insofar as they participate [in] the Word of God, they know God. Hence he says: The world has not known you in this way, 'but I,' the fount of wisdom, your Word, 'have known you,' by the eternal knowledge of comprehension. [...] From

¹² 'To be truly imperious, the necessity of dogmatic prolegomena, i.e., of an explicit account of the particular way to be taken in dogmatics, must be an inner necessity grounded in the matter itself' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1* (1932), trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London–New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 51. 'In the prolegomena to dogmatics, [...] we ask concerning the Word of God as the criterion of dogmatics.' *Ibid.*, 43.

this knowledge of the Word, which is the fount and root, are derived, like streams and branches, all the knowledge of the faithful.¹³

The ‘root and fount’ of knowledge, in Christian theology, is inseparably linked to the encounter between the Word and creation. Karl Barth was in full agreement with this stance. He had no reservations with theological language about ‘essence’, including God’s ‘essence’ or the divine ‘essence’, but he was not ready to disconnect this kind of talk from God’s act: ‘What makes God who God is, the divine individuality and specificity, the *essentia* or ‘essence’ (*Wesen*) of God – we shall encounter him either at the place where God acts (*handelt*) toward us as Lord and Saviour or not at all!’¹⁴

To ask ‘who’ God is, and from there also ‘what’ God’s being is like, not as such but in relation to God’s act, is quite obviously an ontological question, and a legitimate one. But is it then also a metaphysical

¹³ *In Ioan.* c. 17, lect. 6 (n° 2267–8). Quoted in Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: University Press, 2017), 76 (rev.). Or see Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 7 (ad 1): ‘Although we cannot know in what consists the essence of God, nevertheless in this science we make use of His effects, either of nature or of grace, in place of a definition, in regard to whatever is treated of in this science concerning God [...]’: See also Origen’s opening words in his Preface to *On First Principles*: ‘All who believe and are assured that *grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*, and who know Christ to be the truth, according to his saying, *I am the truth*, derive the knowledge which leads human beings to live a good and blessed life from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ.’ Origen, *On First Principles: A Reader’s Edition*, trans. John Behr (Oxford: University Press, 2017), 5. ‘[...] God gets titles from the actions God is believed to perform for our lives.’ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, book 2, §149, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Lenka Karfiková, Scot Douglass and Johannes Zachhuber with Vít Hušek and Ladislav Chvátal (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), 91. The same is true of Cyril of Alexandria: ‘What is at stake in their works [i.e. Cyril’s and Irenaeus’s words; CC] is primarily soteriological, and their aim is to prove that the entire divine economy tends toward the filial adoption of human beings. [...] Cyril’s reflexion thus always has as its starting-point the revelation of God in God’s economy, and what is at stake is the union of the human being to the Trinity, spiritually through the presence in the human of the Holy Spirit, and bodily through the participation in the mystical eulogy (eucharist), that is in the body of Christ.’ Marie-Odile Boulnois, *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d’Alexandrie. Herméneutique, analyses philosophiques et argumentation théologique* (Paris: Institut d’études augustiniennes, 1994), 598 (my translation). Karl Barth put it in this way: ‘Nicht das Sein als solches hat die Ewigkeit, aber die Ewigkeit als solche hat das Sein in sich.’ *Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1* (Zollikon-Zurich: EVZ, 1940), 687.

¹⁴ *Church Dogmatics II/1*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, Harold Knight and J. L. M. Haire, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London-New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 261 (rev.) (for the original version see *Kirchliche Dogmatik II/1*:293).

question? An answer to this question depends, of course, on the definition of ‘metaphysics’.¹⁵ I have (very briefly) suggested one above.

