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**The use and function of mystery within contemporary systematic theology with special reference to the doctrine of providence in Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles**

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The use and function of mystery within contemporary systematic theology with special reference to the doctrine of providence in Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles.

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For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and Religious Studies

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## **Abstract**

The contention of this thesis is that God is fundamentally mysterious and that this is displayed clearly through the doctrine of providence. The implication of this thesis is that mystery is an inescapable feature of Christian theology. This will be demonstrated through the following sections.

Firstly, by contrasting three contemporary attempts to survey mystery, I will suggest a basic division between 'comprehensible' and 'inscrutable' mysteries. Inscrutable mysteries (subdivided into 'ontological and 'epistemological') will form the primary type of mystery to be explored throughout the research.

Secondly, applying the refined sense of mystery, I will construct a dialogue between Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles to explore their different uses of mystery within their respective doctrines of providence. Both theologians have written extensively about providence and use 'mystery' throughout their work. I have selected providence as a doctrinal focus because it is one of the pre-eminent places in theology, in which we might expect God to be most accessible and yet we find the clouds of unknowing most impenetrable. Within and outside of their formulations of providence, both Barth and Wiles frequently employ mystery in differing and interesting ways and this dialogue will illustrate their differing theological backgrounds and the possibilities for constructive uses of mystery in theology.

Building on the earlier sections the final chapter makes constructive formal and substantive proposals. The methodological portion advances mystery as neither 'another starting point' or the disappointing end to a failed theology but a basic mode and style of theological construction. The substantive portion proposes the use of mystery as a defence against idolatry with implications for contextual theologies.

This research will be within systematic theology and methods will include critical theological and philosophical analysis. I believe that this thesis makes three distinctive and original contributions to theological knowledge. Firstly, there have been very few attempts to 'map' types of mystery in this extensive way and this thesis provides stable terminology for the theological task. Secondly, I know of no constructed dialogue between Barth and Wiles.

Thirdly, mystery is a ubiquitous and underdeveloped theme of theology that is placed at the beginning of this thesis rather than the end.

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# Chapter One

## 1. Introduction

‘With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been inducements; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote.’<sup>1</sup>

The contention of this paper is that within Christianity, God is fundamentally and inscrutably mysterious. God is not some supreme creature but wholly other; an unfathomable, superabundant being who infinitely exceeds our creaturely comprehension.<sup>2</sup> To ‘know’ God is unlike knowledge of anything else; theological knowledge is not gathered and possessed but received and known *as mystery*. Therefore, mystery is an inescapable feature of Christian theology.

‘Mystery’ is a term commonly applied to the central doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity, in addition, I propose that this divine mystery is clearly demonstrated through the doctrine of providence. In ‘*Moby Dick*’, Ishmael’s ‘everlasting itch’ drives him to the ends of the earth to find the White Whale, so Melville describes a wider human hunger to uncover hidden things. In contemporary culture the internet has provided fertile ground for conspiracies as dark cores of unknown unknowns invite speculative attempts to peek and peer into the truth. Sometimes the less that is known, the attempts to describe the object become more verbose. In a conspiracy theory once, the White Whale is landed – once the secret is

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Superabundant’ is a compound term in which the ‘super’ accentuates the quality of ‘abundance’ to a highly positive degree. Whereas ‘abundance’ may indeed be diminished, ‘superabundance’ communicates the sense of the overwhelming infinite divine quality. The term is not biblical although ‘περισσεῖαν’ is translated as ‘abundance’ and ‘superfluity’ in Romans 5.17, 2Cor 10.15 and Jas 1.21. ‘Superfluity’ tends to be used more negatively to refer to excess that is ungainly and grotesque. ‘Superabundant’ term has a long theological history. For example, Athanasius uses the term to describe the Father’s creation of the Son out of the ‘superabundance’ of his power. Maximus the Confessor is translated as writing that the natural properties of humanity are overcome by the ‘superabundance’ of God’s glory. In more contemporary theology, Barth explains the ‘superabundance’ of divine being as the possibility of connection between creation and God. All these uses are positive and refer to an inexhaustible excess which provokes wonder and awe. St Maximus the Confessor ‘Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God’ *Philokalia*, ed. St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth accessed <https://archive.org/details/Philokalia-TheCompleteText> accessed 10/1/18. Athanasius, ‘De Synodis’, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 4*. Trans. John Henry Newman and Archibald Robertson edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Trans. T.H.L Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight, J.L.M Haire (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) p. 673

revealed - the mystery is dismissed.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, in Christianity when God makes himself 'known' or in the language of providence 'acts', we *know God as mystery*.

Despite the centrality of mystery to a Christian theology of God, the concept remains underdeveloped within contemporary systematics, failing to generate even a listing in the contents page of recent dictionaries of theology.<sup>4</sup> The problem for mystery is that the very intriguing element of concealment also makes the question very difficult to address with any authority or precision. Some theologians seem embarrassed by the 'failure' that mystery represents, others allege that 'mystery mongering' is a form of ecclesiastical abuse designed to retain power; others prefer the path of silence taking Wittgenstein's advice that 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.<sup>5</sup> These complaints will reverberate throughout the paper but briefly illustrating them at the outset will help to establish our context.

### **1.1 Mystery as the failure of theology**

Terrance Tiessen's ambitious attempt to map varying formulations of providence begins by noting the attendant difficulties of the doctrine before making this incredible refusal of mystery:

'I admit that God is beyond our *complete* comprehension. If we fully understood him, he would not be God, or we would be too! On the other hand, I am very reluctant to give up and appeal to "mystery" too quickly. The mind stretching philosophical and theological work is necessary if we are to practice our faith intelligently as God wishes us to do'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> That is accepting a literalist version of the White Whale rather than a reading that understands the beast to be a facet of Ishmael's strained mental health.

<sup>4</sup> Evidenced by the absence of a contents listing in Alister McGrath, *Introduction to Christian Theology 5<sup>th</sup> edition*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). David Ford, *The Modern Theologians Third Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983) or finally a volume you might expect to make use of mystery Graham Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001). This is a necessarily limited overview but does underline the absence of the concept from so much modern theology.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. CK Ogden (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 108. The next chapter on Epistemological Mystery will engage this issue in some detail.

<sup>6</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p. 18.

Here, mystery is clearly a concept that comes at the close of theological endeavour, and an early appeal to mystery is intellectual laxity. William Lane Craig states this approach even more forcefully:

‘For many Christians, easy appeal to mystery has become a substitute for the labor of *hard thinking*. (sic) But such an appeal is of little use against Christian theologians who are fatalists and it will hardly convince non-Christians philosophers who on the basis of theological fatalism reject as unintelligible the Christian concept of God...such an appeal ought to be made as a last resort after much *hard thinking*.’<sup>7</sup>

Note ‘hard thinking’ is repeated twice; little substance is given to this phrase, but the implication is that an appeal to mystery is a type of lazy theology. Craig suggests that such indolence causes two problems: firstly, an internal theological problem of discipline, whereby fatalists cannot be properly combatted and secondly Christianity is unable to communicate effectively and is brought into disrepute in the apologetic arena. To remedy this faineance, mystery is the ‘last resort’ – in other words, the need to appeal to mystery is a signification of a failed theology. I detect a certain arrogance to these words or at least an unhealthy disregard for those theological predecessors not blessed with such a prodigious ability to ‘think hard’. It is astonishing hubris for Craig to imply that Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin and Karl Barth just needed to ‘think harder’ rather than appeal to mystery.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, this is not disagreement borne of ‘hard thinking’ rather it represents a jocular dismissal, in captivity to enlightenment era scepticism. To disagree is honourable; to ridicule is to pretend an insult is a replacement for argument. William Alston describes this attitude most sharply:

‘Contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion exhibits a considerable degree of confidence in its ability to determine what God is like how to

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<sup>7</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000) pp. 15-16. Italics added.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Mystery’ was an important concept for Augustine especially in relation to faith, for example, ‘I saw that many passages in these books which at one time struck me as absurdities must be referred to the profundity of mystery. St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Trans. FJ Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), p. 101. Also, St Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, Trans. A Haddan (New York: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012) pp. 298-301. Calvin applies mystery near the end of his section on providence, see John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Trans. H. Beveridge (Peabody Massachusetts: Hendricksons Publishers, 1998), pp. 136-7. We will deal in a more concentrated manner with Calvin in the next chapter and Barth throughout the paper.

construe his basic attributes...no one thinks we can attain a comprehensive knowledge of God's nature and doings. But on many crucial points there seems to be a widespread confidence in our ability to determine exactly how things are with God.'<sup>9</sup>

Alston's critique can well be applied to Craig's confidence in the power of 'hard thinking'. However, Craig's attitude is not new. For example, in the infamous diatribe, '*Christianity is not Mysterious*' John Toland railed that mysteries should be understood in the Greco-Roman sense of something requiring 'special revelation' which is thereafter clear. This has been transformed so that 'it is inconceivable in themselves, however clearly revealed'.<sup>10</sup> Toland is not denying the truth of Christianity, instead he attempts to revert to the reality of faith 'so that which is revealed in Religion as it is most useful and necessary, so it must and may be easily comprehended and found as consistent with our common notions as what we know of wood and stone...'<sup>11</sup> Note, the admission of special revelation and the simultaneous reduction of there being anything distinctly 'special' about it, so that 'revelation' must be consonant with common notion, that is, falling into pre-determined (though not specified) common parameters of knowledge.

## **1.2 Mystery as priestly manipulation**

Mystery is not only described as misconstrued or lazy theology; Hume's bellicose rejection of mystery is suspicious of those who use the concept. It is difficult to match the angry grandiloquence of David Hume without direct quotation:

'For besides the unavoidable incoherencies which must be reconciled and adjusted; one may safely affirm that all popular theology, especially the scholastic has a kind of appetite for absurdity and contradiction. If that theology went not beyond reason and common sense, her doctrines would appear too easy and familiar. Amazement must of necessity be raised: Mystery affected.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> William Alston, 'Two Cheers for Mystery' *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* ed. by A. Dole and A. Chignell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 99

<sup>10</sup> John Toland, *Christianity is not Mysterious, Second Edition*, (London, 1696), p. 72. (Updated spelling and grammar).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (London; Adam & Charles Black, 1956), p. 54

This is quite different from Craig's point; mystery is not generated through a lack of thought but deliberately established to confound the gullible, subsequently the 'amazement raised' through sacred mysteries affords power to the priestly office that administers such mysteries. The weight of this quite extraordinary accusation owes more to Hume's eloquence than to the substantive quality of criticism offered for he declines to substantiate his accusation. In the next chapter we will engage with Frank Kirkpatrick's related claim that humans 'desire' mystery in their religion.

### **1.3 The thesis amidst objections**

These collective complaints against mystery may explain the reticence of some theologians to adopt the concept. It is especially difficult to argue against Hume's accusation of ecclesiastical abuse of power; as soon as the complaint is given reply, one risks confirming his allegation. At the outset, we must honestly acknowledge the danger of abuse and seek to approach the task of theology prayerfully, repent regularly and humbly seek to speak faithfully of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Whether this satisfies Hume's complaint, I cannot be the judge. In response to our critics of mystery, the contention of this thesis is to reject both the resignation of silence, the fear of embarrassing failure and instead attempt to establish a robust concept of mystery through the prism of the Christian doctrine of providence. I contend that mystery is not something to be ignored but proclaimed; not swept under the carpet but displayed on a mantel; that we do not know, that mystery confronts, undermines and fills us is not evidence of an intellectual abyss but a positive representation of the superabundance of God as the subject of Christian theology.

This introductory chapter will attempt the following. Firstly, to provide a justification for this research and specify the original contributions to theological knowledge that are made therein. Secondly, to outline the methodology used throughout the paper. Thirdly, the bulk of the chapter will be devoted to the development of foundational terminology to equip the rest of this research.

One of our initial difficulties is that the term 'mystery' is used broadly in a variety of contexts; from the popular fiction of Agatha Christie novels to the Holy Trinity. Even within theology, 'mystery' is used disparately by authors across the theological landscape. In this preliminary chapter, we must attempt to capture something of the diversity of approaches

without generating unmanageably large amounts of data. To attempt to control our material we will review three attempts to map the contours of mystery, to glean their differing conceptions before attempting to formulate our own distinctive terminology that will guide the rest of the research. Our three contributors, Bernard Verkamp, Stephen Boyer and Christopher Hall (co-authors) and William Wainwright are not famous names in the theological world, nor have they written extensively about mystery. Rather these authors were selected because they attempt summaries of the way that 'mystery' is used.<sup>13</sup> Finally, these authors have been selected because they fall within our 'contemporary' time frame and fall broadly under the heading of systematic theologians. This extended discussion will be followed by a much shorter explanation of the way that we will be using the term providence throughout this research. Finally, this chapter will outline the rest of research.

## **2.1 Justification of the question.**

This research seeks to bring two theological elements together; mystery and providence. 'God moves in mysterious ways' is a colloquial cliché, yet these elements are rarely examined together within theological literature.<sup>14</sup> Although they are related themes, they will not be treated as identical twins; mystery is the primary focus of this research and providence provides a doctrinal framework within which to consider it.

I have selected these two normally separate areas for the following reasons: firstly, mystery remains an underdeveloped area of theological research. Karl Barth once remarked that an entire 'third dimension of mystery' has been lost to recent Protestantism and the newer related philosophies.<sup>15</sup> Although frequently hyperbolic, Barth is a careful writer and a dimension is no small thing to *lose*, for dimensions form fundamental, significant parts of existence like space and time. What Barth is suggesting is that, without incorporating the

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this point underlines the underdevelopment of the theme of mystery within systematic theology.

<sup>14</sup> When these themes are treated together, providence tends to get the fuller treatment. For example, John Webster writes 'Providence is mystery' but unusually does not actually define how he is using 'mystery'. Katherine Sonderegger employs the term liberally; 'The encounter of the Triune God with creation is itself the sovereign presence and act of God; the *Relatio* of God to the world is itself God. This is the holy mystery of the provident God'. Again, Sonderegger uses mystery repeatedly but does not really attempt to define it. John Webster, 'On the Theology of Providence', Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Providence', *The Providence of God*, eds. Francesca A Murphy, Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 164/157

<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1.1*, Trans. G.W Bromiley (Peabody: Hendricksons Publishers, 2010) (original 1936), p. xiv. This attack is directed particularly at German University Theology – Barth does not specify what the other two dimensions are. I understand 'third dimension' to be a rhetorical point based on spatial awareness, so that if one could not perceive a third dimension in space, they would be fundamentally misunderstanding and unable to navigate the world.



dimension of mystery, theologians and philosophers miss something significant about the whole picture of life and faith. The choice of the word 'dimension' is also significant, for a dimension cannot be added as an after-thought. Dimensions are structure our perceptual world; dimensions form the foundation of our thought, not the final flourish.<sup>16</sup> Barth's suggestion implies that mystery should form part of the starting point for theology, not a simple conclusion. One of the original contributions to this field is to explore what theology looks like if mystery is embraced and expected at the outset rather than a signification of a failed theology. It would be erroneous to suggest that discussion of mystery is absent from contemporary theology. Indeed since 2010 there has been a revival of interest in the subject, especially within protestant evangelicalism.<sup>17</sup> I do not believe that these recent efforts have exhausted the subject of mystery and expect that the process of examining mystery through the prism of providence will provide an original voice.

Alongside the subject of mystery, the doctrine of providence has long been neglected. In 1559, Calvin complained of the neglect of this doctrine,<sup>18</sup> and in 1963, Langdon Gilkey decried the 'theological lip service' paid to providence that fails to substantiate the meaning of God's relation to creation. This does not mean that theological constructions of providence do not exist, but that the nature and content of providence is assumed and then ensconced within a related issue.<sup>19</sup> Since the 1960s there have been many revisionist efforts of the doctrine of providence from process theologians, open theists and science-theologians, alongside strident repetitions of traditional formulations; yet none of these efforts have received widespread consensus or assent.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of this paper is not to

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<sup>16</sup> Unequivocal in the original German; this strong reading is supported by the use of the term 'third dimension' by which I understand Barth to be picturing the distinction between two and three-dimensional perception.

<sup>17</sup> For example, GK Beale and Benjamin Gladd's *'Hidden but now Revealed' A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), Frank Kirkpatrick, *'Mystery and the Agency of God'* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) and Stephen Boyer and Christopher Hall, *'The Mystery of God'* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) and *'The Forgotten Christ; Exploring the Majesty and Mystery of God incarnate'* ed. Stephen Clark (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007) and John Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *The incarnation of God; The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway Publications, 2015), Hans Boersma *'Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). N.B Boersma is a Protestant teaching at Regents College, Vancouver but writing about Catholic theology.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 114

<sup>19</sup> Langdon Gilkey, 'The concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology', *Journal of Religion*, Vol.43, (1963), pp. 171-190.

<sup>20</sup> For Science-Theologians the question of providence is vital, see John C. Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence: God's interaction with the World*, (London: SPCK, 1989) and Thomas Tracey, 'Theologies of Divine Action', *Oxford Handbook of Science and Religion*, ed. Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and the

construct another new formulation of providence but to consider how mystery affects and is displayed in this most difficult doctrine. Kröetke's lament is instructive:

'The doctrine of the providence of God stands today as a particularly difficult perhaps impossible part of Christian dogmatics, even though it remains a central, largely unexamined part of Christian piety'.<sup>21</sup>

In response to Kröetke, I propose to ask the question of what an 'impossible' Christian doctrine is; for it strikes me that some of the most significant doctrines are impossible; including the Incarnation and the Trinity. What if we started from the perspective of expecting God and thus divine action to be 'impossible' in our terms? What overarching and guiding principle would a doctrine of divine action that was 'possible' have to conform to? At this early stage I do not wish to presuppose the answer, but the question demands exploration and I expect that this exploration will offer an original contribution to theological knowledge.

Although we have established that both mystery and providence are areas of theology that have been underdeveloped, this does not necessarily justify their pairing. Building on my introductory remarks I contend that providence provides the perfect framework in which to consider mystery. I propose that providence, understood as the action of God in creation, provides the perfect locus in which to examine and study God. In an utterly unique fashion this revelation in action does not exhaust God but reveals the one who is qualitatively other, quantitatively superabundant being/nonbeing that is beyond total human comprehension or apprehension. The core contention of this thesis is that within providential acts God is revealed *as* mystery.

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introductory work Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion, a new introduction 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). For process theologians see John B Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) and Norman Pittenger, *God's way with Men: a Study of the Relationship between God and Man, Providence, 'Miracle' and Prayer* (Eugene: WIPF and Stock, 2000) and finally Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Leicester, IVP, 1993) for a reassertion of a traditional Calvinist model.

<sup>21</sup> Wolf Kröetke, Review of Reinhold Bernhardt, *Was heisst 'Handeln Gottes'? Theologische Literaturzeitung* 125: 1190–3. cited in Charles Wood, 'Providence', *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. J. Webster, K. Torrance, I. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 93.

## 2.2 Personal rationale

This research originated as a deeply personal question. As an Anglican priest researching alongside the practice of pastoral work, I have no pretence of some imagined neutrality. I do not understand Theology as metaphysical gymnastics but rather as the Psalmist intones, the search for 'truth in the innermost parts'. Though research has refined it, the original question concerned how I could portend to speak of faith as both intellectual truth and a guide for life when I failed to understand the central tenets of my own religion. Despite this lack of understanding, I have found myself not grasping at faith but rather in Rahner's phrase to be 'confronted by the Holy mystery'.<sup>22</sup> This confrontation of faith cannot be refused, so that I find myself 'forced to reach beyond and above myself because we are grasped from above and beyond by the one.'<sup>23</sup>

## 3. Methodology

Our main interlocutors for this research will be Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Maurice Wiles (1923-2005). I have chosen these two theologians because of their significance in the landscape of contemporary theology, their extensive writing on providence, abiding interest in mystery and the lack of previous dialogue between these disparate figures. A giant in 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, Barth's interest in mystery is evident from his early '*Romerbrief*' and the '*Church Dogmatics*'. This is confirmed through the secondary literature from Eberhard Jüngel to William Stacy Johnson.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, Wiles is a less common choice and has been afforded far less attention. However, his theological career was distinguished, he held some of the most senior theological positions in England, from chairing the Anglican Doctrine Commission, to the Professor of Christian Doctrine at Kings College to Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford.<sup>25</sup> Through '*Remaking Christian Doctrine*' and as one of the lead authors of the controversial, '*Myth of God Incarnate*', Wiles provides a clear example of contemporary liberal theology. Mystery is important to Wiles' work and indeed forms the title of one of his

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV*, Trans. K Smyth, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) p. 54

<sup>23</sup> TF Torrance, *Karl Barth: Introduction to Early Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 1962) p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> See Eberhard Jüngel *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: WMB Eerdmans Publishing, 1983) and William Stacey Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Foundations of Postmodern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

<sup>25</sup> John Macquarrie, 'The Rev. Professor Maurice Wiles', <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/the-rev-professor-maurice-wiles-225332.html> and unattributed obituary <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1491502/The-Rev-Professor-Maurice-Wiles.html> [accessed 31/3/15]

works *'Faith and the Mystery of God'*. Both Barth and Wiles use the term extensively but in disparate ways. The different forms in which these interlocutors use the term will form much of the body of this research. This is the first time that these two authors have been brought into dialogue which furnishes an original contribution to theological dialogue.

This research is a piece of systematic theology. There will be no practical research methodologies that aim to gather quantitative or qualitative data. Instead, all research will be produced through study of other theologians and scripture. The question that naturally ensues is what constitutes the distinctive marks of a systematic theology? In brief, David Ford defines the traditional topics of systematic theology as 'God and revelation, pre-destination, creation and providence, human being, sin and evil, Christ, atonement, the Holy Spirit and Christian living, the church, ministry, sacraments and eschatology'.<sup>26</sup> These topics are drawn from scripture, philosophy, the historic creeds and traditions of the church and the modern addition, under the influence of Pentecostal and Liberationist theologians, 'experience'. Systematics is an inclusive discipline, so that there is no such thing as a 'pure' systematic theology. For example, systematic discussion of the person of Christ must bear some reference to biblical study. Similarly, systematic theology does not exclude the influence of philosophy or philosophical theology; indeed, the disciplines often overlap.<sup>27</sup> Flint and Rea define 'philosophical theology' as primarily aimed at theoretical understanding of the relationship between God and God's relationship to the world and things in the world.<sup>28</sup> The classic issues of providence; time, governance and free will are remarkably similar to Flint and Rea's admittedly broad definition. Finally, John Webster suggests that systematic theology is characterised by a concern for the 'coherence, scope and unity of theology'.<sup>29</sup> The study of mystery poses fundamental questions about the unity and coherence of theology. Indeed, the question of coherence will highlight a distinct difference between our two main interlocutors. Regarding the scope of this paper, we will not be asking direct questions about the application of this theology for pastoral utility or its relevance to the apologetic arena, although it is my hope that discussion of the divine

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<sup>26</sup> David Ford, 'Introduction', *The Modern Theologians*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Flint and Michael Rea, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. T. Flint and M. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> John Webster, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 1.

mystery will suggest implications for practical outworking, even if these are not directly addressed.

One of the key challenges of systematic theology is how to speak of the whole landscape of theology whilst addressing a particular component.<sup>30</sup> Experience in time necessitates reading books sequentially. Contents pages begin with prolegomena and conclude with eschatology. This can imply several errors. Firstly, sequential ordering wrongly implies that topics are only related to the neighbouring items. Secondly, sequential order forces a type of epistemic foundationalism, suggesting that topics are stacked on top of other topics like a tower. The problem with the tower analogy is that if any one block fails, the tower tumbles. To counter these difficulties, I propose to envisage the 'system' of systematic theology rather more like a spider's web in which everything is interconnected. In a web system, some strands are more important than others yet if any strand is moved, the entire web is affected.<sup>31</sup> The advantage of a web system is that coherence can be maintained whilst drawing on multiple voice and methodologies rather than relying on any one authoritative source. Therefore, the term 'systematic' does not imply an inflexible arrangement of theological topics or a single methodology but a desire to develop an ever-greater picture of the divine that our words strain to contain. This is particularly significant because providence is a doctrine that has a direct impact on multitudinous other doctrinal areas. This thesis, we adopt a 'web' analogy to explore our interlocutors use of mystery primarily through their explicit formulation of providence but at points it will be necessary to branch into other doctrines at points where providence is only implicit.

In *'Types of Christian Theology'*, Hans Frei suggests criteria to distinguish between theologies that ignore the ordinary appellations (Catholic/Protestant/Orthodox, Conservative/Liberal etc) to describe how different types of theology relate to modernity. If we imagine a straight line punctuated by 5 points, at one end, philosophical description is primary, so that Christian self-description is subjugated to the demands of philosophical categories. At the other extreme, Christianity must continue to express itself in orthodox

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<sup>30</sup> Barth describes theology as a landscape in Umbria or Tuscany in which even the distant perspectives are clear. If we speak of a feature of the landscape, how are we to describe the sweep of land? Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses*, Trans E.G. Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (Eugene: Wipf and Stock publishers, 2005) p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> We will not push this analogy to question from whence the web is spun or whether some strands are more significant.

forms without any need to address any questions raised in the last 2000 years.<sup>32</sup> My research will be conducted as a piece of Christian theology and makes no pretensions to religious neutrality. Instead, this self-conscious prejudice is closer to Frei's description of theology type 4, so here priority is given to Christian self-description, but this self-description must continually be rethought and rearticulated in light of the questions raised by modernity.<sup>33</sup> Fundamentally this self-consciously chosen preference is part of the hermeneutical cycle as envisaged by Hans Georg Gadamer. By rejecting the possibility of coming without pre-judgements, Gadamer re-configures prejudice. Preferring the Germanic meaning of prejudice as 'a judgement rendered before all elements have been examined',<sup>34</sup> pre-judgements are not negative weaknesses of an interpretive scheme that must be shed. Instead the embrace of one's own prejudice is an inevitable consequence of our historical rootedness, for 'history does not belong to us, we belong to it'.<sup>35</sup> Gadamer's concern taken from Heidegger is to gaze on things 'as they are'. To do this, one approaches the object to be interpreted and through the revolutions of the hermeneutic circle tests whether the prejudices reflect the reality of the object. To use Gadamer's clearest example, if one misinterprets a single word in a textual context, the word will not make sense in the context and eventually the whole textual context will reshape the prejudiced understanding of the individual word. The reader is then required to approach interpretation in an open fashion, recognising one's own prejudices, acknowledging the potentially tyrannous influence of unrecognised prejudice and testing oneself against the thing as it is in itself. For our purposes, we begin from the prejudiced hypothesis that God is fundamentally mysterious and that this is most ably demonstrated by the claims and outworking of the doctrine of providence. This prejudice will be continually examined through our theological, philosophical dialogue and recourse to experience and scripture.

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<sup>32</sup> Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (London: Yale University Press, 1992) pp. 19-55. The image of the 'line punctuated at 5 points is taken from Ford's *Modern Theologians*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> In the language of the Anglican ordinal, 'to proclaim afresh in each generation'.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, Second Edition*, Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D Marshall, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975) p. 270. Gadamer here rejects the Latin and French versions of prejudice meaning 'to disadvantage or harm'. Gadamer argues that this negative connotation was brought in through the Enlightenment, yet whilst he ably demonstrates Enlightenment conceptual distaste of prejudice (especially in Kant) he does not argue the positive case that prejudice was understood in a positive manner prior to the Enlightenment.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

Our question concerns contemporary systematic theology which falls broadly within the modern era. Without lengthy excursus on when the dates dividing pre-modern, modern and postmodern epochs begin and end, we will consider this to begin roughly at 1918, from the end of the First World War until the present.<sup>36</sup> Grounding this discussion in a particular historical period is helpful for three primary reasons. Firstly, if late modern writers have asserted one consistent theme, it is that theology does not exist in a vacuum but originates from a particular historical and cultural context. Questions raised now about the relationship of mystery and providence are different from those that concerned Aquinas' contemporaries in the Middle Ages. The doctrine of providence is concerned with the governing relationship of God to the world; a doctrine that raises acute questions in an age where expanding technological mastery has elevated scientists to the position of cultural authority once held by the church and philosophers.<sup>37</sup> Although it is a common song of theologians to decry enlightenment optimism and proclaim the death of modernity, a ruination signified by the horrors of the First Great War and the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, evidence of the death of such optimism is more mixed than some are willing to concede.<sup>38</sup> The questions pursued in this thesis are influenced by the modern-

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<sup>36</sup> Following the lead of David Ford in *'The Modern Theologians'*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> C.f. Henry Gee, a senior editor for journal *Nature*, 'TV programmes on science pursue a line that's often cringe-makingly reverential. Switch on any episode of *Horizon*, and the mood lighting, doom-laden music and Shakespearean voiceover convince you that you are entering the Houses of the Holy – somewhere where debate and dissent are not so much not permitted as inconceivable. If there are dissenting views, they aren't voiced by an interviewer, but by other scientists, and "we" (the great unwashed) can only sit back and watch uncomprehending as if the contenders are gods throwing thunderbolts at one another. If the presenters are scientists themselves, or have some scientific knowledge, be they Bill Oddie or David Attenborough, their discourse is one of monologue rather than argument, received wisdom rather than doubt... Why is this? The answer, I think, is that those who are scientists, or who pretend to be scientists, cling to the mantle of a kind of religious authority. And as anyone who has tried to comment on religion has discovered, there is no such thing as criticism. There is only blasphemy.' Henry Gee, 'Science: the religion that must not be questioned', <https://www.theguardian.com/science/occams-corner/2013/sep/19/science-religion-not-be-questioned> [accessed 12/4/18]

<sup>38</sup> Trumpeting the death of modernity in 1996, 'As we approach the end of the twentieth century, modernity is in radical decline. Its legitimating myths are no longer believed with any conviction'. J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it used to be*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995) p. 25. More complex but similarly convinced of the passing of modernity, Habermas can write 'modernity is dominant but dead'. Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib, 'Modernity vs. Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, No. 22, (Winter, 1981), pp. 3-14. The truth is probably more mixed than postmodern iconoclasts wants to admit. Take a wary Moltmann for example, expressing both the horrors of modernity, listing the subjugation of Africa, environmental abuse, two world wars and Stalin's Gulag Archipelago before acknowledging the continued hubris of human endeavour expressed through Expo 2000, Jürgen Moltmann, 'Progress and Abyss: Remembrances of the Future of the Modern World' *The Future of Hope*, ed. M.Volf and W.Katerberg (Grand Rapids: WMB Eerdmans, 2004), p. 14-15. We might also consider the recent 'New Atheist' movement to be a re-assertion of confident enlightenment rationalism. For example, in *'God is not Great*, Christopher Hitchens devotes his final chapter to this re-assertion of enlightenment rationalism. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007) pp.

postmodern time that we inhabit and I anticipate that they would be different if this thesis were to be written one hundred years in the future. Specifying a time frame is a small attempt to avoid making a power claim to 'neutral' theology and recognises the time-based nature of these questions and answers. Secondly, limiting criteria establishes some boundaries to the research, in order to create a practical limit to manage the material surveyed. Finally, it is necessary to note that specifying a time frame is always a disingenuous act in theology. Unlike a relatively new academic discipline, such as computer science, contemporary Christianity is shaped by her 2000 years of history and especially by those extraordinary years of the earthly life of Christ. Furthermore, all of our contemporary theologians are heavily influenced by both the heroes and villains of Christian heritage. This is demonstrated clearly by authors such as Placher who gather material from across theological history, but also applies to constructive theologians. For example, it is impossible to think of Barth shorn of the influence of the Reformers or without his wrestling with Schleiermacher. Although our focus is contemporary theology, this will necessitate some acquaintance and dialogue with theologians from different eras.