Can there be a ‘Christian metaphysics’? Can there be a sort of metaphysics which is not ‘utterly uninformed by revelation’?¹⁶ Some will certainly answer affirmatively and plan to embark on this path. Certainly, some philosophical theologians will be among them, and, once again, the legitimacy of doing this is not in question. To me, however, ‘Christian metaphysics’ is an attempt at mixing oil with water, and we better leave ‘metaphysics’ to the ancient, medieval, and modern philosophical project of thinking about God as ‘first cause’, as ‘prime mover’ and ‘ultimate principle’ of reality as a whole, etc. As the French Roman-Catholic theologian Claude Geffré suggested, Christianity is the ‘religion of the gospel’, and Christian theology as a whole should aim to remain, quite centrally and decisively, a theology of the gospel.¹⁷ Some will argue that, in order for Christian theology to be a theology of the gospel, a metaphysic is required. John Betz has recently argued that, ‘without metaphysics (whether it be affirmed implicitly or explicitly, whether it comes into play as a prolegomonon or as a postlegomonon) faith is rendered absurd – a believing in fairytales [...]’.¹⁸

For reasons I have tried to articulate above (reasons that would certainly deserve much more elaborate treatments), I beg to differ. Some of the most significant Christian theologians in the modern era as well as in the premodern era have been able to articulate widely influential and sound teachings without recourse to metaphysics, and indeed at times leaving metaphysics aside. That being said, it seems crucial to me not to simply posit the final contradistinction between Christian

¹⁵ Here I disagree with Giulio Maspero’s claims: ‘The encounter with God urges one to wonder *what* this being *is* that speaks and acts in history. And this is a metaphysical question, as is the question *what* Jesus *is*.’ Giulio Maspero, ‘Life as Relation,’ 36.

¹⁶ For this expression, see David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 180. Hart is correct, it seems to me, to suggest that ‘the development of Christian thought led inevitably to the dissolution of the idea of ‘being’ as a metaphysical ‘object’ within the economy of beings’ (ibid., 138, note 1). This at least is true of the most significant Christian thinkers. Similarly, albeit less radically, Giulio Maspero sees the articulation of trinitarian doctrine ‘as the slow and laborious self-development of this new ontology, no longer merely a metaphysical theory.’ Giulio Maspero, ‘Life as Relation,’ 37. But of course ‘the idea of “being” as a metaphysical “object”’ never disappeared from the picture, even among the theologians.

¹⁷ Claude Geffré, *Le christianisme comme religion de l’Évangile* (Paris: Cerf, 2012).

¹⁸ John R. Betz, ‘After Heidegger and Marion: The Task of Christian Metaphysics Today,’ *Modern Theology* 34/4 (2018): 568 (565–597).

theology and metaphysics but to leave open the possibility of a critical dialogue between them. The point is not merely to part ways and bid farewell but to keep dialoguing and raising critical questions across the disciplines and various approaches. It is important that the disciplines keep bothering each other rather than let the other in peace.¹⁹

2. The Indispensible ‘Caesura’

What is the ‘problem’, then, with metaphysics? It has been accused, and it is still being accused, of many things, of course. I find it intriguing that even contemporary thinkers who appear to promote metaphysics admit that one of its problems may be its tendency to consider reality and its ultimate origin ‘as a seamless ontological continuum’, as David Bentley Hart put it.²⁰ Here, it is the marginalising of the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between the Creator and the creatures which is identified as the key flaw in metaphysical thought. To mitigate this problem, according to Hart, we need to turn to the ‘analogy of being’, properly construed, namely as the very opposite of any domesticating of God through a doctrine of being common to both the Creator and the creatures. The doctrine of the analogy of being, here, implies a ‘disruption’, it ‘introduces an unclosable ontological caesura’ in the place of ‘a seamless ontological continuum’. For, Hart adds, ‘there is no simple, uninterrupted ontological continuum as such between God and creation [...]’.²¹ This notion of an uninterrupted continuum between the creature and the Creator is indeed the reason for a good amount of distrust versus metaphysics in the first place, and not just among Protestants, but especially among them. Whether the analogy of being is the solution to this problem remains to be seen – certainly it may

¹⁹ See Eberhard Jüngel’s nuanced as well as firm stance in *Gott als Geheimnis des Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 6th ed. 1992), 62–63 and 145; *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (London-New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 49 and 110.