One final methodological point is that I will be retaining the use of the male pronoun when referring to God. This reflects centuries of Christian tradition that have called God 'Father' and is not intended to attribute a 'maleness' to God. One of the key contentions of this paper is that God is an inscrutable mystery about whom all theological language is deficient, and this includes the ascription of a gender to the creator spirit. I have retained the male pronoun as a shorthand manner of speaking in accordance with Christian tradition but also because of the ungainly grammatical gymnastics required in using broader terms.<sup>39</sup>

### **3.1 Hermeneutical Justification of Barth/Wiles Dialogue**

At this juncture, further hermeneutical justification is required to construct this dialogue between Barth and Wiles. How is it that these two authors can 'talk' to one another? Firstly, both authors occupy an overlapping historical period so that, conceivably they could have

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277-283. This is also one of Alister McGrath's consistent criticisms of the movement in *Why God won't go away*, (London: SPCK, 2011) pp. 56-71. Finally, Stephen Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018) is an attempt to remove any sense that society may be worsening but is improving in every measurable fashion.

<sup>39</sup> 'He/She/It' is rather distracting from the text itself, and I similarly find Jean-Luc Marion's consistent 'God' very difficult to read. This is probably Marion's intention, but it is not a strategy that I wish to pursue. *God without Being*, Trans. T.A Carson (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991)



met and discussed theology in person (though we have no evidence that they did so). Apart from this hypothetical scenario, their historical proximity means that they shared some level of similar Western cultural experience. For example, Barth worked as Pastor to a small Swiss village, Safenwil, during the First World War and as a Professor of Systematic Theology in Basel, Switzerland during the Second World War. Wiles was younger than Barth and had his education interrupted by war, serving as a translator in Bletchley Park in 1942; a gift for language meant he hurriedly learnt Japanese to become a code breaker.<sup>40</sup> We should not necessarily build too much on these experiences, yet they do illustrate a certain degree of common historical experience, so that I do not anticipate significant cultural hermeneutical hurdles to dialogue. This possibility of communication does not diminish the individual cultural identities associated with their relative homelands, yet it would be quite extraordinary to suggest that their different nationalities prevent any dialogue.

From his writing Wiles is clearly aware of Barth, stating:

‘Countless words have been written by people in the position in which I find myself – powerfully impressed by the greatness of Barth and of his work, yet totally unable to accent the fundamental premises upon which his whole theological enterprise rests...Barth, then, is to be read, admired but not imitated.’<sup>41</sup>

As a writer who prizes economy, Wiles is sufficiently respectful of Barth to employ two words, ‘powerfully impressed’ to describe his own reaction. In one sense, Wiles holds an advantage over Barth in that he is aware of his position and considers it mistaken. I have not discovered any direct correspondence between the two theologians, this therefore necessitates the construction of a dialogue that does not exist. The question is, how can we justify constructing a dialogue between these figures? Firstly, much of contemporary academia rests on the possibility of comparing and contrasting figures, forcing interlocutors into dialogue that the original authors never intended. This does not diminish the importance of careful hermeneutical translation but does permit that the construction of dialogue can take place for the flourishing and production of academic research.

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<sup>40</sup> Author unattributed, <http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/resources/filer.rhtm/591887/w> [accessed 31/3/15]

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, (London: SCM Press, 1972) pp. 24-5.

Secondly, whilst a direct discussion such as that between Brunner and Barth (the infamous 'No!' controversy<sup>42</sup>) might be preferable, Barth and Wiles throughout their work were both constructing their own theology but also responding to what they considered theological errors. This responsive activity is clear in the critical theology in Wiles' *'Remaking Christian Doctrine'* which creates new doctrinal formulation through close scrutiny and radical re-evaluation of traditional doctrine.

Unlike Wiles, Barth is a combative theologian and spent much of his attention on correcting Friedrich Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as the sense of absolute dependence.<sup>43</sup> A rhetorically robust writer, Barth could state, 'that there was no pathway from Schleiermacher to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ.'<sup>44</sup> Yet Barth makes it clear that he held Schleiermacher in deep admiration; the section in *'Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century'* affords Schleiermacher more space than any other theologian. Barth is not a concise theologian but his regard for Schleiermacher's work is frequently inflated by eulogy of his sheer brilliance.<sup>45</sup>

It is conventional to call Schleiermacher the 'Father of liberalism' and for a time Maurice Wiles stood as the most prominent proponent of theological liberalism. Liberalism is a slippery thing to define, for it necessarily suggests a liberality from the prevailing cultural or intellectual norm, so although this in no way implies that Wiles and Schleiermacher are somehow interchangeable, they do share some common heritage. This means that some of Barth's protestations against Schleiermacher may afford some workable hypothetical responses to Wiles' own liberalism.

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<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, Trans. P. Fraenkel (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002)

<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith, Second Edition*, Trans. F. Mackintosh, HR and JS Stewart, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928,) p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Barth, *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*, cd. Heinz Bolli (Munich and Hamburg: Sichenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, nos. 113/114, 1968), p307 cited in James E Davison, 'Can God Speak a Word to Man? Barth's Critique of Schleiermacher's Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 37, (May 1984), p. 190

<sup>45</sup> Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Trans. B. Cozens and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 411-459. Barth applies this to Schleiermacher, 'he did not found a school but an era', p. 411. See also, Trevor Hart, 'Revelation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 38-41. Finally, Terrance Tice reports that years later Barth could be moved to a disgusted rage and sorrow that Emil Brunner had burnt his papers on Schleiermacher, Terrance Tice, 'Interviews with Karl Barth and Reflections on His Interpretations of Schleiermacher', *Barth and Schleiermacher; Beyond the Impasse*, eds. J. O'Duke and Streetman (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1988) p. 50.

Thirdly, and most importantly, both authors are deeply engaged with our specific subjects of mystery and providence. Although their relative understandings of what a mystery is and most especially what the meaning of providence is, differ considerably, that both Barth and Wiles have substantially addressed these subjects makes possible the construction of such a dialogue.

#### 4. Typologies of mystery

I am deeply aware of the irony of attempting to define mystery; our attempt to 'define' mystery cannot expect conceptual mastery of the term.<sup>46</sup> This task requires a dose of epistemic humility, so that this exercise expects to delimit the term to establish consistent use throughout the research without pretensions to exhausting the term 'mystery'. We are attempting a formal definition of mystery rather than a definition that presumes to exhaust the content. Gordon Kaufman summarises well:

'I want it understood at the outset how uncertain all of this is.... Mystery does not tell us anything specific about the subject matter we are seeking to grasp or understand. Mystery is rather a grammatical or linguistic operator by which we remind ourselves of something about ourselves; that at this point we are using language in an unusual, limited and potentially misleading way.'<sup>47</sup>

Gathering these typologies is not an attempt to specify the content of mystery, only to say how the term has been applied. We will invest significant time and space to the development of these terms because although mystery is a prominent theological theme there have been relatively few attempts to gather together the different ways in which the term is used.

Through this overview of mystery, it is my aim to furnish some terminology that might gain general acceptability and so stabilise usage in the theological community.<sup>48</sup> Amongst the

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<sup>46</sup> At this point we must ask what we mean by the term 'definition'. If we mean 'conceptual mastery' by which content is specified and the boundaries of language are immovably set and controlled, then defining mystery is beyond possibility, always slopping over the sides of our boundaries. I want to suggest a stipulative approach by which we attempt to say, 'this is how I am using the term but mystery is not limited to this usage'.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> 'Distinguishing between problems, secrets and mysteries...is always blurred because the territory is so extensive'. Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology*, Trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986) p. 96. All mapping exercises require sketching to a certain scale and this study is no different, yet a crudely drawn map is better than none and the paucity of similar mapping attempts is rather puzzling.

differences between our authors there are similar threads that can be detected. Three different attempts have been selected, Bernard Verkamp's *Senses of Mystery*, William Wainwright's article 'Theology and Mystery' and Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall's *The Mystery of God*.<sup>49</sup> Other typologies may exist but I have not discovered any other attempts to bring together typologies of mystery.<sup>50</sup> As this research is primarily concerned with mystery in systematic theology, I have not included some biblical overviews of the uses of mystery in scripture. This is not to imply that biblical study is a wholly unrelated discipline or that the data would be irrelevant, only that for practical purposes a substantial study of biblical senses of mystery is not possible within the confines of this work.<sup>51</sup> For similar reasons I have focused on primarily texts of a theological rather than philosophical nature.<sup>52</sup>

Mystery has conceptual cousins such as 'paradox' or 'contradiction' and even 'nothingness'. At times these terms are used interchangeably with mystery. However, for the most part we will not be pursuing these lines of thought for two reasons; firstly, focusing on one concept permits practical management of the quantity of material; this investigation is ambitious enough without foolishly chasing all descriptors of 'unknown things. Secondly, mystery is a term widely used in scripture and within theology, whereas her conceptual cousins are more frequently employed in other disciplines, so 'nothingness' is used extensively in existentialism, whilst paradox and contradiction are often used in logic and in the natural

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Rahner writes more than most on the subject of mystery, so that S.J. John O'Donnell argues that the entirety of Rahner's 'head breaking' system can be understood under one motif; 'the nearness of God as Mystery'. Therefore, it may seem strange to exclude him from this list. The primary reason for this exclusion is that he does not map other uses of mystery, instead preferring to develop his own. 'The Mystery of Faith in the Theology of Karl Rahner', *Heythrop Journal*, 25.3, (1984) pp. 301-318. In *Theological Investigations 4*, Rahner does consider the doctrines that the term mystery might properly be assigned to and indicates that the Trinity, the hypostatic union and 'grace and glory' are those to be considered 'mysteria strictae dictae' (in the strict sense), but again this is not a distinction between types of mystery but the doctrines the title can be applied to, p. 60-72. Finally, Vatican 1's distinction of mystery into 'absolute mysteries' and 'mysteries made known' is described as 'formally and logically clear' but this 'does not take us much further in the actual question, and Rahner offers little comment of his own. 'Mystery', *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol 4. ed. K. Rahner (London: Burns & Oates, 1969), p. 134.

<sup>50</sup> Wainwright makes a broadly similar point in William Wainwright, 'Theology and Mystery', *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> See G.K Beale and Benjamin Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed; A Biblical Theology of Mystery* for a good overview or shorter dictionary articles such as H Kramer, 'μυστηρίου', *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament Volume 2*, ed. Hortst Balz & Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: WMB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991)

<sup>52</sup> Both Wainwright and Verkamp could be classified as philosophers of religion, however the pieces that are considered here are primarily theological in nature.

sciences.<sup>53</sup> For my own part, a word with roots in Christian history and scripture is preferable to imported terms from other disciplines.

#### **4.1 Bernard Verkamp ‘Senses of Mystery’**

Bernard Verkamp is Professor of Philosophy at Vincennes University, Illinois and has published two books on mystery. ‘The Senses of Mystery’ offers six approaches to mystery that we will review swiftly. From his background, this work is more philosophical than theological in tone. Considering the interweaving of the disciplines by Verkamp, I contend that this is still worthy of inclusion for even when dealing with atheist scientists, the similarities between aesthetic mystery and language about the ineffability of God is striking.

In truth, this is a frustrating work; Verkamp seems intent to reveal just how much he has read on the subject. For example, his first chapter squeezes in 118 footnotes to a mere 12 pages, so that numerous authors are mentioned briefly before moving on, making it difficult to identify the author’s voice amongst the crowd of witnesses he calls forth. This dense and yet shallow style means that philosophers and theologians are tangled in groups that they may not recognise; this is a summation of Verkamp’s work and should not be taken as my own approximation of these various authors. Despite these caveats, Verkamp’s breadth over depth approach means that this work surveys mystery in a wider manner than I have encountered elsewhere.

##### **4.1.1 ‘Denial of mystery’**

Verkamp demonstrates that the reasons given for rejecting any sense of mystery are varied. A denial of mystery is not a presumption of human omniscience or belief that all things are

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<sup>53</sup> Of course, these terms are also used by theologians. For example, Barth has an extensive section on ‘*das Nichtige*’ following his strident doctrine of providence. Krish Kandiah has recently published ‘*Paradoxology*’ which aims to bring together various paradoxes of faith – for example, ‘that God loves the whole world but still has chosen people’. Kandiah uses paradox interchangeably with mystery, but I do not see a reason for privileging paradox, a term alien to the biblical writers when the apostle Paul uses the term mystery in Ephesians to describe the inclusion of Gentiles. My concern about the term paradox is twofold; firstly, I suggest paradox ‘borrows’ linguistic-conceptual credibility from supposedly neutral subjects and so loses the theological character. Secondly, a paradox affirms the truth of two things that are apparently contradictory but both true. Take for example the now common paradoxical example of how light moves in a wave and a particle like manner. Applying the same word to Christian theology is problematic. For example, the Trinity is both one and three. These truths/things/statements/persons are affirmed but I contend that paradox suggests that we know what both ‘sides’ are in a full enough manner to presume the presence of paradox. In contrast, I suggest that presuming to understand what it means for God to be ‘one’ and ‘three’ or indeed ‘a person’ is not at all obvious, for theological language works differently. Mystery expresses this more fully than paradox. *Paradoxology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014)

known, and all dark questions are now illuminated. Rather to deny mystery is to claim that humanity is not barred from making our current partial knowledge of the universe, totally complete. Verkamp traces the familiar story from Descartes' rationalistic foundationalism, through Enlightenment empiricism to Feuerbach to Freud's psychoanalytical rejection of religion, via logical positivism and ending with Stephen Hawking's search for a Grand Unified Theory in physics. At times, the whole concept of mystery is rejected in a direct frontal attack, such as occurs in our earlier example of Toland's, *'Christianity is not mysterious: a treatise shewing that there is nothing in the gospel contrary to reason, nor above it and that no Christian doctrine can be properly called a Mystery'*.<sup>54</sup> Reading Toland's treatise, I was reminded of the Reformer's frustration at scholasticism, less a rejection of Christianity than obscurantism that does not arise from the scriptures.<sup>55</sup> Yet it is more common to engage the mystery of a particular issue. For example, Daniel Dennett considers that a 'mystery is a phenomenon that people don't know how to think about yet.' Science has peeled back the layers of mystery from areas such as the origin of the universe, reproduction and gravity, so that these mysteries have been tamed, 'no longer allowed to overwhelm our thinking.'<sup>56</sup> The overwhelmingly common feature between these authors is the assumption that science alone will eventually deliver a total picture of reality.<sup>57</sup> Underlying this belief (which, ironically can never be established empirically) is an evolutionary, almost imperialistic, sense that human progress can conquer the deepest truths of the universe. Mysteries representing a limitation of this progress are thus forcefully rejected.<sup>58</sup>

#### **4.1.2 The Aesthetic Sense of Mystery**

Surprisingly, Verkamp devotes his chapter on 'aesthetic mystery' not to artists or to architects who echo beauty through their stone or paint but the scientist observing the mysterious comprehensibility of the universe. Albert Einstein writes most eloquently to his friend, Maurice Solovine;

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<sup>54</sup> John Toland, *Christianity*, cited in Bernard J Verkamp, *Senses of Mystery* (Chicago: University of Scranton Press, 1997) pp. 3-4.

<sup>55</sup> Toland, 'How many voluminous systems infinitely more difficult than the scripture must be read with great attention by him that would be master of the preferent theology?' p. xxii.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 21. cited in Verkamp, p. 11

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> David Cooper describes this approach as a type of 'absolutist' approach to reality. For Cooper, reality is truly mysterious and suggests that such a denial of mystery is a symptom of 'arrogant pride'. David Cooper, 'Living with Mystery; Virtue, Truth, and Practice, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4/3 (Autumn 2012), pp. 1-13.

‘You find it strange that I consider the comprehensibility of the world as miracle or as an eternal mystery.’<sup>59</sup>

Where we might expect chaos, Einstein marvelled at the symmetry, elegance, clarity or more precisely, the beauty of an ordered universe. How is this experience mysterious? It is disappointing that Verkamp does not state this clearly, yet, moving beyond his own description, an aesthetic mystery is mysterious because it evokes a deep sense of wonder in the observer, sparking inspiration to delve deeper into the unknown. Beyond the psycho-emotional impact, the ordered quality of the universe is mysterious because it *is* so ordered and need not be so. As a further example, Verkamp cites Heisenberg describing the ‘compass’ that appears to order the created order. Conceding that this ‘compass has been given different names...happiness, the will of God, the meaning of life...but I have the strong impression that all such formulations try to express man’s relation to the one...consciousness underlying the plan of nature’.<sup>60</sup> This is reminiscent of Schleiermacher’s description of religion as the feeling of absolute dependence, yet quite different from Christian language about a transcendent God. Indeed, Verkamp wisely steps back from building too much theology onto these phrases. This type of mystery arises from the presence rather than absence of knowledge, a humble and joyful wonder at the discoverability of the universe, so that mystery is both positive and negative. Positive because the scientist, illumined and enthralled through aesthetic mystery is driven to further study to illuminate those things as yet unknown and dark.

#### **4.1.3 The Skeptical Sense of Mystery<sup>61</sup>**

Verkamp’s third category is philosophically similar to Kant’s scepticism towards obtaining knowledge about the noumenal. Noam Chomsky summarises this view most neatly, distinguishing between problems, as ‘those things which appear to be in reach of current approaches and concepts which are moderately well understood’ and mysteries as those things which humans are inherently unable to understand and unable to develop the skills

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<sup>59</sup> Albert Einstein, *Letters to Solovine* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987), p. 8., in Verkamp, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond, Encounters and Conversations*, (London: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 215-220. in Verkamp, p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Although ‘sceptic’ is the preferred spelling in English, I have preserved Verkamp’s American English as ‘Skeptic’

or knowledge to do so.<sup>62</sup> Verkamp's often repeated example is how physical human beings have obtained the ability to think; how can physical matter generate thought. Whilst Daniel Dennett considers that unlocking the answers to this question is an inevitable unfolding of knowledge, Colin McGinn suggests this is simply something beyond the purview of scientific discovery. Verkamp suggests that this quite fundamental difference can be traced to either optimism about the possibilities of science or a conscious scepticism about human capacity to understand elements of the natural world. Here, mystery is a negative thing; a lack of ability frustrates the potential to obtain answers to fundamental questions.<sup>63</sup>

#### **4.1.4 Sacral Sense of Mystery**

Verkamp's fourth 'sense' is his first foray into religious language and construes 'mystery' as a feeling of the infinite, citing Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence'.<sup>64</sup> Drawing on Rudolf Otto, 'feeling' is a misleading term suggestive of a sensory organ, whereas this religious sense of the mysterious is not an expansion of the aesthetic mystery but something entirely separate and different from other 'normal' experience, something sui generis. The 'otherness' of this experience flows from 'the idea of the Holy'; that which is pure, distinct, wholly other from the ordinary things of life. Although frequently connected with God or gods, Verkamp notes how 'holiness' is extended to items (communion cups), places (Uluru), people (priests/witches) or even times (Ramadan, Lent). The 'holiness' of these things gives them an aura of mystery; a sense of otherness amongst the ordinary.<sup>65</sup> One of the key differences between sacral and aesthetic mystery is the shift towards emotive rather than cognitive language. Further what makes 'sacral mystery' mysterious flows from the holiness of the other rather than from an absence of some piece of a cognitive puzzle. It is disappointing that Verkamp again fails to sharpen how he perceives this particular sense of mystery, for it is unclear whether he is referring to a particular moment of ecstatic experience or to a general sense of otherness in life.

#### **4.1.5 The Immanentist Sense of Mystery**

Verkamp awards the term 'immanentist mystery' to Romantic and Transcendentalist thinkers, sweeping characters such as Goethe, William Wordsworth and Henry David

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<sup>62</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*, (New York, Pantheon, 1975), p. 137-8. cited in Verkamp, p. 52.

<sup>63</sup> Verkamp, pp. 45-59

<sup>64</sup> Verkamp, p. 67.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72-76.



Thoreau together to gesture towards a certain sense of mystery. A reaction to an overly mechanistic worldview, the Immanentist mystery uses the inner eye of reason to 'see' the world as a holistic, living, purposeful evolving organism. Refusing 'lust' for objectivity, this view attempts to fuse the 'ideal' and the empirical creating a 'spiritualized science' that allows the union of the knowing subject and the object of experience into the joy of communion with nature.<sup>66</sup> For example, Goethe writes of God as 'the impersonal Spirit and Force from which the world emanates and by which it is animated; God is deeply immanent within the world'<sup>67</sup>. Verkamp is aware that this 'sense of mystery' remains unclear but indicates that this is a conscious choice of both Romantic and Transcendentalists. So, it is said of Wordsworth that 'a commonplace flower or a mountain view could stir him to a rapt mood of transcendent ecstasy in which nature would speak to him of the mystery of infinitude, of powers, Spirits, Presences'.<sup>68</sup> Yet these mystical experiences with nature can relate only how he felt, not what he felt, for that is ineffable. Here, the immanentist mystery is that sense of 'something more' within or behind nature herself.<sup>69</sup> Like aesthetic mystery which is a vertiginous intoxication at the wonder of nature, the distinctive feature of immanentist mystery is that it pushes further gesturing towards a dimension of divinity that is lacking in aesthetic mystery.<sup>70</sup>

#### 4.1.6 The Transcendent sense of Mystery

Under this last category, Verkamp attempts to distinguish between immanentist and transcendent mystery; although both share a regard for 'otherness' the difference lies between how this otherness is primarily received; through nature or something more

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<sup>66</sup> Verkamp, p. 89.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 91

<sup>68</sup> Martin Day, *History of English Literature*, (New York: Doubleday and company, 1963), pp. 333-4 in Verkamp, pp. 93-94

<sup>69</sup> John Cottingham echoes those romantic voices: 'Even were science and technology to secure optimal conditions for a healthy and secure human existence, even were it to formulate covering laws that full described the operation of the macro and micro worlds...it would still not be in our nature as human beings to draw a line and say 'So that wraps it all up then!...To be human is to see that we are somehow incomplete beings advancing to a horizon that always recedes from view'. Cottingham's article ends on an appeal not to explain the 'fearful mystery of existence' but 'perhaps we can at least glimpse something of it's enduring beauty and goodness. John Cottingham 'Religion and the Mystery of Existence' *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4/3 (Autumn 2012), pp. 15-31.

<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Cooper argues for a type of mystery that recognises the deep mystery of the world that eludes the grasp of humanity. However, for Cooper this 'faith in mystery' does need to be tied to theistic worldviews but is well expressed in Neo-Platonic and Daoist philosophies whereby the mystery of reality is really *there* even without the personal shape brought by theistic accounts. Cooper, 'Living with Mystery', pp. 10-13

cognitive in character. In the most explicitly theological 'sense' of mystery, Verkamp indicates two levels of transcendent radicality shared between his gathered writers.

- a) Milton Munitz contends that to preserve the mystery we must recognise that the question about "why there is a world" is meaningful but totally unanswerable. This discovery is a way of 'coming upon the Boundless Existence...that which is beyond all possible versions of the intelligible and known universe". This level of transcendent reality can never be conceptualised, nor named as any other object but 'shines through but is not identical with it or any other existent'. Any diminishment of the incomprehensibility of this transcendence undermines the fundamental mystery of existence.<sup>71</sup>
- b) Macquarrie suggest that mystery might function not as a completely unanswerable question (could such a question even be asked?) but rather as a question in which 'we only glimpsed the shape or direction of an answer and found that the more we penetrated into the answer the more its horizons expanded so that we could never grasp it'. For example, in the New Testament, 'mystery and presence seem to go together' as we 'participate' we are 'afforded a glimpse of its...inexhaustible character'.<sup>72</sup>

Verkamp does not draw the distinction as sharply as I have attempted to but does suggest that the difference lies in the level of incomprehensibility of the transcendent other.

#### **4.1.7 Reflections on Verkamp's typology**

Between Verkamp's six listed 'senses of mystery', denial, aesthetic, sceptical, sacral, immanentist and transcendent between them contain some very helpful material that assists to broaden the field of enquiry. Some evaluative comments have been offered through the summation process and although it would be unfair to offer full evaluative comment before representation from the other two typologies, my initial reflections are that there are too many 'senses' of mystery in Verkamp's description, without adequate or clear distinction between them. For example, the 'senses' of sceptical and aesthetic mystery

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<sup>71</sup> Milton Munitz, *Cosmic Understanding*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 234-5. in Verkamp, p. 110.

<sup>72</sup> This summation is an amalgam of Gordon Kaufman, Karl Rahner and most prominently John Macquarrie, *Mystery and Truth*, (Milwaukee: The Marquette University Press, 1985), pp. 13-20 in Verkamp, p. 111-118

can be classified together without real difficulty. As we have previously noted nearly all of the categories suffer from editorial issues; at points there are virtually no defining statements between strings of quotations from innumerable authors. This not only affects the flow of Verkamp's writing but the clarity of the point he is making. Finally, the terminology he suggests can be clumsy and even misleading. For example, Verkamp chooses 'sacral sense' for encounters with the 'holy'. This is acceptable in speech yet as a term is misleading. Working primarily with Christian scholars, sacral can refer broadly to 'holy things' yet it is more common usage to connect sacral with religious rites. This creates unnecessary confusion for a term that is intended to clarify matters.

#### **4.2. Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, 'The Mystery of God'**

Writing from a Protestant Evangelical perspective, Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall are anxious to establish an understanding of mystery acceptable for their readership which is then applied to a variety of systematic topics. The second chapter displays this concern, as it is dedicated to those who regard mystery with suspicion as 'long on creative imagery and short on biblical substance.'<sup>73</sup> Their relative brevity, focus and explicitly biblical and theological concerns contrast nicely with Verkamp's philosophical meanderings. Although published by Baker Academic, the intended audience is probably more popular or at least directed towards first year undergraduate tuition with commonplace technical terms explained within the body of the text.<sup>74</sup> A more generous explanation may be that written from an American 'Christian University' (Eastern) the authors are addressing solely theological readers rather than those with philosophical training. Between their five distinctions they suggest that all types of mystery 'resist or defy explanation' and more eloquently point 'to something that is not immediately clear, or rather to something that is clear precisely in a depth of an intensity or an immensity that makes its clarity even harder to pin down'. Although these five options are distinguished as separate 'ways' of mystery, actually the first two elements represent categories of mystery and then the final three efforts are distinctions within 'Revelational mystery', but we will retain the author's own distinctions for clarity.

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<sup>73</sup> Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, *The Mystery of God*, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> Epistemological is described as 'our limitations as knowers – what philosophers call epistemological limitations'. pp. 7-8

#### **4.2.1 Mystery as an ‘investigative mystery’**

Firstly, mystery is considered as a state of affairs in which something is unknown and must be figured out. Detective fiction is the paradigmatic example, whereby a detective has certain clues but must develop these details so that the truth of the mystery can be discovered. There are no ontological or epistemological barriers to discovering the truth of the mystery; with enough investigative effort, the puzzle can be solved. Boyer and Hall suggest that this approach is applied in a mistaken way to God, when it is claimed that God requires ‘evidence’ for the existence of God.<sup>75</sup> Here, mystery is a negative occlusion of knowledge that needs to be remedied. Once the detective reveals the answers, then the mystery is dissolved.

#### **4.2.2 ‘Revelational Mystery’**

Secondly, Boyer and Hall indicate that the scriptures almost always speak of mystery as ‘something known’. For example, in Mark 4.11 Jesus speaks of those who have been ‘given the mystery of the Kingdom of God’. Here the mystery *is* the answer; mystery is the gift to those disciples. Within this setting, mystery is not dissolved when it is awarded but remains mysterious, even to those ‘in the know’. Another example is illustrative, and Boyer and Hall select the Apostle Paul’s pronouncement that ‘the mystery was made known to me by revelation’ (Ephesians 3.3) and yet can still exclaim ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements and how inscrutable his ways’ (Romans 11.33).<sup>76</sup> Even as a mystery is ‘revealed’ it remains mysterious. ‘Revelational mystery’ is the inelegant term selected to describe this sense.

#### **4.2.3 Extensive Mystery**

This refers to a certain quantitative inexhaustibility of magnitude or internal complexity that pushes the object of knowledge out of reach. The mystery here is that the object defies explanation because of an excess of information which is beyond the limitations of the subject who is seeking knowledge. Whereas investigative mysteries suffer from insufficient

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>76</sup> The co-text of the Ephesians passage relates to two types of closely aligned mysteries, the ‘mystery of Christ’ and the inclusion of the Gentiles, whilst the doxology from Romans is focused more around the complicated scenario with Israel. Whilst these two passages are thematically related (inclusion of gentiles/position of Israel), there is a danger of proof texting to say that Paul ‘received revelation’ without any exegetical workings to show how the two are linked.

knowledge to complete the puzzle (one or two jigsaw pieces are missing), extensive mysteries confront us with an excess of information beyond human comprehension, rather like when an internet search engine presents a billion results. For Boyer and Hall, God comes to us as an extensive mystery, overwhelming humanity with sheer abundance of infinite being. Infinity is both qualitative and quantitative, so that God is not only a 'larger being' than any other thing but a different type of being altogether.<sup>77</sup>

#### **4.2.4 Facultative Mystery**

This refers to a type of experience that people occasionally report, experiences that are unlike any other, possessing a 'non-rational opaqueness' that is not in the normal range of sensory experience and seems resistant to rational analysis. The term 'facultative' is stretching to describe the need for an additional 'spiritual' faculty/power to cope with the experience which does not operate by the ordinary rules of experience. Like Verkamp, Boyer and Hall draw on Rudolf Otto's category of the numinous to specify these senses, describing it well:

'We find ourselves confronted with a distinctive, inimitable, and somehow sacred phenomenon that cannot be mastered by a description or analysis. Explanation is impossible not because of too little or too much information, not for any quantitative reason, but because the quality of the thing does not allow that kind of approach.'<sup>78</sup>

Appealing to their core readership, Boyer and Hall note the frequency of the distinction between 'knowing about' and 'knowing God personally', suggesting that knowing God in a personal manner is roughly analogous to facultative mystery. Despite their choice to include this fourth example, Boyer and Hall decry facultative mystery for two reasons. Firstly, the primary concern is that emphasising non-rational elements risks undermining the theological enterprise, by breaking continuity with the historic church. Secondly, they suggest that 'non-rational opaqueness' is not unique to religious experience but can be applied to far more mundane activities like smelling a rose. As our olfactory feelings cannot be reduced to logical propositions, so non-rational...