²⁰ ‘The analogia entis [...] introduces an unclosable ontological caesura into what mere metaphysics treats (quite unconsciously) as a seamless ontological continuum. And this is the interval of being that lets us *be* as the creatures we are [...]. This disruption – this infinite qualitative distinction between God and creatures – is one that, within the *ordo cognoscendi*, we must call ‘analogy’ [...]: D. B. Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest*, 103.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

appear promising if one understands this point of theological teaching in close connection with the well-known saying from the Fourth Lateran council on the ‘greater dissemblance’ (*maior dissimilitudo*) between the Creator and the creature (1215).²²

3. Theological Ontology Rather than Metaphysics

Thinking theologically about ‘being’ – not being ‘as such’, but *God’s* being and the being of *creation* – remains an indispensable task for Christian theology today. This should go without saying. But how should we proceed as we attempt to fulfil this task? Everything begins, it seems to me (and I am not alone in stating this), with God’s *act* in history. Without God’s act in history, we could not utter any genuine – but also necessarily inadequate – theological word about God’s being or the being of the world.²³ And God’s act bears a name, in Christian theology: Jesus of Nazareth, God’s word uttered in the power of the Spirit, God as ‘Immanuel’. That God is ‘with’ God’s people, that God does not wish to be without God’s people, is arguably one of the key assertions in both the Old and the New Testament, a statement found in some of its most decisive texts (see Exod. 3:12; 6:6–7; see of course the gospel according to Matthew, which, significantly, is framed as a whole by the word ‘Emmanuel’, in Matt. 1:23 and 28:20).²⁴

As soon as we touch on these central features of the biblical narrative, we find ourselves in very different waters, it seems to me, than the usual metaphysical waters. We find ourselves doing theology, right

²² ‘[...] between the Creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of nothing a greater dissimilarity between them.’ Denzinger, §806; *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 231–32. See, however, Eberhard Jüngel’s penetrating critique, on behalf of a primarily (but not exclusively) kataphatic understanding of theology, of the Lateran IV version of the analogy of being, in *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 282–95.

²³ John Zizioulas puts it this way: ‘For Israel, truth in general, and faith in God more specifically, are not a matter of theory for they do not come from observation (*theoria*) of the cosmos. Truth comes through history, and from God’s interaction with the people of Israel and thus through their experience and history.’ John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (London–New York: T&T Clark, 2008) 42–43.

²⁴ The fourth gospel then goes further and points to a being ‘in’ or ‘among’ the other, rather than simply ‘with’; see John 14:20 or 17:21; see 17:12 for ‘with/among them’/ μετ’ αὐτῶν.

from the start – which of course does not forbid letting ourselves being questioned by philosophy as well by metaphysics. Here freedom and love, love and freedom are recognised as belonging ‘to the foundation of being itself’,²⁵ or rather, as I would suggest putting it so as to be less general or abstract, as expressing the very heart of who *God* is.

To sustain itself, still today, Christian theology needs to let itself be nourished ‘in green pastures’ and refreshed ‘beside still waters’ (Psalm 23:2), the pastures and waters of the Scriptures that beg for our attention and our interpretation: *there* is its food, its sustenance, its starting point, not just as a closed (or, better, open) book, not as an immediate, ‘graspable’ divine word, but as a witness to God’s act and God’s being (or vice-versa; God’s act and God’s being, I would argue, are co-original, without priority of one over the other, even logically speaking). God, as confessed by Christians and by Jews, is the One who bends down to the world because God hears the cry coming from God’s people (Exod. 2:23–25). This ‘bending down’, this ‘hearing’, is what many rightly miss in traditional metaphysics, since metaphysics quite often focuses on causality and on going up the causal ladder, step after step, in order to attain a first cause (see already Plato’s *Symposium*, 211b–c) that is immutable and thus incapable of such ‘bending down’. Instead of a metaphysics of a ‘first’, ‘unmoved cause’, instead of abstract debates that turn on substance metaphysics, we need a theological ontology orientated and shaped right from the start (this entire discussion has much to do with *where* we begin as theologians) by the triune God’s life-giving and liberating act and by the human quest for the One true source of life and meaning. I wish to end by sketching the possible contours of such a theological ontology.

4. What Kind of Trinitarian Theological Ontology?

The idea that Christian theology is inherently trinitarian, that it does not merely become trinitarian toward the end or at the very end of the presentation of its content, but that it is trinitarian right from the start, is still being debated – and that is not a bad sign, for we need to ask ourselves what it means to begin straightaway with a trinitarian outlook, and how we may (or may not) do this.

²⁵ G. Maspero, ‘Life as Relation,’ 42.