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<sup>77</sup> Although they avoid any suggestion that God is 'not' a being or does not 'exist'.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

‘facultatively mysterious experiences described as religious that cannot be reduced to propositional statements are nothing special either. The problem is the clunky interface between bodily experience, logic and the function of language rather than a divine encounter.’<sup>79</sup>

This change of tone is quite textually dramatic, and I was left wondering whether Boyer and Hall really do reject ‘facultative mystery’ for the stated reasons or are concerned to defend themselves against accusations of mysticism, which they admit make Protestant evangelicals nervous, before they introduce their final and preferred understanding of mystery.

#### **4.2.5 Dimensional Mystery**

The term dimensional is borrowed from Edwin Abbot’s ‘Flatlander’ analogy, of which a short résumé will suffice. Imagine an ordinary circle, a simple geometric shape, with nothing mysterious or remarkable about it. On the circle lives a ‘flatlander’ who understands all the complexities of his circle-based life. In actuality, this circle is only one end of a cylinder, so that the circle only accounts for two of the three dimensions of this shape. However, the flatlander cannot even conceive of such a shape with three dimensions. It requires more than sheer imagination, it requires another dimension that is entirely beyond the flatlander. Boyer and Hall indicate that the third dimension is not just ‘more’ in the ordinary sense of quantity or quality, instead this additional dimension constitutes a ‘radical transcendence’ far beyond the possible understanding of a character confined to two dimensions. Within theology, dimensional mystery is defined as ‘an unclassifiable superabundance’ that transcends but does not invalidate rational exploration. This kind of mystery is ‘impenetrable even after it is revealed...by virtue of an unimaginable depth or density that transcends our rational capacities.’<sup>80</sup> Boyer and Hall suggest that the Flatlander is the only representative example that adequately reflects the impossibility of finite creatures accurately representing the infinite creator. We will return to this theme of radical transcendence in the next chapter.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-13.

#### **4.2.6 Reflections on Boyer and Hall's typology**

Following Verkamp's verbosity, Boyer and Hall's reduced number of categories is welcome. In addition, greater clarity and definition are given to each of these categories. Overall, the distinction between investigative and revelational mystery helpful provides a neat difference, although some of the sub categories of 'revelational' mystery could easily be moved under the heading of investigative mysteries. For example, the point about extensive mysteries being 'more than we can handle' is fair but does not consider the possibilities of technological advancement providing resources to do so. When the authors suggest that the inner workings of their DVD player are 'beyond them', they fail to recognise that humans actually designed and created this object; it is quite clearly not beyond human capacity. I am reminded of Verkamp's distinction between sceptical and aesthetic mystery; something might be beyond our current capacity but consigning one's DVD player to the realms of 'eternal mystery' seems to ignore our position as creatures in society and community. This option seems inadequately explored.

One further critical remark before we move on. Nearly all the terms applied to mystery derive from the example supplied. This generates inelegant terminology, with each term requiring a single and inflexible narrative before it gains further meaning. For example, 'revelational' veers close to a cumbersome neologism whilst 'dimensional' only makes sense if the flatlander analogy is repeated. Fatefully, at points the terms selected are misleading. So 'facultative' actually refers to the lack of a faculty, not the presence of one, as the term might initially indicate. Requiring the reader to remember the inverse of the statement is not a good choice for terminology. We now turn to our final example.

#### **4.3 William Wainwright – 'Mystery'**

Our final contributor, William Wainwright, is an American Professor of Philosophy, specialising in the Philosophy of Religion, especially in the theology of Jonathan Edwards. Wainwright's contribution is the shortest of our three typologies. However, this example has been selected because of its clarity and the distinctive shades of mystery presented.

##### **4.3.1 The unexpected mystery**

Mystery can be used in relation to a 'sense of wonder, surprise or astonishment at something the human mind did not expect and *could not* have anticipated. Wainwright cites

an example from 1Corinthians 9, 'things beyond our imagining'; these things can remain mysterious once revealed or can then become clear when they are revealed. Little detail is given here, but perhaps two biblical examples may illumine Wainwright's meaning. In particular I understand Ephesians and 1Timothy to be indicative of Wainwright's double meaning. So, in Ephesians 3.6, Paul writes, 'This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel'. Doubtless, to a first century Jew, the concept of Gentile inclusion into the blessings of Israel must have seemed marvellous, surprising even confusing but this is not a mystery beyond human understanding, once it has been revealed. Similarly, in 1Timothy 3.16:

'Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.'

Referring to Christ, the text is clear, the mystery is 'beyond doubt' and yet despite the list of revelatory activities attesting to his person, Christ is still 'the mystery'. So that even amid revelation he remains enigmatic, a mystery.<sup>81</sup>

#### **4.3.2 Incongruent with 'common notions'**

Drawing on Jonathan Edwards, Wainwright suggest that we should expect a revelation of 'spiritual things' to be 'attended with much mystery and difficulty' because they are removed from the mundane notions which language is normally absorbed with. This is most helpfully described through reflection on the doctrine of eternal punishment. Recalling the clarity which Edwards applies to this doctrine in *'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'*, he admits that without a proper regard for holiness (which ordinary language seemingly fails to provide) the eternal punishment of hell seems unfair. Here, the mysterious quality is derived from the clash between the paucity of ordinary speech meeting the pristine truth of spiritual revelation, so that the issue is not with revelation but with the jars of clay that are supposed to receive it.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> William Wainwright, 'Theology and Mystery', p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



### 4.3.3 'Deprived of relevant information'

In an investigative mystery, the detective is hampered by a lack of evidence which will guide him to the solution. Normally, these mysteries are resolved once clues are stumbled upon as the story progresses. However, Wainwright contests that there are some mysteries about which humans are deprived of relevant information because of limitations imposed by their existence as finite human beings. Citing Rowe's example of a fawn slowly dying in a burning forest, Wainwright argues that human capacity cannot now grasp the complex connections required to understand this situation but that this will be made clear in the transformed eschatological state. Alternatively, a special revelation within history may grant the ability to know a mystery, which was not previously knowable. These mysteries are not 'intrinsically mysterious', for faith anticipates that they will be dispelled by God through revelation or in the coming eschaton. From among all of our examples, Wainwright is the only author to consciously consider the effect of time, and especially of the eschaton on mystery.<sup>83</sup>

### 4.3.4 'Uneliminable mystery'

Drawing from Gabriel Marcel, Wainwright argues for a fourth sense of mystery as that which has 'no solution', so that no matter how much we learn about it, it remains as mysterious as before. This sense is supplemented through Rudolf Otto's '*mysterium*' as the 'wholly other' beyond the sphere of the usual intelligible and falls outside the limits of the 'canny'. Formally this concept is 'negative' yet 'it is in truth positive in the highest degree, though it cannot be rendered explicit in conceptual terms'.<sup>84</sup> It is difficult to write about a subject that cannot be made clear in linguistic form, so Wainwright attempts analogies to describe that which is beyond. Drawing on Karl Rahner, mystery is not information about the divine that exceeds human grasp but an intrinsic part of God which grasps us, pushing us into a divine darkness that is only recognised in prostrate worship. Here, Wainwright pushes the thickness of mystery further, so that if God is intrinsically mysterious; is God mysterious to Godself? Helpfully, a distinction between 'epistemological and ontological mysteries' is proffered; an epistemological mystery eludes humans because of the relation of God's nature and the limitations of human intellect. Wainwright contends that God holds conceptual mastery of this type of mystery, so that there is no propositional content about

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 81-2.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

God that God does not know. However, ontological mystery is closer to Otto's description of the 'blank wonder...amazement absolute occasioned by coming upon something inherently 'wholly other'? This encounter is 'thicker' and more holistic than conceptual structures allow. Writing in a creative Trinitarian mode, Wainwright argues that this is entirely plausible for the perichoretic movements of the Trinity to be continually amazed, astonished in the movements of glorifying one another. This is not divine bafflement or confusion but closer to aesthetic wonderment with the 'depths of his own being that necessarily elude even his own complete conceptual comprehension.'<sup>85</sup>

#### **4.3.5 Reflections on Wainwright's terminology**

Despite the philosophical tone of the piece, Wainwright's frequent use of theological analogies lend him a more theological tone than our other authors. Whilst Boyer and Hall include numerous biblical references, they are forced to draw on Abbot's Flatlander analogy for conceptual insight. By contrast, Wainwright's continuous interrogation of the potential effect of the eschaton on religious knowledge and his somewhat speculative Trinitarian reflections allow for a creative and distinctly Christian tone that is to be celebrated.

Unlike Verkamp, and Boyer and Hall, it is disappointing that Wainwright is not inclined to offer consistent or distinctive terminology throughout his examples. However, by allowing the 'uneliminable' mystery to be explored in depth and then sub-divided into 'ontological and epistemological mysteries', Wainwright is able to offer some helpful insight.

#### **5. Distinguishing between the shadows; terminological resources for research**

From our review of the various type of mystery described, we now attempt to establish working definitions or at least delimitations for distinguishing them within the broad term 'mystery'. These terms will principally be formed from commonalities amongst the material reviewed but also defined in relation to their utility to our secondary focus, providence. Whilst Verkamp's meanderings around themes like 'aesthetic mystery' are of potential theological interest, I contend that they are a distraction from our core theological task of distinguishing types of mystery in relation to providence. Additionally, I do not wish to introduce any neologisms. We are searching for distinctions within the existing language of mystery rather than entirely new concepts. Unfortunately, this may occasion using double-

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

barrelled descriptive terms rather than the elegance of a single term. Finally, for my own part, good terminology should be clear and positively describe what the word is supposed to 'do'. With these caveats in mind, I propose the following two categories for 'mystery' comprehensible and inscrutable. Within 'comprehensible mysteries' I propose two further refinements, 'investigative mystery' and 'undisclosed mysteries'. Within 'incomprehensible mysteries' I propose the terms, 'epistemological mysteries' and 'ontological mysteries'.

## **5.1 Comprehensible Mysteries**

A comprehensible mystery refers to that category of things which are unknown, but that once known are quite understandable.

### **5.1.1 Investigative Mysteries**

All our authors describe a certain type of mystery which is formally negative, that constitutes a lack of relevant information. Once this deficit is corrected, for example, when Sherlock Holmes discovers the culprit of a murder, the 'mystery' is resolved. All the authors surveyed cite some version of this form. Verkamp's categories of 'no mystery' and 'skeptical mystery' are optimistic/pessimistic versions of the possibilities of pursuing evidence to find the truth of a matter and his 'aesthetic mystery' describes the poetic beauty of the intelligibility of the universe that drive scientists to make further discoveries. Boyer and Hall select the term, 'investigative' to describe this phenomenon. The principal weakness of the term 'investigative' is that it describes a process of finding solutions on the part of the investigator but fails to describe the deficit of information conveyed by 'mystery'. However, I suggest that the term 'investigative mystery' is retained, for this does represent a common use applied to the broader term 'mystery'. It is unfortunate that 'investigative' has connotations of detective novels, yet we might still stretch the term to incorporate the endeavours of the scientist uncovering the 'mysteries' of the universe. For our purposes, an investigative mystery is one in which unknown information can become known through empirical or philosophical processes.

### **5.1.2 Undisclosed Mysteries**

The crucial weakness in applying the term 'investigative mystery' to theology is that it ignores the effect of time on mystery. This may be satisfactory within an optimistic empiricist worldview, in which all is discoverable but within theology one is required to

account for revelation that is comprehensible in both our present time and the future eschatological epoch. Revisiting Ephesians 3.6, the inclusion of the gentiles into the body of Christ is described as a ‘mystery’. In the preceding verse, Paul explains that this insight was ‘not made known’ to previous generations and indeed could not be known until it was revealed through the Spirit. However, once this ‘mystery’ is made known, it is comprehensible, though this deficit in knowledge could only have been filled through divine revelation. Boyer and Hall entitle this term ‘revelational mystery’, whilst Wainwright opts for ‘deprived of relevant information’. In this sense, once this comprehensible information is disclosed, the mystery ceases to be mysterious. Therefore, I propose the term ‘undisclosed mystery’ for this category, a term that permits knowledge gained in some futurist eschatological revelation.

Christian hope frequently offers some sense of noetic fulfilment alongside consummation from the physical labours of life. Three examples will suffice to demonstrate the importance of the need for the expected unveiling of mysteries in the future. Firstly, there is a strong biblical theme that the future eschatological reality will inaugurate a physical healing but also relational and spiritual restoration. From Isaiah 11, the vision of the lion laying down with the lamb, ‘they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord’. Similarly, Paul’s longings in 1Corinthians 13.12, ‘now I know in part, then I shall know in full’ evoke a strong sense of the future providing some form of intellectual enlightenment. Secondly, this theme is a common component of Christian hymnody.<sup>86</sup> Finally, hope of the eschaton unveiling things which currently remain mysterious has a rich theological history. Drawing on Aquinas’ understanding of the eschaton as ‘consummation’, Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

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<sup>86</sup> ‘What rejoicing in His presence  
When are banished grief and pain;  
Death is swallowed up in vict’ry  
And the *dark things* shall be plain’ ‘Carrie E Breck, *Face to Face with Christ*, 1898

On a similar theme

‘Blind unbelief is sure to err  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.’ William Cowper, *God moves in a Mysterious Way*, 1774

This trend continues in more contemporary worship music:

I try to hold on to this world with everything I have  
‘But I feel the weight of what it brings and the hurt that tries to grab  
The many trials that seem to never end, His word declares this truth,  
That we will enter in this rest with wonders anew’, Jeremy Camp, *There will be a day*, 2008

‘Christian hope for liberative justice takes the form of working for such justice in confidence that in ways mysterious to us Christ will make use of what we have done...good and bad for the coming rule of justice in his kingdom.’<sup>87</sup>

Future hope motivates present activity but the efficacy of the connection between the ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ remain presently mysterious. Let us imagine, a civil rights campaigner silenced and imprisoned. For her, there is currently no way of knowing whether her suffering has achieved ‘anything’, but the hope described by Wolterstorff points to an eschatological expectation that she may yet know *one day*. In this example, undisclosed mystery is a form of hope.

For our purposes, an undisclosed mystery is a deficit in knowledge that can only be known through divine revelation, now or in a future state and, once known, can be understood.

## **5.2 Inscrutable Mysteries**

This sub-category refers to those things that are *known as* mysteries. At the outset we must note that this does not refer to those very difficult topics, that are identified but may never be understood by human minds. For example, Astronomers identify black holes but much of their detail remains totally unknown. Instead, ‘known as a mystery’ refers to what Wainwright describes as ‘uneliminable mystery’, Verkamp uses the broad ‘transcendent’. ‘Uneliminable’ helpfully expresses the persistence of this type of mystery but implies that the mystery is something to be rid of, whereas I propose to establish mystery in a positive sense; to behold the glory of the Incarnation not as a necessary evil, but a wondrous revelation of the mystery of God. Instead, I therefore propose the term ‘inscrutable mysteries’ due to its origin in ecclesiastical Latin and because it encapsulates in a positive manner something known but unfathomable, something seen and yet beyond comprehension. The following two designations of mystery, epistemological and ontological share several overlapping points, yet it is helpful to distinguish between them. As Rahner repeatedly states that there is only ever one mystery. ‘The Trinity and Incarnation are not intermediate mysteries...but they signify the articulation of the one single mystery of God being the radical form of his one comprehensive mysteriousness which has since been

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<sup>87</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Seeking Justice in hope’, *The Future of Hope*, eds. M.Volf & W.Katenburg (Cambridge: WMB Eerdmans, 2004), p. 98.

revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>88</sup> I concur with Rahner, yet as humans know by ‘combining and separating’ it may be that making these distinctions about the mystery of God may allow us to speak as much clarity as we can manage. It is helpful to remind ourselves of the call to approach the mystery of God with a healthy dose of epistemic humility.

### **5.2.1 Epistemological Mystery**

Within the category of ‘inscrutable mysteries’, I will adopt Wainwright’s term, ‘epistemological mysteries’ to refer to the very real difficulties of religious language and the unsuitability of all created thought and language to describe and speak of God. In Barth’s phrase, ‘one cannot speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice’.<sup>89</sup> Through dialogue with the works of William Placher, Kathryn Tanner and Denys Turner, Chapter Two will develop the theme of radical transcendence to express the inadequacy of created language and conceptual forms to describe the eternal, infinite creator who is ‘other’. I propose that an understanding of God in this fashion pushes theology towards a type of mystery that is primarily epistemic in character. This approximates to what Boyer and Hall refer to as ‘dimensional mystery’, yet their term is unhealthily reliant on a single analogy, whereas ‘epistemological’ maintains the focus on conceptual-linguistic challenges of religious language but is rooted within a philosophical theological tradition.

### **5.2.2 Ontological Mystery**

So far, our distinctions within the meaning of mystery have described some privation of knowledge or limitation of creaturely capacity of comprehension. These mysteries are cerebral issues - that is problems confronting ‘the mind’. It is striking that each of our examples refer to something that indicates more than mere cerebral decrepitude but point to that range of experience that appear like an encounter ‘beyond’ the range of normal sensory experiences. Our examples all draw heavily on Rudolf Otto’s description of the numinous, Verkamp describes this as ‘sacral mystery’, Boyer and Hall use ‘facultative mystery’; yet here we will follow Wainwright’s description of ‘ontological mystery’.<sup>90</sup> In Chapter Three we will be exploring this type of mystery in some depth in special dialogue

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<sup>88</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations IV*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>89</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Trans. D Horton (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) p. 196.

<sup>90</sup> As I outlined in the earlier discussion both facultative and sacral are misleading terms.

with Otto.<sup>91</sup> Ontology is the study of existence of what it means to be and although it is difficult to describe in words - the non-verbal, supra-sensory encounters with the 'holy' that mystics allude to - perhaps we might more consistently focus on talk of encounter(s) with the presence of 'that other'. As Otto poetically phrases it;

'The truly mysterious object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits but because in it, we come upon something inherently 'wholly other' whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own and before which we therefore recoil in wonder that strikes us chill and numb.'<sup>92</sup>

There is an implicit distinction between epistemological mystery that is beyond comprehension and the more holistic, 'thicker' encounter with that which is 'incommensurable with our own'. Let us imagine a teenage boy communicating with a prospective girlfriend using only email. Though he might employ all the magnificent powers of teen imagination and literary skill to conceive of what she is really like; an actual meeting with his beloved will be a holistic and qualitatively different encounter. To sense another, to see a face, to smell perfume, to hold a hand, to hear a laugh, even to kiss is an embodied experience that is related to rational calculation and verbal description but remains quite different in kind from epistemological construction.<sup>93</sup> As with all theological analogies the difference between our creaturely innamorato's imaginings and actual encounter does not adequately describe the difference in relation between epistemological constructions and ontological encounters with the infinite God but does give an intimation of it. For our purposes, an ontological mystery points to an encounter with the 'wholly other'.

### 5.3 Summary of terms

We have come to the end of our extended discussion of appropriate terminology for mystery. For clarity these terms are summarised in table form:

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<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Otto's association with this type of mystery is so strong, I am tempted to entitle this 'numinous mystery'. However, I have elected to use a broader, more generic title to allow the concept to move out of Otto's shadow and the contribution of wider voices to come forth.

<sup>92</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. J Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958) p. 27.

<sup>93</sup> Although this example of teenage love may seem flippant, the use of erotic language though foreign to much systematic theology has been very prominent in mystical theology. See Bernard McGinn, 'Mysticism and Sexuality, *The Way Supplement*, 77 (1993), pp. 46-54, also Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979) pp. 116-137.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Comprehensible Mystery – once known, understood.</b>	<b>Inscrutable Mystery – once known, understood as mystery</b>
<b>Subdivision</b>	<b>Investigative Mystery –</b> unknown information can become known and understood through empirical or philosophical processes.	<b>Epistemological Mystery –</b> the known unknown; that God transcends rational, cognitive and linguistic concepts to an infinite and qualitatively other degree.
	<b>Undisclosed mystery -</b> a deficit in knowledge that can only be known through divine revelation, now or in a future state and once known can be understood.	<b>Ontological Mystery –</b> pointing to an encounter with the ‘wholly other’.

This table clearly delineates four types of mystery used in contemporary systematic theology. The ensuing question is how these types of mystery are distinguished and interrelate. The comprehensible mysteries are related epistemologically because they can be understood. They are distinguished from inscrutable mysteries which cannot be understood but only received as mystery. Further, undisclosed, epistemological and ontological mysteries are distinctly theological because the knowledge gained is directly related to some type of divine revelation that would not have been available. By contrast, the knowledge gained through investigative mystery primarily relies on the human, not the divine agent.<sup>94</sup> Investigative mystery may well lead to acknowledgement or reception of one of the inscrutable mysteries; an individual studying the historicity of the empty tomb, an investigative study of historical and textual matters may lead to an affirmation of the epistemological mystery of the incarnation. In this case, the incarnation and resurrection persist as an epistemological mystery because are not understood, even as they are accepted. Finally, as we noted above the inscrutable mysteries are varying characterisations of how mystery is received or described, God himself remains the ultimate mystery.<sup>95</sup> This concludes the mapping process and allows the thesis to progress.

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<sup>94</sup> As we shall see, within a doctrinal framework of creatio ex nihilo, the total exclusion of God from human knowledge is a foolish task. However, it is linguistically unhelpful to suggest that every investigative mystery from lost keys to investigation of cancer growths is some kind of divine revelation.

<sup>95</sup> The contention of this thesis is that providence is a pre-eminent location for the mystery of God. However, because God himself is the ultimate mystery of Christianity I have not entered into any dialogue in which



## Section 6. Permutations of Providence

Earlier I noted that the two themes of mystery and providence will not be given equal attention; mystery is our primary interest and providence provides the framework by which we will explore the concept. At this stage, we need to identify which aspects of the doctrine of providence will be used. As with appeals to mystery, the breadth of ways in which the term is used makes this rather difficult. Broadly, the doctrine of providence tries to elucidate the way that God relates to creation. Even a slight reflection reveals the potential scale of this task.<sup>96</sup> This thesis will not attempt to develop a fresh formulation of the doctrine. Instead we will follow the material set out by our interlocutors so that their material that relates directly and indirectly to providence may speak of our two themes. At this juncture, a brief introduction to the doctrine will serve our purposes.

Brian Hebblethwaite describes providence as a non-creedal doctrine which underlies ‘all the actual doctrines of the creed.’<sup>97</sup> I would add that some conception of providence underlies all theology, whether the theologian is conscious of it or not. The reason for this can be stated simply: providence concerns how God relates to the world, therefore any discussion of God immediately requires some metaphysical understanding of that God-world relationship.<sup>98</sup> This affects cataphatic and apophatic theologies alike. Even the most abstract or speculative work of theology must, consciously or not, have some concept of what the meanings of words refer or do not refer to, namely that is some metaphysical conception of how God relates to world.<sup>99</sup> I concede that this poses a much broader notion of providence than is commonly recognised. However, this breadth permits our interlocutors free discourse, rather than just within the framework I have set. I propose using the stipulative

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doctrines ‘compete’ to be the prime source of mystery. ‘Pre-eminent’ means a ‘significant’ location of mystery rather than the sole or primary location. Such discussion does not seem fruitful.

<sup>96</sup> At the conclusion of Tiessen’s overview of 10 doctrines of providence, he helpfully produces a table listing the following key differentials in doctrine: God’s experience of time, God knows the future, God knows counterfactuals, God takes a risk in creation, God specifically permits all evils, the nature of human freedom, prayer ‘affects the outcome’ and prayer changes God’s mind. *Providence and Prayer*, p. 363-4. I would also add the question of miracles as this permits dialogue about the relation of God to the ‘natural world’. Additionally, Tiessen’s work is dogged by the lack of reflection on the coming of Christ for providence, so that it is rather more neutrally monotheistic in tone than distinctively Christian. I do not claim that this list is exhaustive of the possible permutations of providence but this does illustrate the need to further delimit criteria.

<sup>97</sup> Brian Hebblethwaite, *Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 132.

<sup>98</sup> ‘World’ here used in a broad sense to incorporate all created things.

<sup>99</sup> Even theologies which refuse to engage in the ‘referential character’ of theology to focus only on the grammar or language game of theology, a characterisation of postliberal theology for example, have at some point made a metaphysical decision that their theology can or cannot describe God. My argument is that some doctrine of providence is operating in the background here.

definition for providence as ‘God’s action in creation’ for the following reasons. Firstly, the doctrine is so broad that it can encompass almost any other theological topic; this narrows the field appropriately whilst retaining enough flexibility to allow our interlocutors usage. Secondly the focus is definitely theological, so it is the action of God that remains in focus; not other questions of human freedom or prayer. Thirdly, ‘in creation’ acknowledges a classical creator/creation division within Christian doctrine. The preposition ‘in’ does suggest a somewhat interventionist model that is not necessarily helpful. Alternative prepositions ‘with or through’ creation may suggest a double agency model but could also return us to a panentheist position which, within traditional Christian doctrine, I hope to avoid. Finally, ‘God’s action in creation’ is lifted straight from Wiles’ Gifford lectures. Given that Barth offers no similarly economic definition; I propose Wiles’ brief definition allows us to move on effectively.

## **7. Framework of the research.**

This research is divided into seven chapters. In this first chapter we have mapped uses of mystery and developed appropriate terminology to proceed. Chapter Two will refine our new term, epistemological mystery, through a critical review of William Placher and Kathryn Tanner’s constructions of radical transcendence. This form of transcendence attempts to articulate the way in which an ontologically mysterious other relates to the world. This review is supplemented by Frank Kirkpatrick’s critique of radical transcendence before taking a linguistic turn and using Denys Turners apophatic theology to consider ways of mediating the challenges of radical transcendence in order to perform the theological and pastoral task of worship.

Chapter Three develops the term ‘ontological mystery’. Considering the significance of Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy*, this part will devote considerable space to elucidating and considering his seminal work. This will be supplemented through secondary sources and engagement with William James’ understanding of the mystery of religious experiences.

Chapter Four is a brief excursus on nonsense and whether ‘mystery’ allows one to say, ‘anything at all’. This begins with a typology of nonsense as ‘exclamation’, ‘intentional subversion of discourse’ and ‘Wittgensteinian nonsense’ before considering how these relate to our principle theme of mystery.

Chapter Five will offer a short biography and outline of the theologies of providence as presented in Barth and Wiles. An account of our interlocutor lives reminds us that the theology of our authors proceeded from grounded lives. Such biographical understanding can enrich the readers' perspective on doctrine in a way that is profoundly self-involving. This is true in the case of both authors. Wiles' own doctrine was changed as a direct result of pastoral experience and an awareness of Barth's experience of personal hardship helps to mitigate the sense that his formulation is detached from ordinary life.

Chapter Six offers a sustained study of Barth's use of mystery throughout the '*Church Dogmatics*'. To my knowledge, this is the most detailed study of Barthian forms of mystery. This research is structured using Barth's own divisions of providence between *conservatio*, *concursus* and *gubernatio* and does reach beyond the confines of *CD III.3* to consider other uses of mystery in his corpus.

Chapter Seven surveys Wiles' use of mystery primarily in '*God's Action in Creation*' and '*Faith and the Mystery of God*'. Apart from the festschrift '*The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in honour of Maurice Wiles*', this is one of the most sustained studies of his work and, I believe, the only review of his use of mystery. Wilesian mystery is dotted throughout his corpus; this sporadic appeal to mystery requires that we trace usage throughout his various works.

Our concluding chapter will summarise the debate between our two interlocutors before offering some conclusions on the theme of mystery and suggest opportunities for further development.

This introductory chapter has provided a terminological toolkit for our task. The underlying thesis of this research is that God is an inscrutable mystery that cannot be repealed or diminished. This is demonstrated clearly in the doctrine of providence, as God is revealed as mystery in ways which superabundantly exceeds human experience and comprehension. The terms developed here allow us to examine more closely the ways in which mystery functions as a fundamental feature of Christian theology.

## Chapter 2. Epistemological Mystery

### 1. Introduction

Millard Erickson's description of the transcendence and immanence tension unwittingly poses our problem succinctly:

'...the degree to which he is present and active within the universe (immanent) as opposed to being absent and removed from it (transcendence).'<sup>100</sup>

'Opposed' is the key word here, for it suggests competition over the limited resource of God's being. Even the term 'degree' is suggestive of a sliding ruler, so that as one side increases the other necessarily decreases. The more immanent and involved God is with his creation, the less transcendent he can be. I contend that this is a quite inappropriate way to speak about the infinite God who is 'other'. The definition is simply too neat for a being/nonbeing who remains an inscrutable mystery. The aim of the introductory chapter was to sketch broadly the various ways in which mystery is appealed to in contemporary systematic theology. This exercise underlined the need for caution when attempting to speak about God; for if God is truly an inscrutable mystery then this has quite serious implications for our efforts to speak about this God who is other. Flowing from the definitional work in the opening task, here we turn to the task of refining epistemological mystery and the debates below will support the overall thesis that mystery is an important, varied and ineludible part of Christian theology.

Our question concerns that most basic theo-logical question. How can we make our '*logos*' appropriate to this '*theos*'? How can we speak about God if he is a mystery? Firstly, we will explore William Placher and Kathryn Tanner's notion of 'radical transcendence'. Their contributions will be interrogated by the critique of radical transcendence from Frank Kirkpatrick. Secondly, Erickson's oppositional definition of transcendence/immanence presumed that we would know what it means for God to be 'present and active' or indeed 'absent and removed' from the universe. To broach this assumption, we will examine the contemporary use of the doctrine of analogy by those aforementioned theologians and Denys Turner's reinterpretation of apophaticism, 'The Darkness of God'. In relation to our

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<sup>100</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology, Second Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), p. 328.

wider purpose - assessing the use, meaning and function of mystery in contemporary theology - this chapter provides the first clear point of reference and will anticipate the differences and similarities in our later dialogue between Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles.

This chapter may initially seem quite removed from our secondary theme of providence. Indeed, traditional issues of providence include how God relates to time, human freedom, prayer and the question of evil, so I concede that a discussion of transcendence seems alien to traditional formulations of providence. This concession is however not a weakness of argumentation but a conscious choice. Amongst the enormous variety of the formulations of providence, one consistent element is the attempt to articulate some account of how God acts within the created universe. 'Transcendence' is a term describing the relation of God to the world and so descriptions of providence have direct and necessary implications for providence, some account of transcendence is essential and intrinsic to the task of theology. John Polkinghorne's reflections on science and kenotic theology illustrate this well. Polkinghorne's end goal is that modernist preoccupation with providence, theodicy. In brief, God's kenotic self-limitation allows the emergence of an evolving creation with autonomous creatures, whose freedom from metaphysical determination allows the flowering of love, but simultaneously necessitates the possibility of evil.<sup>101</sup> Polkinghorne's main concern is to discuss freedom and evil and his formulation makes several metaphysical choices concerning the relationship of the divine to creation or, in traditional theological terms, the axis of transcendence and immanence. Despite this, the term transcendence is curiously lacking from the text.<sup>102</sup> The significance of this lacuna is its presumption that speech about the uncreated creator God is approximates to speaking about created things. In such a highly revisionist account of providence it is regrettable that major metaphysical choices can be so lightly skimmed over. Fergus Kerr's comment is instructive:

'If theologians proceed in the belief that they need neither examine nor even acknowledge their inherited metaphysical commitments, they will simply remain

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<sup>101</sup> John Polkinghorne, *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth* (London: SPCK, 2011), pp. 78-83. I do not wish to disparage one of the foremost contributors to the dialogue between Science and Religion, only the open theism (p. 98-101) is explained and accepted rather quickly without doing justice to the complexity of the arguments forwarded by classical theism, see p. 83-100.

<sup>102</sup> John Polkinghorne, 'Kenotic Creation and Divine Action', *The Work of Love* (London: SPCK, 2001) pp. 91-104 does use the term negatively, when it is associated with 'Classical Theology'.

prisoners of whatever philosophical school was in the ascendant 30 years earlier when they were first year students.’<sup>103</sup>

Conscious or not, all doctrines of providence require metaphysical choices about how God relates to the created order. In the context of this thesis, that God is revealed pre-eminently as mystery in providence, then the relevance of examining how we might speak of this God-world relation is clearly important.

## 2. William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*

‘The problem of greatest concern to me are not the modern world’s famous inability to believe in God.... but the world’s characteristically trivial images of God.’<sup>104</sup>

Placher indicates that his work emerged from two frustrations with contemporary Christian theology. Firstly, the proliferation of heavily divergent, self-styled, postmodern theologies which nevertheless claim to represent the definitively authentic form of postmodern theology. Secondly, the attacks aimed at ‘classical Christian theism’, which misrepresent the way in which Luther, Calvin and Aquinas spoke of God as a ‘distant, lordly deity’ incapable of being affected and reinforcing structures of oppression.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, Placher’s proposal is:

‘God is not one of the things in the world, to be analysed and compared with categories appropriate to the other things in the world...Something we can understand and adequately account for in terms of our human categories is not God...Transcendence that fits our categories has been domesticated.’<sup>106</sup>

Few within Christian theology would seriously argue that God is to be considered ‘one of the things in the world’ or that one may obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the divine, yet the degree to which humanity has the capability to understand or categorise God, as we shall see, varies considerably.<sup>107</sup> The keyword here is ‘domesticated’. An intentionally provocative term, domestication is typically used of animals, when something formerly wild becomes tame; something beyond our control becomes manageable and thereby suitable

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<sup>103</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (London, SPCK, 1997) p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. ix.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>107</sup> c.f. our earlier quotation from on the contemporary confidence of theologians and philosophers from William Alston’s, ‘Two Cheers for Mystery’, p. 99.

to live in close proximity, play or perform tasks for humans. Dogs are domesticated; deities are not supposed to be. To advance this thesis, Placher produces a conceptual history of theology, contrasting the premodern classical theologians Aquinas, Calvin and Luther with 17<sup>th</sup> century 'modern' theologians, Cardinal Cajetan, Francisco Suárez and the much-maligned René Descartes. Placher contests that prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, theologians were largely comfortable with referring to God as 'mystery', but 'something went wrong' as the modernistic demand for clarity and distinct ideas eroded the transcendent darkness into more palpable light. Although *'The Domestication of Transcendence'* makes use of historical argument, there are two reasons why it would be a mistake to consider it as primarily a work of history. Firstly, there is an early apology for oversimplifying the dialectic of history and philosophy and an admission that this will be an 'intellectual' history rather than an examination of the historical factors that contrived to produce particular concepts.<sup>108</sup> Secondly, Placher's foremost concern is to 'tell the story' of the 17<sup>th</sup> century so that 'we might learn from their mistakes' and thereby contribute to contemporary theology. In turn, it would be a distraction from our purpose to repeat the question of whether the 17<sup>th</sup> century really was the distinctive period when opinion shifted or attempt to adjudicate on whether this reading of these theological giants is 'correct'. Eschewing concerns about Placher's historical and theological foundations we will instead focus on the argument as he presents it and engage on those terms. Much of *'Domestication'* leans rather heavily on the interpretations of other scholars of Aquinas, Calvin and Luther. Indeed, Placher acknowledges his own role as a 'historian' rather than as a distinctive contributor to his own postliberal tradition.<sup>109</sup> The quality of this work stems not from Placher's interpretations of the ancients but from the clarity of his writing and drawing together of diverse theologians to cohere on a consistent theme. At this juncture, Placher's meditations on Luther are less pertinent so for brevity we will focus on Placher's retrieval of Calvin's rhetoric of faith and Aquinas' concept of the 'unknowability of God'.

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<sup>108</sup> *Domestication*, p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

## 2.1 Placher's 'Postliberal' Aquinas: 'Classical Theism' and the Five Ways

To commence this section, Placher concedes the controversial nature of his interpretation and acknowledges his debt to Victor Preller, Michel Corbin and David Burrell.<sup>110</sup> Thomas Aquinas' 'five ways' have been endlessly repeated in theological and philosophical textbooks so that at first glance it appears to be quite clear what Thomas intends: to write philosophical proofs of the existence of God. Philosophical proof seems to be the goal for following an initial quotation from Exodus, none of his arguments make any claims from within theology, but appeal to 'general principles' such as causation, motion and gradation. Indeed, Aquinas actually states 'The existence of God can be proved in five ways' and each of the arguments finishes (with slight variation) 'this being we call God'.<sup>111</sup> Displaying his own postliberal position, Placher denies that Thomas ever intended to *prove* God's existence. Two main reasons are given for this rejection. Firstly, Aquinas' early statement in the '*Summa*'; 'Now we cannot know what God is, only what He is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which he does', is interpreted (if the internal coherence of Aquinas is to be maintained) as a necessary rejection of any positive statement about God at all.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Placher pushes the maxim to an overall rejection of the ability of humanity to make any such positive statement. Secondly, Placher notes the strangeness of Thomas' selection of the simplicity of God as a starting point for listing God's attributes.<sup>113</sup> Here, divine simplicity is understood to mean that the ordinary human accumulation of knowledge through 'combining and separating' is subverted, as God has no composite parts to be separated.<sup>114</sup> The simplicity of God underlines the necessary brokenness of any human attempt to describe or define attributes of God.

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<sup>110</sup> *Domestication*, pp. 17-21. For alternatives to the postliberal position see Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) pp. 52-72 for short summary of the divergent interpretations of the five ways.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.2.3, Trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1948)

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 1a.3

<sup>113</sup> Was this a strange place for Aquinas to start? Placher does not suggest Aquinas was the first to explore the concept yet it is slightly disingenuous to emphasize the strangeness of this opening point when the doctrine of simplicity was so much more prominent in Medieval than contemporary theology. Simplicity was highly important for Peter Lombard and Anselm of Canterbury, whilst Pseudo Dionysius, a writer Thomas consistently quotes, has simplicity near the beginning of 'Divine Names'.

<sup>114</sup> I understand the early cataloguing impulse that characterised the initial stages of biology – divisions between for example, blood temperature, reproduction and number of legs - to be indicative of 'combining and separating' that Aquinas refers to.



## 2.2 Univocal, equivocal and analogical language

Aquinas' response to God's sheer unknowability is his famous distinction between univocity, equivocity and analogy.<sup>115</sup> Univocity is when the same word with the same meaning, is applied to different subjects. For example, 'hard' may refer to both concrete and steel. Although the substances are very different in composition and appearance, both are firm substances that do not yield easily to force; 'hard' is used in the same sense for two different substances. This is not appropriate for speech about God. When Christians say, 'Jesus is alive', 'alive' does not mean exactly the same thing as 'my dog is alive'. If, as Hebrews 1.3, indicates Christ is seated at the right hand of God enjoying eternal immortality, then 'alive' is not used in the same sense as an animal who may be dead tomorrow. Thomas' own example comes from simplicity. If a man is wise, then his wisdom is a separable component from his power and essence. Yet because God is simple, his wisdom is inseparable from his power or essence, so that univocal predication is 'impossible' between creatures and God.<sup>116</sup> An equivocal use of a term is when the same term is applied to two subjects in a completely different sense. The recent change in use of the word 'gay' is instructive. Gay can describe joy, happiness or conviviality yet if a teenager announces to parents that he or she is gay, they are more likely referring to their homosexual inclinations than to an elevated emotional state. Of course, a homosexual person may be gay because they are *gay*, but the terms are only coincidentally or accidentally related, there is no necessary intrinsic connection between sexual orientation and mood. Equivocation is more appropriate than univocal language about God yet;

'Neither...are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense, as some have said. Because if that were so, it follows that from creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all...such a view is clearly against the philosophers who have proved many things about God and against what the apostle

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<sup>115</sup> We must recognise David Burrell's comment limiting the significance of Aquinas' theory of analogy: 'Aquinas is best known for his theory of analogy. On closer inspection it appeared he never had one'. *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 55. It is true that Aquinas' notes on analogy are very brief, though we may note that this did not prohibit Burrell from writing extensively about Aquinas' understanding of analogy in *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (London: Yale University Press, 1973).

<sup>116</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.13.5

says, “the invisible things of God are clearly seen being understood by the things that are made (Rom.1:20)”.<sup>117</sup>

For Aquinas, analogy provides a middle way - somewhere between the ‘absolutely the same’ univocal and ‘completely different’ equivocal uses. Thomas’ favourite example is health. When we say that a person is healthy, medicine is healthy, and urine is healthy, these things are all healthy in quite different ways. If a chemist formulates healthy medicine, this is quite different from a doctor pronouncing that a person or urine is healthy. Yet unlike the absolute difference of equivocation, these three instances are related and actually interconnected; ‘For urine is the sign of health in the animal and medicine is the cause of it’.<sup>118</sup> Human language is both like and unlike God, it is ‘somehow’ related, yet what Kierkegaard would later call the infinite qualitative difference means we can never fully specify the meaning of our own religious language. Placher prefers an interpretation of Aquinas’ understanding of analogical language that is closer to the equivocal use than the univocal. Betraying his postliberal origins, Placher writes:

‘He (Aquinas) offered, not a metaphysical system that would place God within our understanding of the world and specify the meaning of our language about God but metalinguistic rules that remind us of the limitations of our language about God and thereby make it clear that we *cannot* place God within the world we can understand.’<sup>119</sup>

Transcendence here is radical. God is not just ‘bigger’ or ‘highest’. Instead divine utter otherness means that, literally we do not understand what our own talk about God means. Placher does use Thomas to entertain the ensuing question of why humans should accept something they cannot even purport to understand. In terms that sound more Barthian than Thomist, the revelatory grace of the Holy Spirit comes to us, so that:

‘Nothing I see compels me to believe that this is the story of the self-revelation of God, and yet I am captured by its authority through a power not my own, the gift of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., interpretation of this passage has generated much discussion; again, see Kerr, *After Aquinas*, p. 61-65. for vastly different conceptions of what Aquinas meant from Campbell, Fitzmeyer, and Rogers.

<sup>118</sup> Aquinas, *Summa...*, 1.13.10

<sup>119</sup> Placher, *Domestication*, p31 (Italics original) Placher cites his dependence on Bruce Marshall and George Lindbeck ‘Aquinas as a postliberal theologian’ *The Thomist*, 53.3 (1989), pp. 353-406.

the Holy Spirit, so that I find myself able to have faith in an unknown...I believe that the language I use about that mystery is somehow true, but I do not know how it properly applies'.<sup>120</sup>

Here it is not only God who is radically transcendent, but also the operation of his grace. Placher's appropriation of Aquinas indicates that, in being and action, God is fundamentally other; radically transcendent in a manner which could not be fully expressed by humanity, even in the light of revelation. We will be exploring the cogency of this question later in dialogue with Frank Kirkpatrick and John Caputo, but for now we continue with Placher's reading of John Calvin.

### **2.3 Placher on Calvin's theory of accommodation**

The decision to unite Aquinas, a medieval monk and most beloved of all Catholic theologians with John Calvin the trained lawyer, pastor and vanguard of reformation theology is an unusual choice. The differences in doctrine are evident; the stylistic shift from scholastic subtlety to Calvin's robust biblical, often polemical rhetoric are marked; however, Placher seeks to unite them through a shared conception of the radically transcendent nature of God that is revealed as mystery. We will briefly consider Placher's presentation of Calvin's doctrine of predestination, as this accords with our dual concerns with providence and mystery.

'It were cold and lifeless to represent God as a momentary Creator, who completed his work once for all, and then left it.'<sup>121</sup> Without direct quotation it is difficult to relay quite how strongly Calvin conceives the constancy of providential governance. In a colourful passage, he reflects:

'If one falls among robbers, or ravenous beasts; if a sudden gust of wind at sea causes shipwreck; if one is struck down by the fall of a house or a tree; if another when wandering through desert paths, meets with deliverance; or, after being

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 36. See also William Placher, *The Triune God* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 17 On Aquinas, 'We can talk about God appropriately but when we do, we literally do not understand what we are saying...we trust in the appropriateness of language whose meaning we cannot yet understand. The 'yet' introduces an eschatological element otherwise unseen in '*Domestication*', which presumably means that the mysteries described will be unravelled in the eschaton.

<sup>121</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Press, 2008) p. 114.

tossed by the waves arrives in port...all these occurrences, prosperous as well as adverse...all events are governed by the secret counsel of God.<sup>122</sup>

From the affairs of Satan to the fall of every rain drop, God's providence is entirely comprehensive. Notoriously, the salvation of the elect and damnation of the reprobate is no exception to this overarching sovereignty.<sup>123</sup> Placher is not a Calvinist and so does not 'defend his every conclusion', yet Placher should be applauded for drawing attention to the care and caution Calvin employs to discuss this difficult subject. For example, in his opening section on predestination Calvin repeatedly warns that:

'The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended with considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths, and climbing into the cloud, determined if it can that none of the secret things of God shall remain unexplored.'<sup>124</sup>

Calvin's warnings frequently use peripatetic imagery; 'rushing into labyrinths' with no exit' or 'going beyond the bounds of the word', lending an almost homely, fairy-tale quality to them. Though vivid it also means that, like the warnings of a protective parent in a fairy tale, they are likely to be ignored by the reader. The strength of Placher is to listen to Calvin's warnings against 'excessive curiosity'. Indeed, Calvin considers that for humans to express the limitations of our own knowledge about God is actually a strength.<sup>125</sup> As Placher indicates, Calvin's consistent recourse is to return to scriptural revelation as the sole source of truth about any subject:

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>123</sup> Whilst the significance of predestination for Calvin himself is an area for debate, for later 'Calvinists', the significance of the doctrine for later theologians can hardly be underestimated, most clearly demonstrated in the Synod of Dordt's reduction to 'Five Point Calvinism' or TULIP (Total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints). Unattributed author, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1619dordt.asp> for access to the canons of Dordt. [accessed on 6/11/14]

<sup>124</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.1, p. 607.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 3.21.2 'Let us not be ashamed to be ignorant in a matter in which ignorance is learning. Rather let us willingly abstain from the search after knowledge, to which it is both foolish as well as perilous and even fatal to aspire.'

‘Let us, I say, allow the Christian to unlock his mind and ears to all the words of God which are addressed to him, provided he do it with this moderation i.e. that whenever the Lord shuts his sacred mouth, he also desists from inquiry.’<sup>126</sup>

Citing Augustine, Calvin considers that scripture walks softly, as ‘with a mother’s step’, in accommodation to our weakness.<sup>127</sup> How to understand this? Calvin is not repeating the warnings of Zeus to Pandora; ‘do not open the box, you may not like what you unleash’. Instead, stumbling around in the darkness of ‘foolish curiosity’ one will not discover something previously unknown, hidden and unpleasant about God, but be led further astray from biblical truth. Perhaps Calvin’s use of weakness is a misleading term; for modern readers it almost suggests that one should or can become strong to overcome weakness. Instead, to further our metaphor, it is not that there is a box of Pandoran truth to be discovered. No further truth of God outside of scripture will be discovered, straying from the path of scripture will not bring illumination but error and is actually ‘insane’.<sup>128</sup> Accommodation is the key word for Placher.<sup>129</sup> A trained lawyer, astute in the art of rhetoric, Calvin contests that because God knows the heaviness and gravel of human minds, he ‘lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children...such mode of expression, therefore do not so much express what kind of being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness.’<sup>130</sup> One of the joys of reading Calvin is the aureate language used to berate the stupidity, feeble and perfidious qualities of humanity providing a provocative contrast to Calvin’s high regard for the glory of God:

‘His (God’s) ‘immensity surely ought to deter us from measuring him by our sense, while his spiritual nature forbids us to indulge in carnal or earthly speculation concerning him...he is incomprehensible.’<sup>131</sup>

Michael Tinker summarizes Calvin’s logic neatly:

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 3.21.3 p. 608.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 3.21.4 p. 609.

<sup>128</sup> Placher records the term ‘insane’ from 3.21.2 in particular discussion of predestination. Please note this is taken from the translation of Ford Lewis Battles translation of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). The Beveridge translation uses the term ‘infatuation’.

<sup>129</sup> For more on divine accommodation in Calvin see Ford Lewis Battles, ‘God was accommodating Himself to Human Capacity’, *Interpretation*, 31:19, (1977)

<sup>130</sup> *Institutes*, 1.13.1, p. 66.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

- ‘1. Man does not have the capacity to know God as he is in himself.
2. Scripture talks about God communicating with Man and Man understanding something of God.
3. Therefore God must have lowered himself to man’s capacity.’<sup>132</sup>

We have reached the same difficulty that we encountered in Aquinas. If we do not *really* know what God is like, then why should we consider our piecemeal knowledge of God to be accurate or trustworthy? Like Aquinas, Calvin appeals to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

‘The testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.’<sup>133</sup>

The trustworthiness of the word of God is inwardly confirmed in the believer, in a manner that cannot be verified through external ratiocination, God comes to us as incomprehensible mystery; the reason why some people accept this mystery is no less impenetrable. Calvin refused to subject the word of God to an external test; under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the scriptures are self-validating standards of truth that will not suffer recourse to ‘higher’ authorities. As described above, Calvin does not feel the need to satisfy intellectual curiosity but is happy to leave questions unanswered, mysteries unsolved. As with Aquinas, we will return to these questions in our discussion with Caputo and Kirkpatrick.

## **2.4 Placher’s Conclusions**

Within the wide-ranging historical survey of his book, Placher’s theological voice only becomes clear in the final chapter:

‘A basic lesson: theologians get in trouble when they think they can clearly and distinctly understand the language they use about God.’<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Michael Tinker, ‘John Calvin’s Concept of Divine Accommodation: A Hermeneutical Corrective’, *Churchman*, ed. G.Bray, (Winter 2004), Vol.118.4

<sup>133</sup> *Institutes*, 1.7 pp. 30-34.

<sup>134</sup> *Domestication*, p. 181.

Here 'trouble' means that God becomes domesticated and so drawn down to the status of yet another item, object or person, albeit a supreme one in the universe. As another item in the universe, God is incorrectly understood to be different in quantity rather than quality; so that one can ask, 'where is God' or 'what is he doing'? Placher's solution is to think of God in a more 'radical sense, admitting we do not know what we mean when we talk about God' undermining our understanding of distance and coming to us as a transcendent mystery.<sup>135</sup> The question remaining is how radical is Placher's version of the radical transcendence of God? For my own part, I am not convinced of the appropriateness of the adjective 'radical' in this formulation. Radical implies a drastic difference from contemporaries or history, yet this eschews apophaticism and instead opts for an account of revelation as narrative that owes much to Placher's postliberal roots.<sup>136137</sup> Briefly, the narratives of scripture speak of a 'character' called God who is slowly revealed through interactions with humanity, so that in retelling the stories we do not grasp the divine nature, but trust that we will be speaking rightly about the God who eludes our grip. The radicality of transcendence is the refusal to reduce narrative to formal proposition. When retelling the story of Joseph's various travails, we can repeat his statement from Genesis 50.20 'you intended it for evil, but God intended it for good' and even worship as a result, yet not offer any further analysis about what that means about God's nature or being. Placher seems caught between wanting to affirm a truly radical transcendence that preserves the utter mystery of God ('a God who remains utterly transcendent') and yet apologetic and pastoral concerns draw him back from the implications of his radical scheme.<sup>138</sup> Reluctant to really push the implications of transcendence that is truly undomesticated, the overall appeal instead is for greater humility and slowness in theological talk; a worthy, welcome and valid plea that this piece

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>136</sup> Especially since his earlier quotation from Aquinas (we do not know what God is...) it is surprising that Placher does not engage more fully with the apophatic tradition. Although four reasons are given for his rejection of the via negative across two pages, in a book of this size this is a disappointingly slim critique. Amongst his given reasons, the last seems most pertinent for Placher; 'If we can literally say nothing at all about God, then we are atheists, and sooner or later just have to get on with talking about something else'. pp. 184-185.

<sup>137</sup> Placher's model follows a familiar postliberal account drawing on Paul Ricoeur, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

<sup>138</sup> Placher, *The Triune God*, p. 22 which demonstrates apologetic concerns that would not have troubled Calvin. 'If we try to talk about God in a way that fits God into human categories, we end up with an idol but if we too quickly acknowledge the meaningless of all talk about God we run the risk that our contemporaries will rest content in unqualified secularity, have a beer and go bowling.'

will echo. Yet, for a book appealing to a form of transcendence that is ‘radical’, this conclusion is ironically and somewhat unsatisfactorily domesticated.

Before examining the cogency of the notion of radical transcendence, we turn to Kathryn Tanner’s attempt to articulate radical transcendence within a doctrine of providence.

### **3. Kathryn Tanner – God and Creation in Christian Theology, Tyranny or Empowerment?**

At the time of writing, Kathryn Tanner has returned to her alma mater as Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale. Consonant with the Postliberal School, she demonstrates particular concern with appropriate language structures to express Christian dialogue. Tanner considers her work a response to the ‘commonplace’ charge that Christian theologians speak incoherently about God and the created world. The charge of incoherence has two effects; undermining the confidence of the Christian community and simultaneously driving theologians from classical understandings of God to revisionist theology. Tanner laments that theological and philosophical attempts to wrestle these two factors into rational coherence, tend to ‘either limit the power and extent of divine agency, or deny that divine and created operations are ultimately distinct’, so the idea that ‘a radically transcendent God exercises a universal and unconditional agency tends to go by the board’.<sup>139</sup> Considering the slew of 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians that radically reconstruct the doctrine of providence ranging from the one-act, semi-deism of Gordon Kaufman to the broad impact of process theology influencing both liberationist and Science Theologians, to the post-evangelical construct of ‘open theology’, it is hard to disagree that radical transcendence is overlooked.<sup>140</sup> Instead of offering another reformulation of divine transcendence, Tanner’s approach is ‘meta-linguistic’, re-examining the ‘complacent self-evidence of modern assumptions used to interpret traditional Christian language’ and attempting to state the ‘rules as rules’, so consciously developing a grammar by which

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<sup>139</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) pp. 1-2.

<sup>140</sup> Terrance Tiessen’s helpful mapping exercise ‘*Providence and Prayer*’ offers an excellent introductory guide to the varieties of contemporary views on providence. For more detail on the interlinking of process and liberation theology see John B. Cobb Jr, ‘Points of Contact Between Process Theology and Liberation Theology in Matters of Faith and Justice’, *Process Studies*, Vol. 14.2 (1985), pp. 124-141.



dialogue about God can be attempted.<sup>141</sup> Through the discovery and embracing of ‘rules’ for doing theology, her concern is to develop what ‘the character of Christian coherence would look like’.<sup>142</sup> The ambition of her relatively short project is quite breath-taking, as theologians as diverse as Irenaeus, Schleiermacher, Barth and Aquinas are analysed and considered to be operating under the same ‘rules’.<sup>143</sup> This is not a search for consistency, but a deeper grasp at ‘systematic coherence’; statements that not only agree but imply one another. Tanner states her rules for Christian talk about God as transcendent creator as follows:

- 1) For talk of God as transcendent beyond necessary relations of identity or difference with the non-divine and
- 2) For talk of God’s agency as immediate and universally extensive.<sup>144</sup>

In a helpful phrase, Tanner refuses to understand transcendence in contrastive terms, embracing a ‘non-contrastive’ and therefore radical transcendence that encompasses both distance and closeness; the radicality of transcendence implies immanence, a God who is closer than we are to ourselves. The term mystery is rarely found within the work; yet it is heavily implied by the subversion of ordinary senses of closeness and difference. This mysteriously transcendent God requires the adoption of analogy to speak of God at all:

‘Theologians may make affirmations about the nature and existence of God but maintain that their analogical status prevents any specification of their positive content...theologians may claim to know *that* their statements refer to God and are true of God’s nature, but they do not claim to know in what way they refer or *how* they are true.’<sup>145</sup>

Beyond ‘necessary relations of identity or difference, speech about God is unlike speech about anything else in existence. When we talk about the eyes of a spider, we can use the term ‘eye’ even though the spider’s visual system is qualitatively and quantitatively different

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<sup>141</sup> Tanner, *God in Creation...* pp. 7-8. The inspiration for viewing theology as undergirded by appropriate theological grammar is attributed to Ian Ramsey, Bernard Lonergan and George Lindbeck, see p. 50

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5 Tanner suggests that there are ‘ruled relations among traditional theological statements that are sufficient to provide internal coherence for Christian discourse, but that these have undergone a radical transformation in the past 5 centuries. Tanner does not develop how or why this change may have occurred.

<sup>143</sup> See pp. 56-80.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

from human sight. For Tanner 'radical' is not an amplifying adjective. It does not mean 'to a high degree', divine sight is not just seeing 'a lot'. Divine sight includes all that is, has been and will be in a singular moment to an infinitesimal level of detail. 'Radical transcendence' indicates the otherness of God that can only be described analogically.

The danger that Tanner is trying to avoid is the desire to go beyond the analogy; to delve and peek into the metaphysical reality, a deeper ontological truth behind the sign. Further:

'Let us assume then, the Christian authenticity or well-formed character of claims of this sort: God transcends the world; God is directly involved with the world as its creator. We can leave unspecified the exact nature of these claims. They are vague in practice. Theologians...work out rules for their elaboration in explaining their consistency with one another.'<sup>146</sup>

Tanner is attempting to go beyond the type of mystery implied by Placher. The role of theology is not primarily to construct but to reflect on the 'Christian character' of truth statements. The worshipping life of the Church is the primary impetus, the constitutive element of faith, yet the fundamental mystery of God's radical transcendence is not left as a brute fact to be repeated by worshipping communities and left unexamined by the academy. The theologian has the continuing role of systematically developing the 'grammatical' rules for coherence of Christian speech. Thus, Tanner considers her work not as a piece of 'first order' constructive theology (note that above, these claims are vague in practice) but rather as a 'meta-level' methodological analysis that provides linguistic tools and rules for future construction. In her own conclusion, Tanner supplies good reason for suspicion of her own meta-level method, citing Foucault:

'Interpretation is...the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will...'<sup>147</sup>

By claiming to be concerned with theological rules, the suggestion is that the provision of hermeneutical rules is a theologically neutral activity which can claim wide assent. It is

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>147</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy and History' in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice* ed. D Bouchard, Trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 151-2 cited in Tanner, *God*, p. 163.

difficult to know whether Tanner's quotation from Foucault is ironic, for if the fathers of postmodernity have taught us anything, then suspicion of 'neutrality' is surely one lesson. Foucault's point seems to be that interpretation and the construction of rules for interpretation are violent attempts to stake out meaning.

In this case as Tanner appropriates the rules for constructing theology she is, perhaps unconsciously, practising first order theology; making statements about God which can test other theological constructions.

The preference for meta-linguistics in actuality seems to be metaphysics 'by the back door'. 'First order' theology is practised but not acknowledged as such. The reluctance to consciously engage in 'first order', or in George Lindbeck's phrase 'cognitive-propositional' theology is a wider symptom of the postliberal preference for religion as a cultural-linguistic expression. Lindbeck's emphasis on the 'rules' for appropriate dialogue has clearly influenced Tanner's own grammatically oriented theology, and yet leaves her work susceptible to the same weaknesses coursing throughout the cultural-linguistic vein that throbs in Postliberalism.<sup>148</sup> For example, the aforementioned quotation 'God transcends the world; God is directly involved with the world as its creator. We can leave unspecified the exact nature of these claims. They are vague in practice.'

To pretend that 'God transcends the world' is merely a rule that evades, worse, ignores the question of whether the statement has an external referent 'God' that the words are groping to express. It is a deeply unsatisfactory conclusion to demarcate grammatical boundaries for a coherent religio-textual system without examining that to which this system might refer. God is missing from Tanner's theology.<sup>149</sup> What is missing from Tanner's account is a robust embrace of the mystery of God who is genuinely, radically other, utterly transcendent of human understanding. Christian doctrine makes truth claims that are intended to transcend rules and culture. Theology intends to describe God even as it

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<sup>148</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pp. 4,18-27. 'First order and second order' propositions is a phrase used by Lindbeck, 'To say that doctrines are rules is not to deny that they involve propositions. The rules formulated by the linguist or the logician, for example express propositional convictions about how language or thought actually work. These are, however, second-order rather than first-order propositions and affirm nothing about extra-linguistic or extra-human reality...they make intrasystematic rather than ontological truth claims. p. 66.

<sup>149</sup> I am indebted to Alister McGrath's critique of Postliberalism in Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Cambridge: WMB Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), pp. 12-34.

acknowledges the superabundant otherness of the creator and corresponding weakness of human language. Embracing the mystery of God liberates the theologian to say God is beyond words and yet must be described in words, not for the conveyance of grammatical rules, but to speak of God.