Here are some of the contours of the kind of trinitarian theological ontology which I think may be promising today:

a) We cannot retreat to a 'pre-covenantal' God, that is, to 'a God' who does not commit to being God 'for' God's people, and who intends that God's people will respond in a corresponding manner. This, of course, is another reason why thinking in abstract ways about 'being as such' may not deserve a place within Christian theology proper (even as, to repeat, it may still be of interest, and with complete legitimacy, in the context of various kinds of philosophical theologies).

b) A responsible Christian trinitarian ontology centres on the sending of the Son by God the Father, in the power of the Spirit, without severing God's act *ad extra* from God's own life, but also without simply collapsing or confusing the two. Consequently, the person of the Logos cannot be considered independently from the historical figure Jesus of Nazareth – even as they cannot be conflated (the Logos was not eternally 'enfleshed', even as we may claim that the Logos was eternally meant to assume human flesh). This is another radical revision, to say the least, of traditional notions of God or of divinity. God's own Word and Spirit are addressed, sent out, beyond God's own life, thereby creating and recreating everything that is not God. The Old and the New Testament render witness to this ecstatic movement, from God outward. This ecstatic movement has something to do, not just with God's act but with who God is.

c) God's own life is a life of plenitude, from all eternity. In that regard, God does not 'need' the world or any special partnership with anybody. Such statements are puzzling to some, and one can understand why, but these claims remain important, not simply to preserve God's freedom 'from' the world, but precisely to express as best we can God's freedom 'for' the world. God's relation to the world is a relation characterised by grace, and so, quite inescapably, by freedom – certainly not by any necessity that might work as a compelling force acting upon God. The legitimate puzzlement may be related to the conviction that God's freedom has nothing to do with arbitrariness, as if God could just as well have decided *not* to create the world, or as if God had many different options, so that, after some deliberations, God opted for this option rather than all the other possibilities. Although the word 'necessity' may be too strong here, Christian theology needs to show how creation befits the very being of God as love that constantly flows or circulates within God's own life as well as without.

d) How do we know that God's love flows within God's own life? Is this not pure speculation (as Rudolf Bultmann and others would have argued²⁶)? No! Significant gospel narratives – and not simply in the fourth gospel – point in this direction: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17; οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα; see also Mark 1:11 where, very interestingly, the Father directly addresses Jesus his Son: σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα). In passages such as this one, it is as if a bit (and probably *more* than a bit) of the veil is being lifted before us: something *decisive* concerning God's own life, concerning the relation between the Father and the Son, is disclosed to us. It is in such passages that our (always tentative and provisional) thinking about and indeed our faith in God, i.e. in God's triune life as a life of shared love, finds always anew its horizon. But it would be a grave mistake, it seems to me, to focus on these passages to the detriment of God's involvement in our history in order to redeem, i.e. to liberate, enslaved human beings and creatures. There is more than a grain of truth in Kornelis Miskotte's claim: 'The Bible shows no great interest in substances, properties, characteristics, principles. Instead, it attends to what has happened; is happening. It matters that something happens. [...] God's being can be found nowhere else than in what God does.'²⁷ And yet Miskotte goes too far, for indeed the Bible shows an abiding interest in the 'characteristics' and 'properties' of the God of Israel, who also manifests Godself as the Father of Jesus Christ.

Christian theology must do better than bifurcate into speculations concerning God's immanent, triune life, on the one hand, and God's intent of liberation for God's people and God's creation, on the other. We need to find or create bridges between theologians, correlating God's liberating action for and in the world with God's own life in Godself. And we need to make it clear that the centre of gravity of Christian theology does not lie in God's own life as such, but precisely in the *sharing*, by God, of God's own life with God's people and with creation: the heart of it all lies in God's freeing and life-giving act in history. The story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, alongside many other texts from

²⁶ See for instance Rudolf Bultmann, 'The Question of Natural Revelation,' in Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 90–118.

²⁷ Kornelis H. Miskotte, *Biblical ABCs: The Basics of Christian Resistance*, trans. Eleonora Hof and Collin Cornell (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic/Lexington Books, 2021), 94.

the Scriptures, may help us begin to understand this and find ways to articulate what needs to remain closely correlated in Christian theology. In sum, Christian theology should not lose sight of its proper theme. If ontological aspects undeniably are part of this theme, metaphysical questions concerning ‘being as such’ are best left to the philosophers who wish or who are called to pursue such questions.

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