The grace and generosity demonstrated by Tanner towards theologians of all hues is admirable and her desire to broker agreement through theological rules is surely a noble quest for unity in a divided theological world. Indeed, her breadth of scholarship is impressive, yet Tanner's work is reminiscent of LL Zamenhof's amalgam language 'Esperanto', which artificially merges European tongues to make a neutral and non-political language. Whilst the goal is laudable, key distinctions are ignored or passed over in a manner that occasionally renders historical giants of theology as unknowingly saying 'functionally' the same thing. Major debates are diminished to 'positive and negative' emphases on either the capacity of the creature or transcendent power of God in a way that is rather quick and smudges their distinct voices.<sup>150</sup> For example, following a chapter that considered the divergences between Suarez and Aquinas' understanding of divine action and even the sharp Brunner/Barth 'No!' dispute, Tanner can write:

'The theologies we have analysed are complementary as well because they function to cut off possible misconstruals of one another. Theological discourse that emphasizes the negative force of the rules serves as a corrective for theological discourse that stresses their positive force.'<sup>151</sup>

The assumption is that theologies are written to counter potentially negative practical implications. So, Calvin emphasises the 'negative' dependence of the creature on its creator, not primarily because of his concern for the truth of the statement, but as a theological prophylactic against human pride and self-assertion.<sup>152</sup> This is stated quite boldly;

'Theologians form statements about the creature's capacities, then, to head off illicit implications of talk about divine sovereignty. Theologians form statements about

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<sup>150</sup> Tanner, pp. 106-118.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115

divine sovereignty to counter improper inferences from talk about the creature's capacities. In doing so they further their own practical agendas...'<sup>153</sup>

Kathryn Tanner is one of the foremost theologians in modern theology, yet her assertion is not supported by evidence from the scholars themselves. Instead multiple divergent theologians are cited but not given sufficient attention that the reader may understand what they are saying nor why they might be saying it. The cumulative effect of drawing such scholars together is rhetorically impressive yet actually only skims the surface of their work.

Towards the end of the piece, Tanner uses the phrase 'in good Hegelian fashion' to describe this drawing together process, inviting the suspicion that Hegel is the philosophical foundation for her work. I am reminded of Wittgenstein's critical phrase regarding Hegel that 'he seemed to always be wanting to say that things which look different are really the same.'<sup>154</sup> Tanner's work seems to fall foul of the same issue, forcing disparate theologians into the same mould.

In our mapping of mystery, we have considered two attempts to express God as radically transcendent. Although, we have critiqued both attempts internally, we will now consider perspectives that reject the paradigm of God as radically transcendent.

## **4. Rejecting radical transcendence**

### **4.1 Frank Kirkpatrick**

Mystery is often the conclusion to a theological argument and thus far our deliberations have reflected this pattern; God is radically transcendent of the created order; therefore, God is a holy mystery. However, mystery does not always conclude an argument. Reversing this pattern, Frank Kirkpatrick begrudgingly acknowledges the ubiquity of the 'religious craving for mystery' in the monotheistic traditions, and so begins his work with a search for an appropriate location for mystery in faith.<sup>155</sup> Leaning heavily on the philosophical work of Edward Pols, personal agents are considered to be a non-reducible basic and ontologically

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 115

<sup>154</sup> Rush Rees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein; Personal Recollections* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1981) p. 157.

<sup>155</sup> Frank Kirkpatrick, *The Mystery and Agency of God*, p. xii. Despite almost exclusively quoting Christian theologians, throughout the book Kirkpatrick continually prefers terms like 'monotheism'.

elemental part of life, and Kirkpatrick's aim is to establish a metaphysically robust, and primordial understanding of God as a real agent.<sup>156</sup> Here the question of mystery is totally reversed; unlike Aquinas' analogical understanding and Calvin's accommodation emphasizing the mystery as a result of the corresponding greatness of God and the brokenness of mortal understanding. Kirkpatrick embraces anthropomorphism because it is 'all we have'. If then, God can be so accurately described as an agent in a manner not dissimilar to human agents, the challenge is how to find enough mystery to 'satisfy our craving for the undefinable, unsayable, unthinkable and unmanipulable'(sic).<sup>157</sup> Rather like attempting to maintain mystery in a long-term matrimonial relationship, here mystery must be generated rather than encountered. Indeed, Kirkpatrick frequently uses the language of mental illness to describe theological efforts to maintain traditional notions of transcendence.<sup>158</sup> Despite the brevity of this work, Kirkpatrick makes the ostentatious claim to have understood and reconfigured the nature of the God of all three Abrahamic religions. Exploring and critiquing his revision of classical theology is beyond our purview here. Instead of analysing Kirkpatrick's positive theological reconstruction, we will consider his complaints against radical transcendence to critique our earlier contributions from Placher and Tanner.

'Religious practitioners seem to want two things simultaneously that are extremely difficult to hold together conceptually: they want a God to whom they can relate, and they want a God who utterly transcends the limitations of the ontological conditions in which they as human beings exist, including the limitation of their language, conceptions, and knowledge.'<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., The ungainly term 'primordial understanding' refers to a fundamental or basic or foundational quality in God that cannot be further reduced or peeled back. C.f Alvin Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?' *Noûs*, Vol 15, No.1 (1981) pp. 41-51 for a helpful discussion of basic beliefs and foundationalism.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 151. For example, 'Perhaps the mute, ineffable gesture towards a totally mysterious and unintelligible God can provide psychological satisfaction for those who need God to be beyond the reach of contaminating human contact and comprehension.' Kirkpatrick repeatedly employs a rhetorical strategy of undermining the mental and emotional state of those he disagrees with. Further, 'the reason one would desire a God who is utterly mysterious may be a question for a psychologist rather than philosopher or theologian.'(p49) While there may well be a psychological impetus to this desire, it is a degenerate form of theological critique to suggest or imply neurosis on the part of those you disagree with. Margaret Thatcher is purported to have said 'if they attack me personally, it means they have not a single political argument left', by resorting to personal insults about his opponent's mental health Kirkpatrick fails to attend to other voices with due seriousness. John Blundell, *Margaret Thatcher: A portrait of the Iron Lady* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008), p. 155.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

It is vital for Kirkpatrick to prove that radical transcendence is ‘difficult to hold together’ before he establishes his own metaphysic of God as agent. We will consider three of his complaints in detail, with regard to personal language, the contention that radical transcendence and monism are conceptually identical and whether the notion of a ‘wholly other’ is coherent.

#### 4.2 Personal language

‘I have struggled at both a personal and a theological level about how to reconcile the disconnect between the common assumption that God cannot act in the world as we normally understand action, and the religious practice of assuming that God has acted in the lives of religious people and their communities.’<sup>160</sup>

The academy is often accused of being too removed from the altar, so it is refreshing for a philosophical theologian to write in the first person, forsaking pretensions of neutrality to consider the implications of theology for practicing religious communities. The pastoral implications of theology are of paramount concern, as he strives to establish a God who *really does* hear prayer, receive worship and indeed act to save. If ‘God acts’ is only an accommodation to human understanding, not an accurate descriptor of how God really is, then there seems to be a significant disconnection between both how religious people speak, the descriptive language of scripture where God ‘does’ things and the austere alterity of the wholly other, radically transcendent God. Kirkpatrick is very concerned to develop linguistic coherence between the God of philosophical-theologians and the God of monotheistic traditions, for he understands the extant lack of coherence undermines the potential for inter-faith and apologetic dialogue. Ultimately this effort is an attempt to ensure that God remains ‘relevant’ for the practical lives of believers.<sup>161</sup> For this relevance to be made possible the language of theology needs to be conceptually coherent and meaningful for the academy and religious communities.

The effort to unite the practice and theory of religious communities is highly laudable. So, it is sadly ironic for a philosopher intending to describe Christianity, Judaism and Islam to

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 14. C.f ‘A God who is only a completely transcendent reality beyond the conceptual reach of human beings is not relevant to religious life even though such a God may satisfy certain speculative or conceptual urges among the super-philosophical’.

complain of the cold, impersonal metaphysical language of radical transcendence and to replace it with the unwieldy term God as a 'primordial agent'. It seems rather difficult to argue that this is a readily accessible phrase for worshipping communities. Throughout his work, Kirkpatrick claims to speak for all of the monotheistic faiths, so he consistently speaks of 'scripture' supporting the basic sense that because God acts, God is an agent like us, only in a supreme, plenipotentary form.<sup>162</sup> Two issues undermine this point. Firstly, Kirkpatrick exhibits no exegetical work of any scriptural passages from any tradition to support this notion but considers it demonstrative enough to say that because God 'does' things, whether creating the universe ex nihilo, orating the Qur'an or raising Jesus from the dead, this means God does things in a 'superior but similar' manner to human creatures. Despite protestations that the language of radical transcendence is disconnected from 'ordinary' faith, Kirkpatrick is hostage to the same issue, as his philosophy presumes the content of the faiths without even bothering to demonstrate evidence for his philosophy. Although, Kirkpatrick considers his anthropomorphic, literalistic propositions to be feeding the desire of believers for a 'genuine relationship', any believer still has to overcome significant philosophical prolegomena before his 'simple' understanding of agenthood is reached.<sup>163</sup> Secondly, although 'transcendent' is not a biblical term, 'holy' evokes a similar, though not identical, equivalent which is prevalent in all three religions; 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord' (Isa6.3 and Rev4.8) and 'He is God beside whom there is no god: He is the King, the Holy...' (Sura59.23). This major scriptural theme is totally disregarded by Kirkpatrick. Within the Christian scriptures, 'holy' has a range of meanings that can encompass the Holy Spirit, Jerusalem as the Holy City or the moral expectations of a community that is to be holy. Yet amongst the diversity of scriptural usage, 'holy' consistently refers to being 'separate or cut off in some manner from the surroundings, whether this distinction is made between the

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<sup>162</sup> Kirkpatrick is ordained in the American Episcopal Church. Unattributed author, [http://www.trinityhartford.org/About\\_Us/Clergy\\_and\\_Staff/Frank-Talks/](http://www.trinityhartford.org/About_Us/Clergy_and_Staff/Frank-Talks/) [accessed 17/6/16] His effort to speak for the entirety of monotheistic faiths seems intended as a generous gesture to promote unity. However, the attempt is hubristic and smacks of unconscious imperialistic arrogance. The reality is that virtually all of the theologians Kirkpatrick draws on are from Christian traditions; so that the God of Christianity is presumed to be normative for Islam and Judaism. If some workings or references to other Islamic and Jewish scholars were used to support this claim then this drawing together may be permissible, but to simply claim that you speak for communities that you do not represent and refuse to cite their own scholars is a grievous weakness of argumentation.

<sup>163</sup> For example, see chapter 3. establishing Edwards Pol's understanding of the primordality of agenthood pp. 79-97.



Holiness of God and humans, or the reserved items used solely for worship that are 'holy'.<sup>164</sup> For example, Hannah's cry of relief and victory in 1Sam2,2, 'There is no Holy One like the Lord...', the 'holy' element illustrates the incomparable greatness of her deliverer. Whether from the lips of Hannah or some unknown Deuteronomist, the language is simultaneously worshipful and pregnant with theology and whilst it is true that Hannah's outburst is couched in joyful worship at the action of God to save, kill and judge rather than the philosophical language of transcendence, she is able to switch between the language of holiness and common terms (poor/rich, kill etc) without difficulty. The acute tension between divine transcendence and immanence alleged to be suffered by moderns is not shared by many biblical authors who were often satisfied to affirm both of these qualities of God.<sup>165</sup> Kirkpatrick's undemonstrated hermeneutic has no time for such messy analogical terms but insists on a false dichotomy of cold philosophical technicality and anthropomorphic literalism. Finally, it is very strange that Kirkpatrick, a philosophically inclined author, fails to offer any sustained consideration of analogy, for this may have resolved much of his perceived difficulties with the language of transcendence.

### 4.3 The Convergence of Radical Transcendence and Monism

Perhaps Kirkpatrick's most original contribution to this debate is the assertion that radical transcendence (or as he prefers 'ontological dualism') and monism only appear to be conceptual opposites. In reality the concepts inevitably converge into parasitic equivalents:

'The otherness is stressed when one wants to keep God from falling prey to our finite cognition and ontological condition and the oneness is stressed when one wants to retain God without having God disappear completely in the beyond...'<sup>166</sup>

Here, if God's alterity indicates an extreme dualism between creator and creation, then it becomes very difficult to attribute the sort of actions to God that are commonly held by most religions. If God is not able to be 'sullied by the muck and mud' of creation then how

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<sup>164</sup> c.f. R.A Finlayson, 'Holiness, Holy, Saints', *New Bible Dictionary Second Edition*, eds. F.F. Bruce, D. Guthrie, A.R Millard, J.I. Packer, D.J Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-varsity Press, 1962), pp. 486-88. Also, Jackie Naudé, 'שֹׁדֵד', *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis Volume 3*, ed. W.A. VanGemeren (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1996), pp. 877-887.

<sup>165</sup> In truth, this refers to biblical theology rather than Islamic which is beyond my expertise and would not have been mentioned apart from Kirkpatrick's hubristic attempt to incorporate all three Abrahamic religions.

<sup>166</sup> Kirkpatrick, p. 49. Although uncited by Kirkpatrick, George Hunsinger notes this point as an aside in *'How to Read Karl Barth'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 207-208. This is a repeated assertion of Kirkpatrick but he does not concede or perhaps know of any others that offer a similar line of thought.

can he 'cause' the parting of the Red Sea or the resurrection of Christ or, pre-eminently for Kirkpatrick, to have a 'relationship' with humanity? Taking his cue from Meister Eckhart and WT Stace, Kirkpatrick suggests that this dilemma is often overcome by transcendence becoming so radicalized that it transcends all difference, so that God is rendered 'available to us in a final spasm of the absolute oneness and identity of all things...so even their otherness is swallowed up in oneness.'<sup>167</sup> The problem raised is a traditional problem for the doctrine of providence and especially those wanting to affirm a classical conception of God; in what sense does God 'do' anything, and how does this relate to the agency of humans or animals? For Kirkpatrick, the only coherent path through this difficulty is the affirmation of 'responsible anthropomorphism' in which God's action cannot be divorced from human action if the phrase is to remain meaningful. Contra Tanner, Kirkpatrick is accepting a contrastive version of divine action that is more powerful than human ability.<sup>168</sup>

If I have duly understood Kirkpatrick's complaint, his concern is that transcendence and monism seem to be conceptual opposites but actually result in the same conclusion. When transcendence is pushed through to a sufficiently radical point, God's alterity becomes so meaningless that he/she/it merges with everything. Concerning Kirkpatrick's desire that God can be said to 'do something', in a transcendent vision one cannot say God did 'x but not y' for the introduction of agency diminishes God's alterity; instead God becomes involved with everything; 'God' can become collapsed into nature or a sense of the natural. By contrast, monistic versions of divinity emphasise a unity with all things so extreme that a human can never know such a 'one', so monism becomes otherness. Meister Eckhart and WT Stace are used as exemplars of this difficulty yet very little attention is afforded to either writer. Kirkpatrick tends to speak generally about concepts without giving specific scholarly examples, so that he risks presenting a 'straw man' argument. Simply because some versions of transcendence end in a reductionist position does not necessarily mean that the concept should be discarded. Indeed, that theories normally considered opposite do have some similarities and so must both be rejected, is a fallacious conclusion. The sense that a

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 49 and p. 107.

<sup>168</sup> 'A lazy and simplistic anthropomorphism is to be avoided but the attempt to transcend anthropomorphism entirely is impossible and misguided. A sophisticated and carefully worked out anthropomorphism will, I believe, yield a view of God that is both metaphysically and religiously satisfying.' Kirkpatrick does not furnish us with a distinction between lazy and sophisticated anthropomorphism, so we are left with the impression that his version is a sophisticated one. p. 7.

mysteriously transcendent God might not be conceptually captured by either discipline, but transcends both categories, never seems to occur to Kirkpatrick. It is as though Kirkpatrick has resumed the search for a causal joint and failing to find one, rejects the classical understanding of God.

#### 4.4 Wholly Other

Kirkpatrick's third objection to radical transcendence is his most compelling and borrows heavily from John Caputo who summarises well:

'To say that God or any other thing is wholly other is, *stricto sensu*, impossible. To say the least God would then be wholly other than whatever is being said by saying that God is wholly other.'<sup>169</sup>

If God is as truly radically transcendent, as totally and wholly other as Placher, Tanner et al contend, then human knowledge of God is not only attenuated, but literally nothing could be spoken of that other. This is not so much a question of the reliability of religious or philosophical language about God, but a denial of the very possibility of that language. In Thomist terms, the analogy is beyond broken and so all theological language becomes pure equivocation in such a radical manner that humans necessarily do not even know in which way God might be different from humans.<sup>170</sup> The purity of the equivocation pushes theological language into the realms of nonsense; literally meaning nothing, becoming totally useless and indeed very removed from the biblical language about God the 'rock' or 'God saving' anything.<sup>171</sup> The insistent force of this objection pushes the theologian towards practical atheism; a life consciously lived in the absence of any divine presence or absence.

Caputo pushes the limit of the phrase 'wholly other' to its logical conclusion. Yet the question for Caputo is whether by 'wholly other' the phrase is intended to refer to something definably 'wholly other' or to be a term for the undefinable that recognises the

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<sup>169</sup> John Caputo, 'God is Wholly Other – Almost', *The Otherness of God*, ed. Orrin Summerell (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 191.

<sup>170</sup> Kirkpatrick's concern brings to mind David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 'How do you mystics who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from sceptics or atheists who assert that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible? ...mystics are atheists without knowing it'. (New York: Haffner, 1948, p. 32. Cited in Cottingham, 'Religion...', p.24

<sup>171</sup> We will respond to this objection in an excursus following our discussion of ontological mystery.

limits of language. That language is poor conduit for the divine is a theological truism that few would disagree with. The question is rather of the degree of the inadequacy of our language or, to shift the metaphor, if we are blind to truth, how severe is our blindness? Caputo's compelling contention suggests a total blindness about the divine, that by stating 'wholly other' or 'radically transcendent' we are saying nothing of any value at all. Not everyone has accepted this counsel of despair. Wittgenstein's discussion of ethics is instructive:

'In ethical and religious language, we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something...now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and to describe the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts...as simile now seems to be mere nonsense...My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly absolutely hopeless...What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.'<sup>172</sup>

In Wittgensteinian terms, we cannot remove the simile from our language about God, in Thomist terms, we can never remove or get behind the need for analogy. The challenge to Caputo is that he has not stumbled upon a new truth. From the statement to Moses, 'I am who I am' to Solomon's dedication of a temple that could not contain God, to Thomas, Calvin and latterly to Placher and Tanner the strangeness of Caputo's critique is that his agnostic despair is not more widely shared.<sup>173</sup> Quite the opposite; the scriptures and history of the church bear witness to the continuing desire to speak of God. What is this human tendency to run against the boundaries of our cage? Like Caputo, Wittgenstein recognises the futility of religious language yet, unlike Caputo, this deeply human tendency requires not mockery or even necessarily atheism, but exploration. The evolving complexity of

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<sup>172</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A lecture on Ethics', *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 37-44.

<sup>173</sup> I am quite aware of Wittgenstein's conclusion to the *Tractatus*, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' Yet the same question applies, why do humans continue to do theology at all? Whence this desire to evoke and represent the transcendent one? Humanity defies Wittgenstein's final rule; they are not silent, they jabber and chatter. Whilst a philosopher may consider these efforts mistaken or misguided, this wrestling, thrusting desire to speak of the transcendent, holy mystery of God cannot be simply be ignored or ruled out. This discussion is given more attention in our final chapter.

computer technology provides a helpful contemporary parallel example. In early two-dimensional games, the screen displayed all of the available game space, if the avatar reached the edge of the screen nothing happened. When technology allowed for a third dimension, a new problem was presented. Technological limitations meant that the game avatar could not move in infinite space, so artificial boundaries had to be introduced. The avatar could approach, see beyond and even bump into these invisible boundaries but never move past them. The parallel with this analogy should be quite clear. The boundary indicates *something* about the game world, namely that the game world is not infinite but has been created. Invisible boundaries signify the artificial creation of that world. Similarly, the human tendency to keep running up against these invisible boundaries of knowledge and language is not meaningless, or even nonsense, it does indicate *something*.<sup>174</sup> Like flies buzzing against the window pane, humans force themselves against limits unseen. That these efforts seem futile never seems to deter us. Humans run themselves ragged to the limits of knowledge, running straight towards an epistemological mystery.

Kirkpatrick retorts;

‘The problem with otherness is that it cannot be articulated without cancelling out the distinction between what is other to the one unless one wants to retreat into meaningless babble, no matter how decked out it is in philosophical terminology.’<sup>175</sup>

The point is that as soon as one attempts to mediate the sense of transcendence or introduce ‘degrees of radicality’ to transcendence, the schema collapses; God cannot be ‘somewhat other’.<sup>176</sup> For if one element of God is ‘soiled’ by similitude to the created order, then the ‘wholly’ other becomes ‘slightly other’ and radical transcendence loses meaning. Although as noted above, Kirkpatrick has no sustained reflection on analogy, this equates to an extreme rejection of its possibility. Pushing himself to a choice between equivocal and

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<sup>174</sup> C.f. The New Yorker reports on video game player, Kurt Mac who is trying to make a ‘walking journey’ through the vast video game Minecraft. The player has turned the quest into a career, posting video online to fund his lifestyle. At the time of publication, Mac’s quest is expected to last another 22 years. In language reminiscent of phenomenologists, this existential pilgrimage is to ‘see places as they are’. Simon Parkin, ‘A Journey to the End of the World (of Minecraft)’, <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/a-journey-to-the-end-of-the-world-of-minecraft> [accessed 26/7/17]

<sup>175</sup> Kirkpatrick, p. 38.

<sup>176</sup> Both Placher and Tanner use phrases like a ‘more radical transcendence’ or ‘somewhat’ radical.

univocal language, Kirkpatrick baulks against tradition and selects univocal predication.<sup>177</sup> By forcing this choice, the field is delimited between what is traditionally considered idolatry and the despair of an equivocal silence. Yet the last line regarding ‘meaningless babble’ indicates both his distaste for the apophatic tradition and therefore another theological option; an option we will now briefly explore with Denys Turner.

## 5. Denys Turner’s appropriation of the apophatic tradition

‘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’.<sup>178</sup>

The negative way is an ancient theological method or practice rooted in recognition of the radically transcendent, epistemologically mysterious nature of God. As we have explored the immediately ensuing question is how to speak of such a spirit when all our language is so heavily corporeal. Thomas’ infamous phrase says that ‘we cannot know’ is quite emphatic about the limitations of human minds; indeed, how could flesh speak of spirit? Although the *via negativa* can be traced from Gregory of Nyssa, through Augustine, Denys the Areopagite to Aquinas without even mentioning the profusion of mystical theologians, the apophatic is an often neglected or forgotten tradition.<sup>179</sup> As we come to the end of this chapter, we briefly consider potential applications of apophaticism to develop our understanding of the mystery of God, in his radical transcendence, particularly through the work of Denys Turner.<sup>180</sup>

Earlier, I noted that Placher rejected negative theology without recording his rationale; ironically his criticism will assist our understanding of apophaticism:

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<sup>177</sup> One of Kirkpatrick’s consistent complaints is that the language about God as mysteriously transcendent depersonalises God so that shorn of common ontological space religious people cannot relate to a being who is wholly other. However, statements like these invoke a false dichotomy between those ‘desiring the warmth of a loving relationship with God and those interested in the preservation of the mysteriousness of God. This concern reflects a rather modern division between theology and spirituality yet can hardly be supported by the history of many theologians which might be labelled ‘mystical or apophatic’. For example, Augustine wrote; ‘Before experiencing God you thought you could talk about Him; when you begin to experience Him, you realised that what you are experiencing you cannot put into words’. Note the connection between mystery and intimacy of experience. Cited in Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, p. 87.

<sup>178</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.3.1

<sup>179</sup> Apophatic theology’ gets three glancing mentions in *The Modern Theologians*, 2005. Although not entirely absent, it is fair to say that apophatic theology is not dominant in the world of modern theology.

<sup>180</sup> For brevity sake we will focus on Turner’s engagement with Denys the Areopagite. Also known as Pseudo-Dionysius, Pseudo-Denys or just Denys, I will use ‘Denys the Areopagite’, firstly because ‘pseudo’ seems inappropriate for such an influential writer even if he wrote under a pseudonym and secondly to differentiate from Denys Turner.

‘Negative propositions can contain hidden positive claims...to say, “God is not body” is equivalent to saying, “God is spirit”...more subtly the piling up of negations may be designed to evoke positive conclusions about God.’<sup>181</sup>

If Placher’s description is correct, then negative theology is an essentially dishonest activity; smuggling ‘positive’ claims about the divine through a negative filter. Paul employs this rhetorical strategy in 1Corinthians 13, as the repeated refrain, ‘Love is not’ rebukes the church at Corinth but also gradually builds into a positive picture of the nature of Christian love.

Placher’s complaint is made rather quickly and so it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that all apophatic theology proceeds in this manner. Turner describes the apophatic as an acquired ignorance, theology is both a strategy and practice of unknowing. This is quite different from ordinary ignorance. When a child does not ‘know’ his multiplication tables, it is not that he is ontologically debarred from doing so, only this sequence of numbers have not been memorised. In time, the child may become conscious that he does not know these sums, master them and thereby remedy his ignorance. By contrast apophatic theology is the acute consciousness of God’s radically transcendent mystery, so that God ‘cannot’ be ‘known’. There is little to be said at all or at least that when we talk about God, we do not understand what we mean. For Turner, ‘apophatic theology is speech about God which is the failure of speech’. By contrast, the cataphatic is the verbose elements of theology that strains to gather all of the voices in a verbal riot to attempt to say more than just something, to attempt to say everything, to exhaust the capacities of language.<sup>182</sup> Systematic theology is more commonly called dull than ‘an anarchy of discourse’. By this phrase Turner refers to the profusion of language required to describe God. In a breathless passage in the *Divine Names*, Denys the Areopagite delivers a richly flowing doxology that delights in the profound diversity of God before ending with:

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<sup>181</sup> Placher, *Domestication*, p. 184. Placher actually indicts Denys the Areopagite and Barth with this use of apophasis although he does not specify an example. I believe Placher has misrepresented both parties by these comments, see Paul Brazier, ‘Barth’s First Commentary on Romans (1919): An Exercise in Apophatic Theology?’ *International Journey of Systematic Theology*, Vol6, Number 4 (October 2004) pp.387-403 for a less dismissive view of Barth’s apophatic strategy and below for a defence of Denys the Areopagite.

<sup>182</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p19-20

‘And so, it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is.’<sup>183</sup>

Through a strategy of deliberately inverting the careful language of so much theology; the source of life, the creator is effervescently described by all of creation. Contrasting these two theological strategies can give the impression that the cataphatic and apophatic compete in some manner, so that positive and negative images jostle for superiority. Turner’s appropriation is far more radical. Apophatic theology is not concerned with wresting concepts away from the cataphatic mode but subverting conceptual forms; the recognition that both negative and positive images of God fail to fully represent the divine. Denys the Areopagite’s opening poem in *‘Mystical Theology’* illuminates this well:

‘Trinity!! Higher than any being,  
any divinity, any goodness!  
Guide of Christians  
in the wisdom of heaven!  
‘Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,  
up to the farthest, highest peak  
of mystic scripture  
where the mysteries of God’s word  
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable  
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.  
Amid the deepest shadow  
they pour overwhelming light

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<sup>183</sup> ‘The Divine Names’ in *‘Pseudo-Dionysius The Complete Works*, Trans. Colm Luibheid (New Jersey: Paulist Press 1987), p. 54-56. Though it should be noted that the author ‘dares not apply words or conceptions to this hidden transcendent God. We can only use what Scripture has taught’. p. 50. Whatever is made of Denys the Areopagite’s orthodoxy, he understands himself to be rooted in Christianity.



on what is most manifest  
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen  
they completely fill our sightless minds  
with treasures beyond all beauty.<sup>184</sup>

This could not be further from the ‘piling of negatives’ that Placher warned against. Instead, images are self-subverting, alternating precedence between positive and negative. So, the positive ‘word of God’ lies silent, only for the darkness of the ‘deepest shadow’ to be illuminated in ‘overwhelming light’. Shadow and light remain rather abstract concepts; an example from language about the body is more helpful. The rise of feminist theology has provided a helpful warning against the male bias of many images of God within the Christian tradition, when such terms are inappropriate for a God who creates and therefore transcends gender. As Turner observes, this redress can easily lure us into accepting ‘higher’ terms like ‘spirit’ or ‘divine’ for God, yet although these terms are no more accurate in their description of God, their pious sounding quality means that the theologian can be fooled into believing that they have accurately described the holy mystery.<sup>185</sup> A self-subverting apophatic strategy might describe God as both male and female allowing the resultant paradox to preserve the otherness of God. The cataphatic elements of this dialectic burst and bristle in a superabundant prolixity, a true verbal riot, only to be consistently undercut by the negative. Returning to our earlier metaphor of Wittgenstein’s cage, the apophatic does not run against the walls and give up but, like a trapped animal, presses and forces every inch of the cage searching for weaknesses and demonstrating the inadequacy of our linguistic forms to describe the divine ineffable mystery. Whereas Kirkpatrick was satisfied to abandon these paradoxes as ‘nonsense’, for Turner this is an intentional strategy. The generation of nonsense is the necessary conclusion of putting language under the twin

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<sup>184</sup> ‘Mystical Theology’ in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 135.

<sup>185</sup> Turner attacks Colin Gunton’s Trinitarian theology for a similar move. ‘Christians commonly tell us, rightly, that the God of Christian faith is the triune God; from which they appear to derive the complacent conclusion that *just because* they talk of the Trinity they could not be talking about anything other than God. Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* out to serve as a warning against such complacent assumptions...’ (italics original) Denys Turner, ‘Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason’, *Silence and the Word*, eds. O. Davies and D. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). How far different theologians take the need to disassociate God from any particular metaphor varies considerably, as noted in fn. 35 the most extreme I have discovered is Jean-Luc Marion’s use of ‘Gød’ in which even the term ‘God’ is potentially idolatrous and therefore vitiated by crossing through the ‘o’. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being* especially p. 25-52.

stresses of affirmation and denial. However, Turner contends that this dialectic does not lead to some Hegelian median, instead:

‘We must both affirm and deny all things of God; and then we must negate the contradiction between the affirmed and the denied...For the negation of negation is not a third utterance...it is not some intelligible synthesis of affirmation and negation; it is rather the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder...like the babble of Jeremiah.’<sup>186</sup>

Turner contends that the collapse of language into nonsense is neither a catastrophic end to the theological project or a need to revert to a primitive anthropomorphism but a mature signification of the utterly epistemologically mysterious transcendence of God. The question for Turner is whether the conscious subversion of all linguistic systems is really possible, for it is not clear what is meant by nonsense. Although a third category is not intended through the process of deconstructing language, I do not see how it can be avoided. For Turner does not believe that the disorder of language means *nothing*,<sup>187</sup> instead, this nonsense is highly meaningful because although it cannot state something by linguistic representation it gestures wildly and therefore meaningfully. If I were approached by a person who was speaking a strange amalgam of language, although they might not be communicating in any accepted linguistic form or structure, their linguistic gesticulations might indicate something about their health or background or needs. Within the nonsensical noises, *something* is communicated. Similarly, the necessary ‘nonsense’ of theological speech gestures richly towards the transcendent mystery of God. Here we are echoing Paul’s sentiment in Romans 8.26; ‘The spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words’. This topic will be revisited in chapter four.

Alternatively, instead of the ‘deliberately generated nonsense’ functioning as a third category of meaning, perhaps Turner’s apophatic strategy indicates the zenith and nadir of conceptual strategy which undermines the presumption that theoretical concepts and language are the only tools available to the theologian and or worshipper. To return to our

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<sup>186</sup> Turner, p. 22. This reference to Jeremiah is rather obtuse, it is not clear whether this is ironic.

<sup>187</sup> I am aware of how philosophically rich the term nothing can be. Here I mean an utter lack of content, in a similar manner to how the ‘number’ zero is commonly understood.

mapping of mystery, perhaps Turner's adapted apophaticism illustrates the boundaries of epistemological mystery, pointing towards a broader more ontological mystery; a theme we will address in the following chapter.

## **6. Summary of epistemological mystery**

To summarise, through analysis of formulations by Placher, Tanner, critiqued by Kirkpatrick and supplemented by the apophatic retrievals of Denys Turner, we have developed the notion of epistemological mystery from our earlier definition. 'Epistemological mystery' is my own term and therefore is not a phrase used by any of these authors, yet here our discussion of the non-contrastive, radical transcendence of God has focused on the conceptual and linguistic qualia, so clearly placing this type of mystery primarily as an epistemological mystery. We have established that a robust understanding of radical transcendence gives conceptual credibility to the epistemological otherness of God, although this makes no pretensions to somehow accurately describe or define God.

Our secondary theme of providence has also been developed, though I concede not in explicit form. The doctrine of providence concerns how God relates to the world in governance, Lordship, causality etc. Transcendence is a term trying to describe the relation of God to the world and so comments on transcendence have necessary implications for providence. Kirkpatrick's distaste at radical transcendence elucidates the relevance of radical transcendence to the doctrine of providence. As a minister currently engaged in pastoral care, I share his concern that God can still be said to 'act'. The bereaved need 'the God of all comfort', the sick require the 'great physician' and the hopeless need resurrection power; it is a genuine pastoral question whether the 'nameless one bearing yet all names' described by Pseudo-Dionysius can 'do' these things. However, this pastoral concern gets the better of Kirkpatrick. His elevation of the principle of 'agency' to primordial status forces him to reject transcendence, so the price of protecting his version of providence is too high. However worthy the pastoral need, the nature of God is not determined by democratic whims; an anthropomorphised God can only end in idolatry. Although I do not share his conclusions, Kirkpatrick's interrogation of the relationship between mystery and nonsense is one that will be addressed in an excursus and will return in our dialogue between Barth and Wiles.

This chapter has supported the overall thesis that God is fundamentally mysterious and therefore Christian theology will implicitly or explicitly engage with the inescapable theme of mystery. This has been demonstrated through examination of the importance and difficulty of theological language and we now turn to a briefer elaboration of ontological mystery.

## Chapter 3. Ontological Mystery

### 1. Ontological Mystery and Religious Experience

The last chapter was dedicated to a consideration of God as an epistemological mystery, a 'being' who superabundantly exceeds human logical and linguist forms in such a radically transcendent manner that the term, 'God', must be taken to refer to a 'wholly other'. However, the second sub-category of inscrutable mystery was type of mystery that was not adequately described in cognitive-linguistic categories. From our mapping exercise, Verkamp, Boyer and Hall and Wainwright all pointed towards a sense of mystery that is non-cognitive and non-linguistic, a 'thicker' mystery that we termed 'ontological mystery'. This chapter aims to develop what we mean by such a sense of mystery and will primarily engage with Rudolf Otto's understanding of the '*mysterium et tremendum*' caused by experience at the presence of the *numen*. Otto has been selected because all of the authors in our mapping exercise referred to '*The Idea of the Holy*' as their principal example of an ontological mystery. This discussion of religious experience clearly aligns with the thesis that in providence God is revealed as mystery, so that mystery is an important and inescapable theme of Christian theology. Throughout the chapter both the minor theme of providence and major theme of mystery are developed; within Otto's framework, 'mystery' features frequently and the doctrine of providence is referenced as we are discussing 'creaturely experience' that is attributed to the divine. To commence this chapter, we will first set out some of the challenges of even speaking about experience before swiftly moving turning to a critical analysis of Otto's most famous and enduring work, '*The Idea of the Holy*', to further refine this sense of ontological mystery for this research.

#### 1.1 Caveats for speaking about Religious Experience

Theology has strong claims to be the broadest of all academic disciplines encompassing both ancient and modern questions concerning God, humanity, existence, meaning, history and ethics; matters that are, a priori, inadmissible for the other sciences.<sup>188</sup> At the beginning of

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<sup>188</sup> This statement is not intended to diminish or negate the breadth of other disciplines. Within the natural sciences, physics makes a claim to be the study of everything which has led to distinctly theological questions. Yet physics is a largely descriptive discipline and does not normally claim to make moral judgements or discuss the meaning of existence. Within the social sciences, both sociology and anthropology make extremely broad claims about the meanings and developments of human history and the prospect for the future. These social

*'Interpretation and Belief'* Austin Farrer argues that the sciences operate through an artificial limiting subject matter. So, when physics measures only physical processes, it is necessarily limited to describing only physical processes. Similarly, the 'science' of economics can render individuals solely as economic units. However:

'When a man (sic) stops asking tidy questions about a single aspect of things and asks the very untidy question 'What whole reality is confronting me here?' science stops....but you should undergo the impact of the whole fact...You cannot say: I propose to open just a crack of my mental door and admit only those to which I have already issued blue tickets. You have to throw the door open, however mysterious, or terrifying or overwhelming the body of fact may be that tumbles in.'<sup>189</sup>

'Opening the door' to religious experience forces the recognition that throughout the ages, individuals have claimed that God has acted upon them in ways that transcend rational faculties. Yet the 'whole fact' of religious experiences is conceptually untidy and highly resistant to systematic ordering. Perhaps this disorderly quality explains why so many theologies do not find room for speaking about experience in their theology at all, so that scripture, tradition and reason hold all the perlocutionary power and authority.<sup>190</sup> As outlined below from Ellen Charry, in theology 'experience is an odd category', a reference point so fraught with suspicion that it has occasionally resulted in persecution from ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>191</sup><sup>192</sup> Such suspicion may be understandable within the confines of an academic environment that prioritises intellectual attainment alone. However, even the daily and fundamental reality of sacramental practice offers an experience of bread, water

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disciplines make no real claim to the origins or ultimate destination for humanity. Theology asks the broadest questions which is part of the reason for the development of sub-disciplines within the subject.

<sup>189</sup> Austin Farrer, *Interpretation and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 4-5.

<sup>190</sup> This is a common complaint of liberation theologians who suggest that through the exclusion of 'experience' as a category, theology is manipulated to look like texts that are devoid of context and time bound content that are therefore applicable to all peoples. For liberationists, in actuality this lack of self-consciousness means that only white, western and heterosexual male perspectives are considered normative to the exclusion of the poor and oppressed minorities. Susannah Cornwall offers a mature discussion of the evolution of Queer Theology and its relationship with Gay and Lesbian theology which is a fascinating development of the role of experience in theology. See *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011), pp. 43-71.

<sup>191</sup> Ellen Charry, 'Experience', *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, (eds. J.Webster, K.Torrance, I.Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 414-417.

<sup>192</sup> The persecution of mystical theologians is well documented from the inquisition of Meister Eckhart and Margery Kempe's trials to recent suspicion cast upon Karl Rahner and Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

and wine that passes beyond what is solely cognitive. Whatever significance is attached to their use, it is not merely 'imagined bread' that are consumed, but real liquid and real bread that are experienced. So, as Proudfoot writes, both 'religion and experience are modern terms but religion has always been an experiential matter, it is not just a set of creedal statements or a collection of rites...a religious life is one in which beliefs and practices cohere.'<sup>193</sup> 'Experience' may be a difficult and untidy theological category, but wherever Christianity remains a living and practised faith, experience will remain as a category.

Charry clearly sets out the difficulties of using experience as a theological category. Firstly, the notion of experience is a relatively modern category that has grown in tandem with the development of experimental science and within a purely empirical framework, there is no 'truth' that is beyond repeated question. Further, she states the experimental method requires the elimination of variables to test 'one thing' in a manner that will provide publicly verifiable data. A good experiment should be repeated by the researcher and can be replicated by other researchers to further reduce the margin for error. It is difficult to imagine how one would apply this type of experimental method to the type of human experience that is used for theological reflection. When a bereaved person is asked about their experience and their reflections on their loss, this experience is deeply private, albeit with some aspects that are in public space. As humans die once, the sorrow is different for each occasion of loss. Each bereavement is unique; the loss of a child could not be naturally compared to the loss of a distant relation or acquaintance. Such 'experiences' cannot be subjected to the same rigour of experimental interrogation that is open to a scientist investigating mould growth. Even publicly shared religious experiences are not necessarily open to repeat and individual experiences can vary greatly. For example, St Paul's experience on the Damascus Road is presented as a public event in which there are effects on Paul and his companions; Paul reported a vision, the others merely heard a voice without witnessing a vision.<sup>194</sup> This one intense moment could not be repeated and the divergence

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<sup>193</sup> Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xi. Proudfoot's contention is that the term 'religious experience' is as recent as Schleiermacher, yet as he notes the utility of the concept is not limited by a group's usage of it. Moses may not have termed the burning bush a religious experience, yet anachronistically we would term it so. The utility of the phrase is not necessarily diminished by its relative youth.

<sup>194</sup> Apologetic battle lines are frequently drawn along the possibility of miracles; perhaps because they represent an opportunity to 'test' the public verifiability of 'God in action'. At times this type of endeavour

of experiences of the party renders any analysis is difficult; a problem compounded by historical distance.

Secondly, experience is a 'slippery' category. It is extremely challenging to disaggregate experiences, especially when they are recounted at a later point. Augustine's writing on time illustrates this well:

'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not.'<sup>195</sup>

Time is passed, recorded, watched and kept but when attempting to describe *what* time is, the issue immediately becomes more difficult. Neither is this simply a weakness of linguistic form; the nature of time remains a quandary by which physicists using mathematical models continue to be exercised by. One who attempts to define religious experience faces much the same problem as that faced by Augustine in his conceptual wrestling with time; experiences 'belong' to individuals and communities and yet, when analysis of these experiences is attempted then one often encounters a curious mixture of certainty and inability to communicate clearly. William James observes the 'great certainty' granted to those who have these experiences but the ineffable qualities that belong to these moments makes them rather difficult to speak about.<sup>196</sup>

The question of 'experience' becomes more challenging when describing particularly 'religious experiences'. What is it that distinguishes a 'religious' or 'spiritual' experience from a 'non-religious' experience? One may be inspired by a sunset or the starry host and attribute this sensation to the action of God. Richard Swinburne categorizes this as 'perception of a supernatural object in perceiving an ordinary non-religious object.'<sup>197</sup>

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leads to scientific prayer tests. See Henry Benson, *Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in Cardiac Bypass Patients – A Multi-Centre Randomized Trial of Uncertainty and Certainty of Receiving Intercessory Prayer*, Accessed [https://www.templeton.org/pdfs/press\\_releases/060407STEP\\_paper.pdf](https://www.templeton.org/pdfs/press_releases/060407STEP_paper.pdf) on 17/7/15 Beyond the ignorance of key relevant biblical passages, 'do not test the Lord God', it is striking that this derisory type of exercise equates the action of God with some other large measurable force like gravity.

<sup>195</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Book xi, p. 315.

<sup>196</sup> See the combination of 'ineffable and noetic' in this classic definition. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (London: Longman Green and Co. 1919), p. 370.

<sup>197</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God, Revised Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) p. 250.



Within a theological framework that understands the entirety of creation as a divine gift, the language of 'religious experience' might swell to incorporate all experience.<sup>198</sup> However, such an expansive approach risks missing the point of those who report such religious experiences. When John Wesley spoke of his 'heart strangely warmed', he was not referring to an abnormal increase in temperature in his aortic pump; 'something' happened which was different from other experiences and was clearly very significant for him and for church history.

For the individual who has had a 'religious experience', it is common to confer immense authority on the insight afforded by the experience. Yet, how much authority can be attributed to the experience of another individual for the wider body of faith? If all 'religious experience' is considered authoritative and revelatory experience of God, then the church (or indeed any religious authority) will be faced with multiple and frequently contradictory statements about the divine. Establishing the authority of an individual religious experience for the wider church is fraught with difficulties. This problem is not new; it seems to be an issue that St Paul confronts in his Corinthian correspondence, yet time has not resolved the question.<sup>199</sup> From the experience of the great Christian mystics through to prophetic visions of a tele-evangelists, it is difficult to ascribe authority to any claimed experience for acceptance by the rest of the church.<sup>200</sup>

In order to manage these difficulties and to work within the constraints of this thesis, we will do two things. Firstly, we will employ a stipulative definition for 'religious experience'. Swinburne's definition is unfortunately close to tautology, yet the voluminous literature devoted to defining these terms is beyond our purview here, so we will define religious experience as:

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<sup>198</sup> I am reminded of the Benedictine rule of life *ora et labora* in which the tasks of prayer and mundane labour are intertwined and complementary. We refer back to the last chapter, where we found Calvin's doctrine of providence protesting that there is no 'secular' space, whatever the vicissitudes of life we are always engaged with the sovereign hand of God.

<sup>199</sup> For example, I understand 1Corinthians 8.1-2 to refer to a type of spiritual pride, endemic in the Corinthian community which privileges individual experience for the whole community.

<sup>200</sup> Charry, 'Experience'...pp. 414-417

‘An experience which seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God (either of his just being there or doing or bringing about something) or of some other supernatural thing.’<sup>201</sup>

Setting aside the problems of tautological definitions, this definition seems to exclude monistic experiences in which God seems to merge identities with the individual, dissolving any sense of metaphysical distinction. However, this stipulative definition does help us to move forward.

Secondly, we will focus on a small area of religious experience that is most resonant with the concept outlined in the *‘Idea of the Holy’*, namely mysticism.<sup>202</sup> This category is selected because of the repeated use of mystery in ‘mystical theology’ and secondly because the phenomenological descriptions most closely accord with the type of experiences that Rudolf Otto describes.<sup>203</sup>

## **2. Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy (*Das Heilige*)**

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of *‘The Idea of the Holy’* for the theological world. Long before Christian spirituality gained theological attention or credibility as a subject worthy of academic pursuit, Otto’s text was quickly recognised and established as an authoritative text. Born in 1869 in Peine, Germany, Otto followed a career in academic theology, eventually attaining Chair of Theology at Marburg in 1917. A keen internationalist

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<sup>201</sup> Swinburne, p. 295.

<sup>202</sup> There are two obvious choices I have entirely excluded. Firstly, liberation theology takes the experience of being poor as a specifically religious experience permitting a unique hermeneutical gaze that is authoritative for the church. This has been adopted by various minority groups including black theologians, feminist theologians and various third world theologians. One of the earliest exponents is the seminal Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, Revised Edition, Trans. Caridad Inda, John Eagleson, (London: SCM Press, 2001). Secondly, I have not engaged the Pentecostal phenomenon which makes such a prominent use of experience of the Holy Spirit as a form of religious authority. See Peter Althouse, ‘Toward a Theological Understanding of the Pentecostal Appeal to Experience’ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol38 no4, (2001) pp. 339-411. I have excluded these two examples for two clear reasons. Firstly, this is only one aspect of the thesis and space requires limitations on material. Secondly, neither the doctrine of providence or mystery are significant themes within these traditions. Instead, the experiences in both of these traditions is similar to the descriptions of early mystery religions in which an experience provides special access to knowledge or power that is not shared by those who have not undergone solidarity with the poor or the semi-ecstasy of speaking in tongues.

<sup>203</sup> For example, John MacQuarrie insists on defining ‘mystery’ before he can even commence talking about mysticism. *Two Worlds Are Ours* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 1-2

and traveller, Otto visited North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, India, China and Japan observing and engaging with various religious groups in pursuit of experience that stands 'at the core of every religion.'<sup>204</sup> This prime core of all religions, 'the trunk and not the branch', Otto describes as 'the holy'.<sup>205</sup> The holy 'contains a *moment* which sets it apart from the "rational" ...which remains inexpressible...in the sense that it completely eludes apprehension in terms of contents'.<sup>206</sup> In order to prevent 'holy' from becoming entangled with ethical connotations, Otto adapts the Latin '*numen*' into the neologism 'numinous', that can be applied as a category of value and as a state of mind. However, Otto is keen to emphasize that, despite this new term, the numinous is not something that can be taught, only 'evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes of the spirit must be awakened'. So '*Das Heilige*' is badly translated to '*The Idea of the Holy*', for this is not intended to be a formal presentation of an idea. Indeed, with intriguing rhetoric artistry Otto warns the reader to read no further if 'he knows of no such moments in his experience.'<sup>207</sup> Unlike Schleiermacher's feeling of dependence, Otto protests that the *numen* is not found inside the self rather it has objective existence outside of the self. The nature of the numinous is 'such that it grips or stirs the human mind with this and that determinate affective state.'<sup>208</sup> Otto describes several points of the determinate affective state which bear repeating.

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<sup>204</sup> As a modern reader, Otto's imperialistic attitudes towards non-western peoples can be startling. This is expressed most prominently when he refers to other religious groups as 'primitive' with Christianity offering the most evolved form of religious consciousness. It is one thing to argue that you disagree with somebody; it is rather more patronising to suggest that their worldview is not as evolved as your own. Writing during the First World War and active within the interim period, Otto's did not live to see the horrors of the Second War or the outworking's of its evils. Politically, Otto supported the minority German Democrats rather than National Socialists but offered no rejection of the Nazi's party either. Although his translator, John Harvey valiantly defends Otto's 'liberal character' and claims would have been outraged by the election of Hitler, it is disappointing to find such imperialistic attitudes towards those of different religions at a historical moment when such conceptions of superiority were so clearly damaging. See Harvey's notes in p. xi. and p. 26, 86, 109 for assorted references to 'primitive man'.

<sup>205</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and The Concept of The Holy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>206</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. J. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 5. Italics original

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 7-8.

<sup>208</sup> Although Otto protests against similarities, there are clear resonances with Schleiermacher's tendency to presume a common religious experience in all peoples. Otto disparages Schleiermacher's 'sense of dependency' as quite inadequate, specifically because he believed it was too inward looking and ignored the movement of the external and real numinous reality on the individual see p. 9-11. Although Otto may have understood the experience quite differently, clearly there is a parallel between the two presumptions of universal 'common core' to religious experience.

## 2.1 'Mysterium et Tremendum'

Calling for the reader's sympathetic and 'imaginative intuition', Otto describes the *Mysterium Tremendum*:

'The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a set and lasting attitude of the soul...it may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions or lead to the strangest excitements...to ecstasy. It has wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of...that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.'<sup>209</sup>

This vividly lucid description encompasses the extremes of human emotion, ranging from tranquil moods to eruptive ecstasies yet, unusually for a description of religious experience, the milder, more 'normal emotions' are also included.<sup>210</sup> These contrasting images are reminiscent of, though not derived from, Denys the Areopagite's doxological poem referred to in chapter one. In Denys' poem, language is stretched to breaking point in an attempt to describe God. Otto's description is comprehensive; beginning with the term 'feeling', which implies sensory ability, the depiction shifts to mental states of both peace and horror, so that the physical and psychic capacity of humanity is stretched in all directions. However, unlike Denys' poem Otto's images do not necessarily convey an experience of the numinous all in one instance but a variety of different sites of experience. Otto describes the sensations evinced by this numinous mystery and yet he is not concerned with categorising the phenomena encountered but seeks to evoke their underlying cause; which is understood to be fundamentally mysterious. It must be reiterated that Otto's first thought

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<sup>209</sup> This long quotation bears full repetition for Otto eschews analytic language here to evoke the numinous doxologically. To translate into analytical-descriptive language would lose the power of the text, p. 13.

<sup>210</sup> Ninian Smart suggests that the Numinous experience and mysticism should be conceptually split because the numinous has 'more of a thunderous quality'. Whether or not these items should be split into separate phenomenological categories does not concern us here, but his description of an experience that is external and thunderous is clearly wrong from this quotation alone. 'Ninian Smart on World Religions, Volume 1 Religious Experience and Philosophical Analysis, ed. J.Shepherd (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 42.

about the *numen* is that it is not within the control of those who experience it; the numinous is quite beyond 'the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny'.<sup>211</sup> In this sense, Otto refuses to use a phenomenological hermeneutic of suspicion. Instead, he generously presumes that the experiences reported by the characters are not only genuine but have an external cause in the numinous.<sup>212</sup> For our purposes, we must also underline that the description ends with the individual left speechless in the presence of a mystery. Here the term 'presence' points more to an affective state than a set of epistemological facts, thus distinguishing this as an ontological mystery distinct from the epistemological mysteries described in the last chapter. William James describes similar ineffable states, 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words...mystical states are more like states of feeling than states of intellect.'<sup>213</sup>

A unique quality of Otto's work is his unflinching description of religious terror, principally through the term '*Tremendum*'. Derived from 'tremor', *tremendum* emphasizes the shuddering that occurs in the individual in the presence of the *numen*. This is a special kind of spectral religious dread that is closer to awe than ordinary fear. In primitive religions, Otto connects this with worship of daemons, but argues that it remains an important element in 'developed' faith, so that the Christian cry of 'Holy, Holy, Holy' contains a sacred shuddering, a liturgical echo of the wrath of Yahweh breaking out in the Old and New Testaments. Religious experience is often cast in a positive light; what Otto manages to do is express the terror that can consume the individual undergoing the experience.<sup>214</sup> There is

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<sup>211</sup> Otto, *Idea...*, p. 26. Otto uses this term once and I understand 'canny' to mean 'know/known' now rendered in Scottish culture as 'ken'.

<sup>212</sup> Melissa Raphael links this to the influence of the Kantian Philosopher Jakob Fries (1773-1843). Fries posits the notion of 'ahndung' a form of 'immediate' knowledge granted directly to the individual without mediation of ethics or other Kantian filters. Ahndung was a proposed solution to the circularity of Kant's non-empirically justified, requirement for empirical justification. The most enthusiastic supporter and expositor of Fries I can find is the American, Kelley L. Ross PhD. His website, [www.friesian.com](http://www.friesian.com) is eclectic and fanatical but a trove of information on the philosopher. Additionally, this site contains Ross' PhD which argued that Otto provided the phenomenological outworking of Fries' philosophical framework. Nevertheless, despite the utility of this link, it should be admitted that Otto makes only passing mention of Jakob Fries in *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 145-7. Finally, there is a significant contemporary parallel with Plantinga's concept of 'doxastic' experience constituting a type of immediate knowledge see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 173-5.

<sup>213</sup> James, *Religious*, p. 370.

<sup>214</sup> The pain of religious experience is rarely emphasised but the importance of this theme in scripture should not be underestimated. We might think of the anxiety of Abram pushed to the last moment to sacrifice his

an overpowering ferocious quality to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and it is this 'awful majesty' that provides raw material for the religious sense and experience of humble 'creaturehood' under the shadow of the creator. For Otto, the twin elements of '*tremendum*' and '*mysterium*' are not just complementary but form a mutually informing dialectic. *Mysterium* alone insufficiently describes some incomprehensible knowledge or epistemological deficit; once paired with *tremendum*, *mysterium* is pushed beyond verbal stupor into a shuddering, recoiling wonder that 'strikes us chill and numb'. Otto argues that this sense of terror-mystery is most clearly expressed through mysticism and here we find an Ottonian anticipation of critics such as Caputo and Kirkpatrick.<sup>215</sup> Mysticism holds to the 'beyond' which is the 'stressing and overstressing' of non-rational elements in religion; developing an extreme contrast of the *numen* with everything else, so that nothing can rightly be predicated of this 'wholly other'. Instead of predication, the mystical description points to a 'brimming over' of religious emotion, although the apophatic emphases are conceptually negative, they become 'positive feeling content':

'It is through this positive feeling-content that the concepts of 'transcendent' and 'supernatural' become forthwith designations for a unique 'wholly other' reality and quality, something of whose special character we can *feel*, without being able to give it clear conceptual expression.'<sup>216</sup>

Here we have the clearest description of 'ontological mystery' to which Verkamp, Boyer and Hall and Wainwright pointed. Otto is straining to descriptively evoke a religious experience that he elsewhere admits is otherwise ineffable. Earlier, we noted Placher's criticism of the *via negativa* as a negative rhetorical device that makes positive affirmations. Here apophysis is a rhetorical strategy to establish something that is non-linguistic, to describe a feeling -not

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son, Jacob wrestling with God or Jeremiah's complaint that his prophetic utterance was akin to being 'overpowered'; in the New Testament, Paul's encounter on the Damascus Road left him blinded for days. In the mystical tradition, Teresa of Avila describes being 'pierced in the heart' causing a pain that is 'spiritual not bodily' – this has well been explored as sexual language but the violence of the description should not be diminished. Recently published letters from Mother Teresa also indicate the 'agony of absence' she has endured following her religious experiences early in life. See Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2011), also Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light*, ed. B Kolodiejchuk (London: Rider, 2008)

<sup>215</sup> Otto predates these two critics, but his argument anticipates the criticisms that they proffer.

<sup>216</sup> Otto, *Idea*, p. 12-30. For the purpose of conserving space, I have not expounded the element of 'fascinans' which Otto also describes, this 'fascinating' quality of the numinous 'fastens' the individual, drawing them further and further into God. Fascinans' affectionate tone balances the holy terror of '*tremendum*'.

a proposition to support a proposition - but a subversion of propositional form to *point to* a holy shuddering in the presence of the one who is other. This detail reveals most clearly the poverty of the translation of the title as '*The Idea of the Holy*', for Otto's concern is not to develop a concept of holiness but an evocation of the sensation in the presence of the *numen*.

The significance of Otto's work for this thesis is clear. If God is revealed as mystery through the doctrine of providence, then Otto's numinous experience provides a concrete example. The sheer presence of the divine is received as divine act and in these experiences the individual is left aghast at the mystery of God. Otto's legacy in contemporary theology is established, yet a thesis of this magnitude is not without detractors. For our purposes, we will examine the very possibility of a 'non-conceptual' religious experience.<sup>217</sup>

### **3. A challenge to non-conceptual experience**

Otto would probably have concurred with Walter Stace's distinction:

'It is probably impossible...to isolate 'pure' experience. Yet, although we may never be able to find sense experience completely free of any interpretation, it can hardly be doubted that a sensation is one thing and its conceptual interpretation is another. That is, to say they are distinguishable, but not separable.'<sup>218</sup>

The desire to maintain a distinction between a raw experience and its interpretation is attractive for several reasons. Firstly, Stace represents a clear voice of those who wish to argue for a common core of experience amongst the encounters of all mystics. Subsequently the differences between the interpretive reports of mystics can be dismissed as cultural or surface differences that belie the underlying common core of experience. The strength of the ecumenical and inter-religious desire to achieve this unity should not be

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<sup>217</sup> A significant debate surrounding Otto's work has been the attempt to phenomenologically distinguish 'mysticism' from 'numinous' experience. For the sake of simplicity, I will be presuming a high degree of similitude between the two types of experience. Leon Schlamm argues this point vigorously in 'Rudolf Otto and Mystical Experience, *Religious Studies*, Vol.27, No.3 (Sep.1991), p. 389-398. Alternative views can be found in William Wainwright, *Mysticism, A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981) and in Ninian Smart, *Op Cit*.

<sup>218</sup> Walter Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1961), p. 31.

underestimated. Secondly, maintaining the reception of a 'pure' moment allows mystics to preserve their experience as ineffable and ignore any criticism of the report due to the inadequacy of language to convey the reality that they have encountered. The question is whether maintaining so called 'pure' moments of experience is possible and if not what the implications are for Otto's conception of ontological mystery.

Writing from a constructivist epistemology, Stephen Katz argues clearly against the possibility of non-conceptual experience. Starting from the basic assumption that:

'There are no pure unmediated experiences...all experience is processed through, organised by and made itself available to us in complex epistemological ways. The form of the experience as well as the interpretive report is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to and which shape his experience.'<sup>219</sup>

Primarily directed against those like Smart, Stace, James and Otto who presume a common core of experience that is only latterly diversified through the interpretive report, Katz's contention is that this approach ignores the complexity of how human epistemology works. Humans do not passively receive raw sense data, but are active participants in the shaping, consumption and interpretation of that experience. An example from developmental psychology is instructive. Piaget hypothesized that very young children have no sense of 'object permanence', so that when an object is out of sight it has disappeared from existence, thus causing great distress when a parent leaves the room. As a child matures, parental absence becomes a less traumatic experience once the concept of 'parental permanence' is acquired. The concept shapes the experience.<sup>220</sup> By contrasting reports of mystical experience from different religious traditions, Katz demonstrates that the distinctions between these accounts are too significant to conclude that each mystic shares a common experience.<sup>221</sup> It is to the great credit of Katz that he does not allege that the

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<sup>219</sup> Steven Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 26.

<sup>220</sup> Jean Piaget, Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, Trans. H. Weaver, (New York: Basic Books, 2002), pp. 13-19.

<sup>221</sup> Katz is not really interested in why these experiences originate or occur at all. The focus is continually on what form these experiences end with. Although Katz does speak of Christians experiencing Christ or Hindu's encountering Ganesh, his concern is more with the underlying philosophy of a religion as it experiences



mystic is falsifying the report or that the experience has not even occurred and is somehow 'all in the mind' (whatever that would mean); an experience is occurring to and with the mystic.<sup>222</sup> Instead, a simpler and more generous explanation is preferred: that the mystic brings pre-existing images and concepts that 'define in advance what the experience he wants to have and which he then does have'. The experience is not *sui generis* sent from some 'other'; mystical experience is self-generated by the mystic. Contrary to Otto's description of a 'non-conceptual moment'; mystical consciousness is not a-conceptual but deeply contextual.<sup>223 224</sup>

Katz bolsters his contention with an attack on ineffability:

'Paradox and ineffability do not function as terms which inform us about the context of an experience or any given ontological state of affairs. Rather they function to cloak experience from investigation and to hold mysterious whatever ontological commitments one has.'<sup>225</sup>

This is similar to Hume's complaint about 'priestly manipulation' that we encountered in the introductory chapter. Ineffability is a deceitful recourse to retain social and religious power by cutting off routes of investigation and discourse. Katz needs to undermine ineffability to re-establish the conceptuality of these special experiences. It is curious to note that apart from accusations of foul play, Katz offers no reason why these experiences which are reported to be indescribable should suddenly become intelligible to the second-hand observer. Instead, the grounds for Katz's assertion of interpretive power is simply assumed by Katz himself. This is a special type of epistemic arrogance, in which, Katz has almost

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mystical consciousness. So, a Buddhist is likely to speak in Monist terms whereas Kabbalists will maintain a strict object/subject dualism. Katz explains the mix of monism and dualism that occurs in Christianity by reference to the doctrinal messiness of the incarnation which he suggests mixes dualism and monism.

<sup>222</sup> Katz, p. 64.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>224</sup> Katz's bold constructivism is reminiscent of what Kidd describes as the 'Scientistic Stance' which is predisposed against other's experience of mystery. Consequently, the experiences of others must be translated into other (reduced) terms, for they cannot be accepted as they are presented. Kidd's own example is a neurobiologist who describes human mental life as 'simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in our brains'. Ian James Kidd, 'Receptivity to Mystery' *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4/3 (Autumn 2012), pp. 51-68. Similarly, Katz cannot accept the mystic's accounts and so must translate them into manageable terms.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. I understand Katz's use of 'mysterious' to be pejorative.

assumed the role of a psychoanalyst that can furnish mystics with 'true' interpretations of their bewildering experiences.

If we do accept Katz's constructivist epistemology, then serious implications arise for Otto's description of mystical encounters with the numinous. Melissa Raphael, normally a very supportive commentator on Otto, sadly reflects that we must accept the constructivist position that 'raw' experience does not exist, so that Otto's account of the numinous was 'more culturally conditioned by his Lutheran pietism than he would care to admit'.<sup>226</sup> Indeed the lack of reflexive self-awareness in '*Das Heilige*' is very strange, so that at times it seems as if Otto stands atop a pyramid of religious experiences on which he can pass neutral judgements, as they ascend and progress to his own Christian position. Perhaps it is unfair to judge Otto's monumental achievement through contemporary hermeneutical lenses so sensitised to claims of neutrality; his effort came at a time when ecumenism and interfaith work was in its infancy and locating this experiential common core had clear and positive implications for ecumenical work. However, with Lindbeck we must admit that despite concerted research efforts no such common core of religious experience has been identified.<sup>227</sup> The greatest contribution Katz makes is the clarity of his constructivist argument that successfully questions the presumption that all mystical experiences are 'somehow' similar. This is a significant blow to the Otto's ecumenist intentions. However, the secondary strands of Katz's argument are somewhat less successful.

Firstly, it would seem that this type of constructivism tries to prove rather too much. By hermetically sealing experience within the confines of cultural expectation, one is only able to account for experiences that would normally occur within a specific worldview. So, it is true that Hindu mystics *normally* experience some kind of monistic encounter with Ganesh or Shiva or that Catholics are more likely to see visions of Mary, yet this is not always the case. There are times when mystics find their experiences surprising and novel, encountering sensations, visions and emotions which run counter to their own expectation. Indeed, the level of persecution that has been directed against mystics is evidence that their

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<sup>226</sup> Raphael, p. 158-9.

<sup>227</sup> George Lindbeck describes this as type of universalism as 'experiential-expressivism' and specifically includes Otto as an exponent of it. *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 17.

experiences are not simply things which restate the religious orthodoxy of the time. Mystics are persecuted because of their perceived unorthodoxy, not their obedience to the prevailing religious authority. Katz is simply unable to account for surprise or novelty in mystical encounter. The second prime weakness of Katz's thesis is his desire to offer a comprehensive description of all mystical encounters. However, this desire for exhaustive description leads Katz to mis-represent mystics and their interpreters, so that he is guilty of the 'straw man' fallacy. Otto does believe that some, but not all numinous experiences are 'non-conceptual'. For example, he describes the 'feeling' of the numinous attached to ancient religious buildings.<sup>228</sup> A religious building with towers, swooping arches and altars is not 'a-conceptual' but literally and metaphorically a 'concrete' experience. Further 'shuddering', 'convulsions', 'ecstasy' are not 'a-conceptual'. Like Caputo on 'wholly other', Katz pushes the logic of the description of the numinous too far. Rather the point of Otto's description is to say that logic and linguistic concepts do not seem the most adequate way of describing such experiences. We might correctly describe Monet's 'Water Lilies' as a collection of around 250 paintings depicting flora floating on water with the occasional bridge but this misses the aesthetic value of an acclaimed masterpiece.<sup>229</sup> One might be describing these French masterpieces, yet such basic descriptions fail to express the aesthetic value and historic significance of the paintings; so 'ineffability' is not necessarily a prevarication, but an admission that descriptions may point towards, but do not capture an experience.<sup>230</sup>

The primary challenge represented by Katz's constructivist attack is not really the possibility of a-conceptual experience, but the corollary of that point. If all experience is simply constructed from cultural fragments within the human mind, claims that a God outside of us

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<sup>228</sup> Otto: "the tower of the Cathedral at Ulm is emphatically not 'magical' it is numinous", p. 68.

<sup>229</sup> Otto suggests that the sense of the numinous is akin to the difference between the aesthetic sense and the rational. p. 17, also p. 147. Similarly, James likens the ineffability of mystical experience to those who cultivate an understanding for music distinguished from those who are unable to appreciate it. p. 370.

<sup>230</sup> One is reminded of Wittgenstein's famous remarks on the aroma of coffee: 610. Describe the aroma of coffee. Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And for what are words lacking? But how do we get the idea that such a description must after all be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and not succeeded? ((I should like to say: "These notes say something glorious, but I do not know what." These notes are a powerful gesture, but I cannot put anything side by side with it that will serve as an explanation. A grave nod. James: "Our vocabulary is inadequate." Then why don't we introduce a new one? What would have to be the case for us to be able to?)) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), section 373.

has encountered an individual are only projections of a religious mind. This is a variation of Feuerbach's projection thesis on religion; religious experiences function as an objectification of religious states of feeling. Like a planetarium show, one may believe that one is seeing the stars when in actuality one is observing patterns of light upon the ceiling of a large room. Katz's argument veers close to solipsism; whereas the claim of Otto is that the wholly other has acted upon the individual from outside themselves. The numinous is not self-generated; God has come to them in a manner that they cannot explain or express. God has come to them as a mystery.

Thus, the implications of constructivism for Otto's description of the numinous do not seem so very grievous and the sense of 'ontological experience' is not lost. It has been important to receive Otto's perspective in a critical and considered manner and Katz's critique has helped to clarify Otto's own position.

#### **4. Conclusions on the Experience of the Numinous, Providence and Mystery**

The significance of Otto's work for this thesis is clear. If we accept Otto's argument that his description of the numinous, points not to some internal psychological mechanism or an experience *solely* generated by the surrounding social-cultural environment, but to the working of the *numen* on the individual, then we have the tentative beginnings of an account of the working of providence that is shaped and presented as mystery.

This briefer section sharpens and given greater depth to the sense of ontological mystery sketched in the first chapter, thus clarifying the map of mystery we began in Chapter One. Anticipating the discussion of mystery and providence between Barth and Wiles, the role of experience will be re-examined as Wiles rejects the possibility outright and Barth cautiously works with it.

## Chapter 4. Excursus on ‘Nonsense’

### 1.1. A brief typology

The overall thesis of this research is that mystery is an important and substantive theme within theology. Yet what separates a mystery from nonsense? Our focus is whether writers who make an appeal to mystery are giving themselves licence to say ‘anything’ and so have slipped into nonsensical statements. Such a query could undermine the thesis that mystery is a significant, meaningful theme within theology. To address this, we will consider a brief typology of ‘nonsense’ before trying to merge the themes. This typology is not meant to be exhaustive but indicative of possibilities.<sup>231</sup> Finally, this discussion is placed at the axis of the research, echoing our mapping of mystery and anticipating the differences between Barth and Wiles.

#### 1.1 Nonsense as exclamation

First, there is the common use of nonsense as a way of disregarding or dismissing a statement that someone has made. For example, Martin Luther on his discourse for ‘*How Christ must be Preached*’ considers the question of whether Christ may be preached in a manner which only shows his life as an ideal form of life to be imitated. Unimpressed, Luther writes ‘This kind of thing is simply childish and womanish nonsense.’<sup>232</sup> Luther does develop his argument further, yet this is a clear example of dismissing an opposing view primarily through insult and exclamation.

#### 1.2 Nonsense as intentional subversion of discourse

I propose that a second use of ‘nonsense’ refers to a mode of discourse that disregards or intentionally mixes ordinary notions and concepts to produce a particular effect. Two examples will suffice. Lewis Carroll’s, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, begins with the stanza:

‘Imperious Prima flashes forth

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<sup>231</sup> This typology will exclude ‘paradox’ from analysis. As mentioned in the opening chapter, I understand a paradox to be the affirmation of two statements that are seemingly opposite but in which both statements are true. Within physics, the paradoxical discovery that light functions as both a wave and a particle was initially understood as impossible but has been so thoroughly established that it is now part of the orthodoxy of Quantum mechanics.

<sup>232</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Trans. T.Wengert (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2016), p. 508.

Her edict to “begin it” –

In gentler tone Secunda hopes

“There will be nonsense in it” –

While Tertia interrupts the tale

Not *more* than once a minute.<sup>233</sup>

Floating down the river Isis, Carroll balances the demands of his second child with the third, to include nonsense, but not too much. Throughout the tale, the heroine encounters kind and pernicious characters which delight and infuriate her. Sometimes the requested ‘nonsense’ is not labelled ‘non-sensical’ but is expressed by importing unusual elements into ordinary settings, so that croquet is played using flamingos instead of mallets. At the climax of the story, a courtroom scene has the murderous Queen of Hearts insisting that a sentence precedes a verdict; ‘Stuff and Nonsense!’ Alice responds just before she wakes from her dream. The claim of the Queen can be dismissed not by ridiculing the statement but through arguing that the form is backwards, a nonsense too far for Alice. So, the elements of the story are all recognisable; we can picture the Cheshire Cat or a talking playing card, but the nonsense is generated by forcing them to do things other than would ordinarily be expected of cats and playing cards.

This second type of nonsense is an accusation that has been addressed against postmodern scholars. We recall the satirical effort of theoretical physicist, Alan Sokal, who contributed a parody article to the cultural studies journal, ‘*Social Text*’, using a combination of fashionable postmodern writers and scientific jargon to produce a final product that was grammatically correct yet scientifically incoherent.<sup>234</sup> The article was scientific nonsense, yet appeared ‘correct’ enough to be published in a serious academic journal. As in ‘*Alice in Wonderland*’, the ‘nonsense’ was not achieved by inventing new terms or subversion of syntax but drawing existing terms from multiple disciplines to concoct a caricature that was

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<sup>233</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1869), p. ii.

Josephine Gabelman, *A Theology of Nonsense* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), offers a fascinating effort to coordinate Lewis Carroll’s work with Christianity.

<sup>234</sup> Alan Sokal, ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’, *Social Text* #46/47, (1996) p. 217-252.

silly. Reflecting on the success of the publication, Sokal suggests that the article was ‘silly’ because it combined ‘meaningless or absurd statements with name dropping to show a false erudition; combined with a sloppy thinking and poor philosophy to make an easy and glib relativism.’<sup>235</sup> Terms like ‘poor’ and ‘sloppy’ are not intrinsically meaningful and actually function as a type of insult, however the overall effect Sokal produced was an intentional caricature, that is, to project an exaggerated representation of learnedness. The apotheosis of this type of nonsense is found in the ‘Postmodern generator’. This website produces a different essay on each visit which, whilst grammatically correct and using academic apparatus, is randomly generated to appear impressive without having any overall authorial meaning or intent.<sup>236</sup> Again this second sense of nonsense is either an effect deliberately produced by the author to entertain or, more subversively, to conceal a lack of content.<sup>237</sup>

### 1.3 Wittgensteinian nonsense.

So far, our typology of nonsense has been relatively uncontroversial. The third type is more contestable and for our purposes can be found in Wittgenstein:

‘1. The world is everything that is the case’

7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’<sup>238</sup>

The *Tractatus* is an ambitious work that seeks to ‘rehabilitate’ philosophy away from the traditional questions that have plagued philosophers through the development of a proper understanding of language. ‘Non-problems’ include questions such as ‘is the beautiful identical with the good?’<sup>239</sup> The role of philosophy is transformed from debate about such idealistic questions into the skill of delimiting the ability to speak or remain silent about a topic; philosophy is a critical, linguistic activity rather than a self-contained discipline.<sup>240</sup> This

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<sup>235</sup> Alan Sokal, ‘What the *Social Text* Affair Does and Does Not Prove’, 1997  
<http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/noretta.html> [accessed 26/4/17]

<sup>236</sup> Please see <http://www.elsewhere.org/journal/pomo/> for an example.

<sup>237</sup> This charge is levelled by Richard Dawkins, ‘Postmodernism Disrobed’ *Nature*, vol. 394, (July 1998) pp. 141-143. This gleeful and entertaining attack on the Humanities alleges that respected postmodern authors, Deleuze, Foucault or Baudrillard are basically charlatans using confusing and fashionable language to obscure their own lack of thought.

<sup>238</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* p. 29 and p. 108. The original numbering system of the *Tractatus* is split into seven sections with numbered sub-points under all but last statements of the work. Although this reads strangely in my thesis these numbers have been left in place to indicate their place as the first and last statements.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>240</sup> Apparently having ‘solved philosophy’, Wittgenstein ceased professional academic work as a philosopher at this point taking work as a gardener and secondary school teacher. The Stanford Philosophical Encyclopaedia

transformation rests on an understanding of language that is pictorial and embodied rather than abstract and idealised. Words do not have intrinsic meaning that can be divorced from their context. Instead words function only in conjunction with other words that paint a picture to describe a situation ('the picture is a model of reality' 2.12).<sup>241</sup> Even if a dictionary is consulted to define 'a single word', one will have to use other words to interpret the original request. The connection of words builds pictures that we have gathered from life-experience. So, language is inescapably shaped by the real physical world we inhabit. Any attempt to refer to things outside the 'world' is simply not possible, it is a 'senseless' saying which is therefore nonsense:

'The book will draw a limit to thinking, or rather –not to thinking but to the expression of thoughts...the limit can, therefore only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be nonsense.'<sup>242</sup>

Aesthetics, metaphysics and ethics are now 'nonsense' that should be left alone in silence. These areas attempt to pose a limit on the world, in their attempt to describe it as a whole in a 'higher' tone that transcends normality (they are 'mystical'); so, not belonging to the world, they cannot be spoken of, only gestured towards. This applies to all 'limits' that are set on the world so that even the *Tractatus* itself is a form of nonsense. Wittgenstein recognises that the delimiting gnomic aphorisms that fill the *Tractatus* are themselves a delimiting set of words that, once used as a ladder, must be kicked away.<sup>243</sup> It is a deeply debatable question for Wittgenstein's interpreters whether the nonsensical 'mystical' is useful, even if it must be 'kicked away' or is actually gibberish that is equivalent to saying 'piggly wiggly tiggly' (which is rather like our second type of nonsense).<sup>244</sup> It seems that the

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phrases this as a rather arrogant move, something that might be anticipated by his phrasing that the problems have essentially been finally solved (*Tractatus*, p. 28). In contrast his celebrated biographer Ray Monk attributes his practical work as a way of overcoming deep unhappiness. See Anat Biletzki, 'Wittgenstein', <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/> [17/7/17] and Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein; The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 191.

<sup>241</sup> *Tractatus*, p. 33.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. (from the preface)

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>244</sup> This phrase comes from Cora Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination and the *Tractatus*', *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. A. Crary and R. Read (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 151. There is an entire industry devoted to interpretation of Wittgenstein. The history and nuance of the argument is simply not possible or particularly beneficial to attempt to reproduce here. We might divide Wittgenstein's interpreters on nonsense into two rough categories. Norman Malcolm is often claimed as an exponent of a doctrinal interpretation that indicates we must study the doctrines of the *Tractatus* in order to understand it; for example, the proposition 'the world is



fundamental tension within the *'Tractatus'* has not been resolved. The *'Tractatus'* offers a series of propositions about how the world 'is' whilst simultaneously using these propositions to describe the very impossibility of setting limits to the world. Wittgenstein understood this contradiction; describing his own work as a ladder to be kicked away once ascended (6.54), meaning that the *'Tractatus'* itself is nonsense.<sup>245</sup> Much has been made of this comment, for my own part, even a ladder kicked away once a height has been reached has still served a definitive purpose in the ascent to knowledge. Cora Diamond's contribution that such 'mystical' nonsense is actually just noise rather like saying 'wiggly piggly tiggly' is fallacious. This comment is intellectual brashness that embraces our first type of nonsense (insult) rather than specific critique. Are we really so sure that 'wiggly piggly tiggly' is not meaningful? In Wittgensteinian terms does the phrase not picture a cartoonish pig or the sort of thing an adult would say to a baby? Even if we pushed the argument further and said that such nonsense was equivalent to 'asdl;khsdajhsd;sdf;jhsdf'(a keyboard randomly struck), the characters are out of order but it is not utterly meaningless for we can well imagine falling asleep at a keyboard or a child bashing a keyboard.<sup>246</sup> If for Wittgenstein, the picture is the meaning, then it is rather more difficult than Diamond admits to generate concepts that do not picture anything. Finally, we might consider 6.522 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.' It seems difficult to reconcile this mystical which shows itself, this 'inexpressible' that is afforded the definite article to be a type of 'nonsense' equivalent to 'piggly wiggle tiggly'. This 'nonsense' has a stronger meaning that refers to or, better gestures towards those things which cannot be said.

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the totality of facts, not of things' should be taken seriously and applied to our understanding of language. These propositions are nonsenses but are useful and so can be later disregarded. By contrast, Cora Diamond's 'therapeutic interpretation' attempts to show that the *Tractatus* has a hygienic role in cleansing philosophy of nonsense. There are no positive senses of nonsense only 'garden variety gibberish'. See Norman Malcolm, *Nothing is Hidden* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) and Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995). I owe the terms 'doctrinal' and 'therapeutic' to John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto Source: Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, Vol. 98 (1998), pp. 263-286.

<sup>245</sup> *Tractatus*, p. 108.

<sup>246</sup> When I initially wrote this, I had intended the keyboard assault to be random. On looking at the pattern I realised that all of the keys hit were from the central row of a QWERTY keyboard, a pattern reflecting the starting position of a person trained as a typist. Even when I tried to produce random scribble, my training came through, so that meaning subverted my conscious rejection of structure.

## **2. Nonsense and Mystery**

Armed with our definitions of mystery and sketch of nonsense, we are now in a better position to consider whether mystery is a disguised form of nonsense and indeed whether this is particularly problematic.

### **2.1 Nonsense as exclamation considered.**

The first sense of nonsense as exclamation does not cause any difficulty for any of our senses of mystery; it is merely an insult that has not adequately considered a point of view. Public debate is not solely rational but is a combination of analysis and rhetorical skill. To say, not only, 'I do not know' but 'it is not possible to know' is to invite opprobrium. Within a western context that thrives on the development and proliferation of positivist knowledge, an appeal to mystery can leave one open one to the declamatory charge of 'nonsense!'

### **2.2 Nonsense as intentional subversion of discourse considered**

The second sense of nonsense is more problematic for claims to mystery. In the first chapter, we noted David Hume's accusation that incoherencies in theology are deliberately invented and maintained, in a priestly attempt to raise levels of 'amazement', to affect mystery. This is a deliberate manipulation by acolytes to increase/maintain the socio-religious power of the church.<sup>247</sup> Frank Kirkpatrick made a similar type of accusation, claiming that a sense of mystery must be conjured to slake the human thirst for the unknown and mysterious.<sup>248</sup> At root, both Kirkpatrick and Hume are saying the same thing; that all types of mystery are a form of religious entertainment that effects emotional or spiritual reassurance on the believer. The nonsensical, logical difficulties of God made flesh, or the combination of divine government and human free will do not need to be taken any more seriously than how the Cheshire Cat teleports around Wonderland; they are maintained merely to stun the mind into religious obedience.

This second sense of nonsense requires substantial irony to sustain it. Irony is a rich term and I am defining irony as the gap within language between what is said and what is meant. In Wonderland, the creatures and setting are so clearly nonsensical that children implicitly

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<sup>247</sup> Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 54. Note the phrase 'socio-religious' is my own description of Hume's position and not an original Humean phrase.

<sup>248</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Mystery...*p. 2.

understand the humour. The fantastical is deliberately created by Lewis Carroll to enchant and entertain children. The reader is not intended to literally imagine a school girl growing and shrinking at alarming rates or drinking tea with anxious hares, the whimsical setting is intentionally comedic.<sup>249</sup> The postmodern writers attacked by Sokal are accused of deliberately writing pretentious nonsense to gain academic credibility. In both examples, the literary expression is vastly different from the intended meaning of the author. This second sense of nonsense requires the interpreter to peel away the layers of stated meaning to find the true meaning in the motives of the author; for this task the reader must apply suspicion to all texts.

Turning to our reflections on mystery, the question is whether the mysteries of faith, particularly how God relates to the world, can be treated as detached, ironic fabrications invented by authors to secure religious power. For example, Barth might claim that the election of Christ on behalf of humanity is a mystery beyond human understanding, but he may just be attempting to develop a career through causing controversy within his academic community. We will develop the argument as a type of thought experiment in conjunction with Barth's biography which will be established in the next chapter. We recall the boy 'Karli', who enjoyed a good street fight, engaged in regular conflict with colleagues which eventually escalated even to the German state itself. Such a biography may well be taken to imply a character with a self-aggrandising love of conflict willing to cause controversy to achieve international notoriety. We can extend this logic to Wiles; how can it be that a devout priest who continued serving the Sunday school children of Iffley could actually reject the basic doctrines of providence, the incarnation and the Trinity? A more likely scenario is that within the context of rampant analytic philosophy, Wiles wrote works that established a glittering career but did not reflect his own beliefs.

This thought-experiment is an example of an overly suspicious hermeneutic. Taking stated meanings and psycho-biographical analysis in order to offer insights into 'true' motives that

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<sup>249</sup> An alternative interpretation of Lewis Carroll's real intent is reported by Melanie Bayley who argues that Wonderland was constructed by Carroll as a satire of the new mathematics emerging at the time. Melanie Bayley, 'Alice's Adventures in Algebra: Wonderland Solved'. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20427391-600-alices-adventures-in-algebra-wonderland-solved/> [accessed 5/1/18] For more on irony see Vernon White, *Purpose and Providence* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 49-55 and Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science; Fundamentalism versus Irony 1700-1999* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

may have been hidden from the individual themselves. Hume and Kirkpatrick beg the question, why should their suspicious and cynical interpretation be preferred? The claim to offer insight into the 'true' motives of a theologian is a grasp for interpretive power. It is true that evaluating personal motivations is profoundly difficult; it seems even more challenging to assert that one interpreter, Kirkpatrick, has virtual God-sight over the *true* motive and meaning of authors who use mystery. This hermeneutical shift relocates the meaning of a text entirely from the author onto the interpreter who can use unassailable interpretive power. This is an assertion of power, but it is not an argument.

In sum, the argument proposed by Hume and Kirkpatrick is simple; theologians use mystery in an insincere and intentionally ironic mode. This aligns with our second type of nonsense as deliberate subversion of direct discourse by stating and meaning two different things. By using mystery to cloud clarity; theologians are intentionally attempting to trick believers into faith or working out their own personal gain. I have argued that this grants powers to the interpreter that is simply not available to them; further we will reverse the thought experiment to consider whether such an accusation is likely, that is, did our theologians gain from their uses of mystery? From our interlocutors, Barth was declared a public enemy by the Nazi party and chased out of his job and adopted country. This was not an ironic wink or joke but represented a threat on his life. It is salient to remember that very few of Barth's colleagues were willing to refuse the authority of the German Führer. In less dramatic fashion, Wiles was universally known as a gentle and polite Oxonian who caused great turbulence in the theological and ecclesiastical community by his contributions, particularly the *Myth of God Incarnate*. From conversations with his personal friends, this turbulence was profoundly difficult for him. Kirkpatrick and Hume's argument relies on theologians adopting mystery to profit from the rewards. To accuse these men of deliberately fostering falsehood to build a career, or for some imposed psychological foible, stretches credulity.

In sum, we can make a distinction. Stating that doctrine is believed in error is not the same thing as accusations of nonsense. One can reject the mystery of God in providence and call it an error in logic or a loss of descriptive powers. However, to state that theologians are applying our second type of 'nonsense' is to make a claim to interpretive power that is difficult to demonstrate and further, that given the evidence of the lack of gain, cannot be applied to Barth or Wiles.

### 2.3 Wittgensteinian nonsense considered

Our third sense of nonsense leads neatly from this second type. The *Tractatus* has been profoundly stimulating for theologians, even though, if followed strictly, there is little space for theology and certainly not for providence.<sup>250</sup> Firstly, consider the flatness of the statement 'God does not reveal himself in the world' (6.432).<sup>251</sup> Secondly, in this third type, theology, ethics and metaphysics are 'nonsense' that should be passed over in silence; they claim to speak about things which cannot be spoken of; therefore they are nonsense. If one adheres to this, strictly, further theological dialogue is ruled out. This is essentially the point John Caputo offers when he refuses the possibility of language about a 'wholly other'.<sup>252</sup> For Caputo, this truth signified the end of theology; for Kirkpatrick it became the rallying call towards anthropomorphism 'for it is all we have'.<sup>253</sup> The act of continuing theology is a defiance of Wittgensteinian orthodoxy and yet reflection on these denials of theology have afforded fertile opportunities for theologians who have not all followed Kirkpatrick's capitulation to anthropomorphism. Returning to a point in our second chapter, we recall our discussion of the importance of analogy and Denys Turner's understanding of apophaticism. In brief, our language about God is inevitably and irrevocably analogical; there is no correct combination of terms that 'capture' the identity of the infinite creator. Sitting between univocity and equivocation, analogy attempts to say what God is like, without making an absolute claim to an exact description. With Turner, the supreme wholly otherness of God is evoked through the conscious subversion of language. To return to an earlier example, as God is neither male nor female, affirming both genders emphasises his transcendence of both.<sup>254</sup> Perhaps the incarnation, through a combination of sheer opposites that are flesh and spirit allows us to express something of the uniqueness of the person of Christ. Returning to Wittgensteinian terminology, the theologian is left in silence, not because the issue is 'passed over' but at the sheer otherness of God. We may recall Barth's early wrestling with his weekly sermons in Safenwil; 'Preaching is impossible from the start

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<sup>250</sup> Lindbeck's 'cultural linguistic' approach to theology which birthed so much of post-liberalism owes an enormous and unrecognised debt to Wittgenstein. Similarly, Kathryn Tanner demonstrates familiarity with Wittgenstein but makes no mention that the phrase 'theology as grammar' is one of the few overtly theological statements in *Philosophical Investigations*. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 116.

<sup>251</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 107.

<sup>252</sup> See p. 63.

<sup>253</sup> Kirkpatrick, p., 152.

<sup>254</sup> In an era of increased awareness of transsexuality this example may be slightly less clear.

because it must be concerned with God.<sup>255</sup> For Barth, this acknowledgement of sheer otherness grew into the requirement for confession.

The difficulty of embracing this Wittgenstenian form of nonsense is that it could imply a license for the theologian to assert any combination of words that he or she wishes and claim it as a theological truth that mysteriously expresses the divine. This would seem to be quite problematic. One might intend to describe the invasive nature of rhododendrons or the melting point of steel and discover that one was actually talking about God. The risk of this approach is that theology becomes so very broad that theology is demoted to the level of insipid generality. The problem of this argument is a cosmological presumption of human life as a 'given'. In the modern west we are used to a clear line between the secular and the sacred. For example, on receiving the writings of the astronomer Laplace, Napoleon is said to have asked why his model of the solar system did not include God; 'I had no need of that hypothesis' replied Laplace.<sup>256</sup> This is the foundational framework for Western modernity; a secular universe that actively excludes God from discussion. Consequently, when we speak of flowers, stars and animals we have no thought of the divine creator. However, these presumptions are hostage to a curiously unexamined dualism, (whether chronological or ontological) that resonates with a model of providence in which the creation is normal and talk of God is extraordinary.<sup>257</sup> But within a Christian framework that retains the doctrine of an ex nihilo creation, nature is not 'natural', it is a gift that points to its originator. Within the scriptures, this model is commonplace; the psalmists use creation images to reflect theologically, so that 'the heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps 19.1) and 'the trees and rivers clap their hands' (Ps 98.8). Within the Gospels, Jesus consistently used agricultural images, 'a sower went out to sow' (Mk 4.3) and 'consider the ravens' (Lk 12.24) to establish theological points. Language as a facet of human culture is constructed upon the natural environment, which is the gift of God. In this sense, all language serves a theological function for, without the originating speech-act of creation; there would be no human

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<sup>255</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth, His Life from letters and autobiographical texts*, Trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1976), p. 90.

<sup>256</sup> This anecdote is rather difficult to trace historically, however the rhetorical effect of the example is not diminished by questions of historicity. The earliest reference I can find is from Augustus De Morgan, '*A Budget of Paradoxes*' (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1872), pp. 249-250.

<sup>257</sup> The traditional division between general and special providence only reinforces this dualistic narrative.

speech. Therefore, neither banality nor generality proscribe a theological quality to speech. This is an extension of the earlier discussion on the mystery of life.

Recasting our language as fundamentally theological is helpful and yet this remains somewhat unsatisfactory. Can one say *anything* and still meaningfully construct a gesture towards God using nonsense-mystery as an umbrella term? One of the consistent features of mystery throughout our study has been the direction of the mystery. Despite the claims of critics to the contrary, none of our contributors, including as we shall see, Barth and Wiles, sought to build an appeal to mystery; rather, they encountered mystery as they wrote their theology.<sup>258</sup> Mystery came to them. I propose that theological talk about mystery can be from a combination of ontological and epistemological mysteries. Ontological mystery represents the encounter; epistemological mystery the attempt to render this encounter in linguistic form.<sup>259</sup> The lived experience of the disciples encountering Jesus of Nazareth in his words and deeds led the early church to begin worshipping him as divine. In essence, the theological development leading to the formula of Nicea is rooted in the attempt to render this particular experience in conceptual form. This response is fundamentally Barthian; Jesus is not primarily a concept or idea, but the ultimate mystery of God come to us in flesh. Therefore, language about the mystery of God is not totally free, it is constrained and grounded in the action of God in Christ. The 'rules' for theological speech are not generated by theologians but fundamentally refer to the action of God that Israel and the Church have encountered in history.

### **3. Concluding the excursus**

The initial question posed as we began this excursus was 'is mystery a license for theologians to say anything? Three types of nonsense were considered; 'exclamation', 'intentional subversion of dialogue' and 'Wittgenstenian nonsense'. From these three senses we established that the notion of 'nonsense' as 'meaningless talk' is difficult to

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<sup>258</sup> By 'critics' I am referring back again to Kirkpatrick's claim that mystery must be generated to satisfy cravings for the unknown'.

<sup>259</sup> Wittgenstein never met Barth. On initially hearing of Barth's thesis he reputedly blocked his ears and refused to listen saying how arrogant it all seemed. On reading *CD 1.1*, Wittgenstein said 'this must have stemmed from an intense religious experience'. Rush Rhees, Hermine Wittgenstein, Fania Pascal, F.R. Leavis, John King and M. O'C. Drury, *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. R.Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 146.

establish and even harder to rid of theological meaning. We have established that that use of the term 'mystery' does not give unbridled license to the theologian, they are not allowed to say 'anything'. Instead, mystery is constrained from within by the subject of theology: God who has come to us in Christ. The divine action is mysterious and elusive but to speak of such things is not meaningless nonsense but a meaningful theme within theological discourse.



## Chapter 5. Introducing Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles

### 1. Introduction

Comparing Maurice Wiles and Karl Barth presents a fascinating contrast of theological development and the Christian life. Living in times of rapid social change, neither theologian remained stationary in their position. Wiles moved from teenage evangelicalism to the forefront of Anglican liberalism. Barth departed from the theological liberalism of his training in Berne to begin a rich theological journey of maturation, culminating in his '*Church Dogmatics*'.<sup>260</sup> In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Barthian studies have become rather fashionable, whilst the fame of Wiles has somewhat faded. We begin our contrasting look at the way these characters use mystery in relation to providence with some brief points of biographical background. It is worth mentioning at the outset that more space will be devoted to Barth than Wiles. This division of space does not reflect a theological preference but rather a difference in their writing styles. Few theologians can claim to match the bulk of material written by Barth; the '*Church Dogmatics*' runs to 9,186 pages without considering his smaller works such as sermons, theological histories or biblical studies.<sup>261</sup> It is necessary to devote adequate space when writing about a detailed theologian like Barth whereas Wiles' love of 'economy' resulted in multiple short volumes that are very focused on particular topics. For example, Barth is quite content to write diversions in smaller font that can last 20 pages whilst Wiles' offers brief endnotes that rarely stray beyond biographical notation. The sheer difference in volume between our two authors can make Wiles' contribution seem paltry, yet this would be an unfair conclusion. Wiles wrote a multitude of books with special focus on patristic theology and doctrine; Barth's prolixity is exceptional not Wiles' economy. Yet idiosyncrasy does not fully explain their different outputs, this difference is also methodological. Wiles prized economy as a methodological value that is part of the 'essential ingredients in a worthwhile approach'. Wiles is keen to

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<sup>260</sup> Culmination might be a misleading term for Barth's continuing theological development is laid quite open within the texts. Famously, '*Der Romerbrief*' was completely re-written only three years after its initial publication in 1918, so that virtually no 'stone remains in its old place'. In the Preface to the English Translation (published after the sixth German edition) Barth pleads for generosity from the reader that they 'ought not to bind too tightly the Professor at Bonn to the Pastor of Safenwil'. Finally, '*Dir Kirchliche Dogmatik*' was never completed yet the sheer bulk of material means that it is really too large to be considered a single culmination. Categorising Barth is not an easy or particularly fruitful task and I will largely aver from it. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Sixth Edition, Trans. E. Hoskyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 1-2.

<sup>261</sup> Eberhard Busch calculates that this makes the '*Church Dogmatics* nine times as long as Calvin's '*Institutes*' and almost twice as long as Thomas' '*Summa Theologica*'. Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 486.

say *what can* be said about God, which is then ‘tested against the facts.’<sup>262</sup> Consequently, a piece with the ambitious title of ‘*Remaking Christian Doctrine*’ runs to a mere 146 pages; famously ‘*Church Dogmatics*’ ran to 13 volumes and remained unfinished. Like a theme in a symphony, this distinction will recur throughout this dialogue.

At this stage we will engage with our interlocutors separately, first Barth and then Wiles, by establishing a biography and then outlining their understanding of providence. Both men were theologians for the majority of their working lives, consequently, their biography is dominated by their intellectual development. We include a short biography beyond academia because it helps to resist thinking about Barth and Wiles as detached representatives of alternative ideas. They were real men who fought in wars, raised families and suffered. Systematic theology is a discipline that is often accused of being overly abstract and formalised; a form of theological-philosophical discourse that is intellectually divorced from the rest of life.<sup>263</sup> Very few, if any, theologians subscribe to a formalised mode of theology that does not impact the wider world and even the most seemingly abstract of doctrines have practical implications for the individual and the church.<sup>264</sup> In the case of providence, the life of the theologian is particularly pertinent for how their formulation is received. In a doctrine that encompasses free will and determinism, the question of evil and even the meaning of life, it is significant to know what kind of life these men lived. For example, Barth’s doctrine of providence does not engage in the question of evil in a focused way. It is common to critique Barth for this, but it is rarely acknowledged that Barth suffered acutely; not only did he lead the theological resistance to Nazism but in the midst of this difficult experience he lost his son Matthias. Personal suffering is not a

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<sup>262</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Remaking...* p. 19-25. Kant is not invoked here but the phenomenal/noumenal divide looms.

<sup>263</sup> Thiselton protests that ‘systematic theology need not be an abstract, static system divorced from life’. The protest indicates that this is how it is often received. Anthony Thiselton, *Systematic Theology*, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), p. 5.

<sup>264</sup> Recognising the importance of historical context of doctrine for the implications of systematic theology is powerfully demonstrated by Max Weber analysis of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. Although Weber’s account makes historical errors regarding his analysis of puritan movements (acknowledged in the introduction by Anthony Giddens), Weber’s powerful interpretation of the pastoral impact of the systematic doctrine is instructive; Calvin’s account of predestination meant that it was impossible to be sure of one’s own salvation. For the populace this unknowing created enormous anxiety, only relieved (ironically) through strenuous disavowal of doubt or enormous energy in worldly endeavours. We do not need to follow the Weber’s argument that this exertion of energy laid the foundation for capitalism, yet it is a helpful and instructive example of how a doctrine explicated in a systematic fashion, shorn of historical context has profound and unintended consequences. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. T Parsons (New York: Dover Publication, 2003), p. 56-79. Originally published 1958.

substitute for argument and the critique may well be accurate. However, Barth's words do possess integrity, even pathos, if we consider that his celebration of God's comprehensive providential guidance included Barth's own suffering.

Within the overall thesis that mystery is a significant, inescapable theme of theology and that this is demonstrated especially within providence, this chapter introduces our interlocutor's variant understanding of the doctrine. This overview will allow us to consider how mystery functions within providence.

## 2. A biographical sketch of Karl Barth

Karl Barth's story is better known than that of Wiles but bears repetition.<sup>265</sup> The eldest of four children, Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1886 to Fritz and Anna Barth. His father was a Swiss Reformed minister and latterly a Professor of New Testament and Early Church History at the University of Berne.<sup>266</sup> It is fair to say that Karl Barth was a combative character throughout his career. This contentious streak was present even during his early education; indeed, Barth's own childhood diaries record him as an unruly child who disliked school, who was a member of neighbourhood gangs and partial to physical altercations with other children.<sup>267</sup> Later Barth attended University in Bern, Berlin, Tübingen and Marburg. Following ordination by his own father in 1909 at Berne Cathedral, Barth served as a '*Pasteur suffragant*' in Geneva. Describing his own sermons, Barth recalled that they were 'very academic' and were often up to 16 pages long - a product of the liberal Marburg school of theology with maxims such as 'The greatest thing is what takes place in our hearts...before I can know God, I must know myself.' On the Chalcedonian Christ, he wrote 'if Jesus were like this, I would not be interested in him.'<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> This account draws very heavily on Busch's biography of Barth. It is a strange form of biography. Busch acted as Barth's secretary after illness incapacitated his lifelong secretary and confidant Charlotte Von Kirschbaum (Lollo) in later life. Busch drew it together from an uncomplete autobiography personal diaries and conversations with Barth himself. At times, the work is hagiographic and avoids penetrating questions (most obviously on the relationship with Lollo) however it is the closest thing to an autobiography that we have and has been extensively resourced. Consequently, I contend that we are able to accept the timeline and of course Barth's own impressions, whilst treating some of the incidents with cautious reserve.

<sup>266</sup> John Webster, 'Introducing Barth', *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>267</sup> In Eberhard Busch's word, Barth was 'something of a layabout' – p20 and Barth's own diary records leading childhood gangs, disputes with teachers and 'a good deal of bashing up'. Busch, *Karl Barth...*, pp. 20-25.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. I record a little detail here about Barth's early liberalism because it is often skipped over and not demonstrated.

During Barth's first pastorate at Safenwil (1911-21), he continued to focus on his preaching ministry. This early preaching was not always warmly greeted;<sup>269</sup> yet it was the grind of pastoral and preaching ministry that unshackled him from his theological heritage:

'Preaching is impossible from the start because it must be concerned with God. We should begin at the beginning that "God is God" ...Why did those question marks and exclamation marks which are the very existence of the pastor play really no role at all in the theology I knew? Why then did the theologians I knew seek to represent the pastor's perplexity...as being tolerable...instead of facing and perhaps discovering in it, in its very own insuperableness and intolerableness, the real theme of theology.'<sup>270</sup>

During his time at Safenwil, amidst pastoral work and standing in solidarity with socialist workers, Barth wrote his first edition of *'Der Romerbrief'*. The phrase 'God is God' is especially important to this commentary as it situated the primacy of the 'infinite qualitative distinction'.<sup>271</sup> The publication of the first edition eventually led to his appointment as Professor of Reformed Studies at the University of Göttingen. Due to this professional move, Barth had to inject what he describes as 'unprecedented zeal' into his working life with night and day study, so that lectures delivered at 7.00 am would often only be completed at 3.00 am.<sup>272</sup> During this time, he initiated a journal on dialectical theology with Friedrich Gogarten and Eduard Thurneysen, *'Zwischen den Zeiten'* (*Between the Times*); Barth's relationship with dialectical theology varies considerably over time, yet talk of a dialectical 'stage' misleadingly implies that the dialectical approach is something Barth discarded.<sup>273</sup> This quotation from one of his lectures illustrates Barth's understanding of dialectical theology:

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>271</sup> See Barth, *Epistle*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>272</sup> Busch, p. 127.

<sup>273</sup> Tillich is happy to call Barth the 'Founder and head of Dialectical Theology' yet contends that Barth is more of a 'supernatural' theologian because he does not take his dialectical approach far enough. Paul Tillich, 'What is wrong with dialectical theology', *Journal of Religion*, Vol XV No 2, (April 1935), p. 127. George Hunsinger describes Barth as adopting various patterns of thought including a Hegelian 'Aufhebung' pattern of affirmation, cancellation and reconstitution as a pattern of theology. This is recognisably a dialectical pattern but Hunsinger's point is that dialectic is one sort of approach (the other two are listed as 'Chalcedonian and Trinitarian') rather than a characteristic of all Barth's work. George Hunsinger, *How*, p. 85.

‘As theologians we ought to talk of God. But we are human and so we cannot talk of God. We ought therefore to recognise both our obligation and our inability and in so doing give God the glory.’<sup>274</sup>

Significantly, for our purposes, the crisis created by the inability to fulfil the obligation is itself a source of theology, a fruitful mystery to be explored but ‘never got behind’. At Göttingen, Barth produced his first attempt at a ‘*Christian Dogmatics*’, a project which was scrapped and later totally rewritten. Despite being identified as a leader of the dialectical group, Barth was isolated at Göttingen and his shift of attention towards Reformation Theology bemused his contemporaries including Brunner and Tillich.<sup>275</sup>

First moving to Münster, then to Bonn, Barth gained increasing recognition and attracted large crowds. When biographies of Barth are recorded, his contribution to the Barmen Declaration is often cited; it would however, be a mistake to reduce his political involvement to this one declaration. It is interesting to reflect on the affect that the rise of National Socialism had on the writing of Barth’s ‘*Dogmatics*’ and it is surely difficult to disentangle Barth’s utter aversion to Natural Theology from the rise of Nazism.<sup>276</sup> Barth was dismayed by his colleague’s willingness to sign statements of obedience to Adolf Hitler and refused to give a Nazi salute at the beginning of his lectures.<sup>277</sup> Eventually banned from speaking in public Barth fled to Basle. There he continued his political opposition by writing letters of support to pastors throughout Germany, teaching at Basle University and writing the ‘*Church Dogmatics*’.<sup>278</sup> After the war, Barth was involved in the reconstruction and

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<sup>274</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God*...p. 186.

<sup>275</sup> Busch, p. 153.

<sup>276</sup> Although this aversion –seen prominently in *The Epistle to the Romans* - does predate 1933, so I do not suggest that this is a causal relationship. However, when a repressive government seeks the support of the church as the natural outworking of God’s will (see below) it would be difficult to imagine that National Socialism did anything but strengthen Barth’s resolve against the cause of Natural Theology. So Barth describes his own career: ‘As far as I can recall there was no stage in my theological career when I had more than the very next step forward in mind and planned for it...I used what I thought I had learned and understood so far to cope with this or that situation...often with some subject presented to me from outside...e.g. a political issue. Busch, pp. 418-421.

<sup>277</sup> Barth’s old colleague, Gogarten published an article stating that ‘for us the will of God is identical with the law of the German people’. A comment that disgusted Barth so that he ceased contributing to the dialectical journal he had founded, Busch p229. Barth requested an additional line to be added to the oath of obedience as ‘in so far as I am able as a servant of Jesus Christ’ but this was refused. Busch pp. 224-255.

<sup>278</sup> This resistance may sound insignificant now; however, Emmanuel Hirsch called Barth ‘the enemy of the German People’ and a soviet Commissar named him the enemy of the German-Russian alliance and of atheism’. Barth was drafted for the Swiss Army for 104 days in 1940 describing himself as ‘not a very good or

rehabilitation of Germany, calling for forgiveness and reconciliation for the nation. He remained at Basle for the remainder of his career, with the world coming to him, as his lecture halls were full of international students, and he was consumed by the serious task of continuing his *'Dogmatics'*.<sup>279</sup> In these later years, as his fame increased, Barth eventually accrued 11 honorary doctorates, won the 'Sonning Prize' and latterly Sigmund Freud Prize for literature.<sup>280</sup> Finally, Barth advanced the nascent ecumenical movement by delivering a speech at the World Council of Churches.

Commentary on Barth sometimes revolves around his theological development and the question of whether the early Barth is commensurable with the later Barth.<sup>281</sup> Barth reflected quite deeply on his own progression but was unsatisfied with this description;

'There is no 'new Barth' as so many hastily assume today. But it is true that I have learnt some things on the way...while once man had apparently no place in my theology, I think over the years I have learned to speak of God the creator and his relationship with man as his creature in a way that allows him a greater prominence.'<sup>282</sup>

Since his death, Barth's fame has only grown. Within the academic-theological world, Barth engages the minds of a range of writers from evangelically-oriented TF Torrance, who wrote extensive interpretive work, to post-liberal George Hunsinger who devoted a prominent career largely on Barthian interpretation. The eminent Princeton Theological Seminary houses a 'Centre for Karl Barth Studies' which hosts annual conferences and symposiums dedicated to his work. Even a popular evangelical magazine such as *'Christianity Today'* can eulogize that Barth is 'the most important theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'.<sup>283</sup> Beyond

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dangerous fighter'. Finally, Barth was involved in a form of secret Swiss Government society to plan for the potential invasion. Busch, pp. 300-310.

<sup>279</sup> Barth did return to Bonn for a few guest semesters. Busch pp. 332-3.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., p. 359, 468 and 489. The Sonning Prize is awarded to those who make outstanding contributions to European Culture, former winners include Winston Churchill, Simone de Beauvoir and Niels Bohr. The prize fund equates to monies exceeding £100,000. See [http://event.ku.dk/sonning\\_prize/](http://event.ku.dk/sonning_prize/) [accessed 16/6/16]

<sup>281</sup> Hunsinger offers a very helpful overview of Balthasar, Berkouwer, Jenson and Torrance's divergent interpretations. pp. 3-23. Balthasar is an example of an interpreter who considered the elder Barth to have abandoned the 'whole conceptuality governing the early work'. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1961), p. 60.

<sup>282</sup> Busch, p. 418.

<sup>283</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/karl-barth.html> [accessed 17/6/16]

ecclesiastical confines, Barth was on the cover of 'TIME' magazine in April 1962<sup>284</sup> and Barth's image has even adorned stamps in Germany.<sup>285</sup>

With some understanding of his background we turn to Barth's understanding of the doctrine of providence. Barth's formal attempt at a doctrine of providence is found in 'Church Dogmatics III.3(CD)'.<sup>286</sup> Wiles' biography and account of providence will follow.

### 2.1 A summary of Barth's formulation of Providence in CD III.3

Barth structures his doctrine under the following headings:

1. The Doctrine of Providence, Its basis and form
2. God the Father as Lord of His creature
3. God and Nothingness
4. The Kingdom of Heaven, the Ambassadors of God and their opponents.

This summary will look primarily at the first two sections and refer to section three without full summation. At this juncture, Barth's Angelology would be an unnecessary diversion for our purposes.

#### 2.1.1 The Doctrine of Providence, Its basis and form

Eschewing the stance of Medieval Scholasticism that positioned providence under the doctrine of God, Barth places providence firmly within a doctrine of creation.<sup>287</sup> For Barth, predestining election occurs in God prior to creation and so properly belongs to the doctrine

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<sup>284</sup> Image attributed to Robert Vickrey, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,896838,00.html> [accessed 19/2/2016]



<sup>285</sup> This is an image of the Deutsche Bundespost stamp in 1986 marking the centenary of Barth's birth. This image is sourced through a Google Images search for 'Karl Barth Stamp' – 19/2/2016

<sup>286</sup> There has been a recent surge of interest in 'Church Dogmatics III.3'. Darren Kennedy, *Personalism and Providence* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), Christopher Green, *Doxological Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), Sung-Sup Kim, *Deus Providebit: Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth on the providence of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), Mark Elliot, *Providence Perceived* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, GMBH, 2015) We should note that Barth's doctrine only occupies a portion of this thesis and so the summary is necessarily shorter and more shallow than if the entire work was explicating III.3

<sup>287</sup> CD II.2 developed Barth's distinctive doctrine of election.

of God.<sup>288</sup> Providence is the execution of the elective will of God in relation to the creature. From the outset, this placement indicates Barth's desire to balance the emphasis on both creator and creation. It is of paramount import to retain this balance, for reading the earlier sections of *III.3* gives the impression that Barth has little to say about the creature, a sense that is redressed as the doctrine develops. Barth offers one early definition;<sup>289</sup>

'By "providence" is meant the superior dealings of the creator with His creation, the wisdom, omnipotence, and goodness with which He maintains and governs in time this distinct reality according to the counsel of his will.'<sup>290</sup>

This description is simultaneously positive and defensive. The two principle characters of creator and creation are established; 'superior dealings' is preferred to language about action and is further developed as maintenance and governance. Barth refuses to collapse the doctrine of providence into the *ex nihilo* act of creation; so, creation is maintained and governed because it already exists.<sup>291</sup> By 'distinct reality' Barth is clarifying the status of creation in relation to God, therefore offering an advanced refutation of any sense of monism that might be suggested by the overwhelming supremacy of God. What is surprising about this early definition is the lack of 'Barthian' features; Christ is not mentioned at all and instead a 'concept' is described before refining the particular Christian meaning of the term.

Barth describes;

'The simple meaning of the doctrine of providence may thus be summed up in the statement that in the act of creation God the creator as such has associated himself with his creature as such as the Lord of its history and is faithful to it as such...In this history, therefore, we need not expect turns and events which have nothing to do with His lordship and are not directly in some sense acts of His lordship. This Lord is

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<sup>288</sup> 'Predestination...does not presuppose the act of creation and the existence of creatures but is itself their presupposition'. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, Trans. G.W Bromiley, R.J Ehrlich (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) n.b. was originally published in 1950), p. 5.

<sup>289</sup> One must be careful when accepting definitions in Barth, his elliptical and dialectical style means that he offers multiple definitions and whilst these are not contradictory tend to offer different shades of meaning.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>291</sup> It must be noted that Barth by distinguishing creation and governance, Barth is not offering some sort of process model in which God does not create *ex nihilo*. c.f. David Ray Griffin, "Creation out of Nothing, Creation out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Steven T. Davis (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 2001).



never absent, passive, non-responsible or impotent but always present, active, responsible and omnipotent.<sup>292</sup>

Barth had only two pictures in his study - Mozart and Calvin.<sup>293</sup> We should not ignore Barth's predilection for reformation theology. The above statement is highly reminiscent of Calvin's own understanding of providence:

'...the providence we mean is not one by which the Deity sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, but one by which he, as it were, holds the helm, and overrules all events. Hence his providence extends not less to the hand than to the eye'.<sup>294</sup>

For Calvin and Barth, providence is fundamentally about the Lordship of God in the created order. Writing from feudal Switzerland, Calvin was keen to repudiate the sense of a distant and uninterested Lord; coming from a more modern state, Barth retains the language of biblical and reformation language of Lordship but attempts to ground it in a personal and distinctively Christian mode. For Barth, God is never absent from his creation, in all things and in all events God remains Lord:

'The Christian belief in providence is also faith in the strict sense...the man who lives by his faith may know that in everything which may happen to him he has to do with God.'<sup>295</sup>

Barth's departure from reformation thought stemmed from what he understood as the collective failure to move beyond a generic principle into the Lordship developed and elucidated by Christ.<sup>296</sup> This Lordship is a 'fatherly lordship' which refers not only to loving,

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<sup>292</sup> Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 12.

<sup>293</sup> Busch, p. 412. 'Barth wondered whether he was the only theologian to have both pictures of the men 'side by side'.

<sup>294</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 116.

<sup>295</sup> Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 18.

<sup>296</sup> There is a little sadness in this tone: 'But we have to take note of the astonishing fact that the older Protestant theology was guilty of an almost total failure even to ask concerning the Christian meaning and character of the doctrine of providence...even in Calvin...we seek in vain for a single pointer in this direction.' Later, '...this syncretistic belief in God and providence with no specifically biblical and Christian substance proved to be inadequate in the face of the Lisbon earthquake, let alone the external and internal catastrophes of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The hour had to come and has now come when belief in history and its immanent demons could replace faith in God's providence and the word 'providence' could become a favourite on the lips of Adolf Hitler.' *CD III.3*, pp. 30-33.

friendly or kindly qualities, but that the God who 'sits in Government is the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. The implication of knowing the identity of the God who rules is that we 'do not stare into a void' or deal with a 'stranger's hand' but with the God who, as Father of Christ, is 'for us'.<sup>297</sup> Barth makes no distinguishable separation between sacred and secular history; instead, the sacred acts of salvation history become the kernel of meaning for the entirety of history. Secular history is accorded shape and meaning by the revelations of the identity of God, who rules the 'sacred history'. This constitutes the 'starting point' for Barth's doctrine of providence. The implication for this personal doctrine of providence is that knowledge of God's providential ruling is not something axiomatic or naturally available; neither reflection on world history nor observation of the 'natural order' will make this purposiveness available to humans. Knowledge of God's fatherly care for creation is known only by the revelatory life of Christ. In the light of Wiles' view to be explored shortly, it is important to note how strongly Barth's doctrine depicts God as present within worldly events:

'From this character of providence as an actual and sovereign work of God there follows the fact that in its sway, we have always to do with God Himself. We certainly have to do with Him in His relationship with His creatures, His presence in their presence, His working in their works His freedom in their freedom.'

Barth leaves no room for doubt here. It is not just an opinion but a 'fact' that we have always to do with God at every moment. This is the case even when it is impossible to perceive the hand of God:

'...faith in God the Lord, is necessarily faith in His Lordship even at points where there is no such revelation, where to all appearances we have to do only with creaturely occurrence, where the orders and contingencies of nature, the works of caprice and the cleverness or folly, the goodness or badness seems to be the only reality. Nevertheless, God himself is He who is freely and graciously and mightily present and active at these points...This Nevertheless is the problem of the belief in providence and the doctrine of providence.'<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>298</sup> *CD III.3* pp. 43-44.

The fundamental implication of this point is that no experience of humanity can undermine this assertion of faith. It is noteworthy that this 'Nevertheless' occurs in 1950; following the death of his son Matthias in 1941 and 5 years after first-hand observation of the evils of Nazi Germany.<sup>299</sup> The relevance of this is clear, for even the profound experiences of these personal and political tragedies do not dislodge Barth's belief in God's providential accompaniment, rule and preservation of creation. In a classic Barthian movement, belief in providence always moves from within a Christological founded vision of creation to the creaturely experience of creation.

### **2.1.2 God the Father as Lord of His creature**

Barth follows the traditional division of *conservatio*, *concursus* and *gubernatio*. For clarity, we will subdivide between these headings.

### **2.2 'Conservatio' – Preservation of the Creature**

Barth's formulation of *conservatio* emphasises that the initial act of creation did not create a reality which now has a life independent from God; instead, all life is sustained and remains dependent on the creator at every moment. God did not have to create, neither does He have to sustain. Rather, the act of continual preservation is a sign of the gracious free choice of God.<sup>300</sup> In words reminiscent of the Genesis narrative,<sup>301</sup> Barth ascribes the self-reproductive ability of creatures to the manner of God's preservation, so that God acts towards and within the created order. That is, continuation of life is given to the creature and maintained through divine preservation. This preservation of creation is not some intrinsic good, but has the specific and binding purpose of seeing the glory of God in history and specifically the revelation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.<sup>302</sup> Here Barth re-asserts the doctrine of election as the internal basis of the covenant which is worked out through the

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<sup>299</sup> Barth's understanding of evil is complex. As in Augustinian tradition, evil is a non-thing, a nothing, a privation from the goodness of creation. Barth pushes this imagery further so that the abiding and overwhelming 'yes' of creation necessarily is a silent no to all that was not given life in the act of creation. Even God's silence is creative. So, evil is 'a nothing' which makes 'no sense' but continues to snarl and snap against God's 'yes' to creation. See *CD III.3* pp. 70-80 for a short summary ahead of the whole section on *das Nichtige* in pp. 289-349.

<sup>300</sup> In view of our forthcoming discussion of mystery 'it has been rightly said that the *modus* of the divine preservation is inconceivable. It is inconceivable because we can understand it only as an act of the free goodness of God. *CD III.3*, p. 67.

<sup>301</sup> C.f. the refrain of Genesis 1.22 'be fruitful and increase in number'.

<sup>302</sup> *CD III.3* p. 34.

doctrine of providence.<sup>303</sup> In common parlance, theological election relates to the preference of one individual over another; ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated’. In Barth’s formulation of election, Jesus Christ is the one who is elected in God; so that faithfulness to creation is an expression of the faithfulness of God to his son.<sup>304</sup> The faithfulness to Christ means that the Christian can have confidence in the preservation because it is rooted in the love of the Father for the son; consequently this connection to God as the Father of Christ is what shapes the tone and feel of the Fatherly providential care and preservation of creation.

The necessity for preserving creation is not simply a metaphysical statement about the contingency of creation. Instead, Barth introduces the concept of nothingness that threatens the life and existence of the created order, so that in conserving the creation, God is holding back the chaos that would engulf the creature.<sup>305</sup> Ultimately, this faithfulness results in the crucifixion, in which the Son as representative of the entirety of creation ‘bore away the whole enmity and problem and power of the non-existent’.<sup>306</sup> The cross of Christ is an act of preservation for a threatened and guilty creation. The enormity of this commitment binds God to his own faithful action of conserving the creation.

### **2.3 *Concursus* – the divine accompanying.**

If Barth’s concern with *conservatio* was fairly alien to many discussions of providence, then the *concursus* is far more familiar territory. Barth considers *conservatio* the necessary ‘first act’ of providence that provides the foundation for the *concursus*, in which God accompanies the creature. As *conservatio* has already established the continual preserving

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<sup>303</sup> Early in the volume Barth writes that although he has found it possible to retain the older dogmatic divisions between *conservatio*, *concursus* and *gubernatio*; now he offers a ‘radical correction’. *CD III.3* p. xii. Kennedy writes that Barth fails to state what this ‘radical correction’ is and argues that this correction is the election of Christ as the internal basis of the covenant. Whilst we may agree that Barth does not categorically state what the radical correction is, Barth’s repeated discussions about the failure of reformed theology to recognise God in providence not as a neutral and blank figure but as Christ, (see pp. 34-35) it is fairly clear if we follow his direct refutations of their work.

<sup>304</sup> ‘We must reiterate that it is His free and unmerited goodness. Its basis is revealed only in the election of grace from which the election of the creature and therefore its preservation drives; and how should it not be revealed in all its inconceivability in that election in Jesus Christ?’ p. 71.

<sup>305</sup> *CD III.3* ‘God knows this nothing as the opponent of the creature, as that which may and can seduce the creature...it continually calls this cosmos into question...if only for a moment God were to turn away His face from the creature, the offensive would break loose with deadly power.’ p. 76.

<sup>306</sup> *CD III.3* p. 79.

work of God, the presence of God to the creature is already established. *Concursus* is the question of how God and creature relate. Citing Turretini's profound sigh; *Quaestio de concurs Dei est ex difficillimis que in theologia occurrunt*<sup>307</sup> Barth does not try to lessen the difficulties of the doctrine but offers a proposal that seeks to affirm the Lordship of God and autonomous actuality of the creature. Keen to establish the identity of the providential God, Barth writes:

'God accompanies the creature...he does not play the part of a tyrant towards it. He no more wills to act alone than as the Creator he willed to be alone or as the Sustainer of the creature He affirms that he does not will to continue alone. Alongside His activity there is a place for that of the creature. We even dare and indeed have to make the dangerous assertion that he co-operates with the creature.'<sup>308</sup>

Here the will of God remains supreme; the suggestion is that God wills to include the creature, wills to cooperate and yet is under no compulsion to do so. Any freedom afforded to the creature is gifted to it; freedom is a form of grace not a natural part of humanity. Barth attempts to walk the tightrope between the Scylla of a tyrannical God and impoverished human marionettes and the Charybdis of a spectator God unable to influence his own creation.<sup>309</sup> This is a long and complex section; in sum I propose that Barth attempts this balance in two main ways. Firstly, the 'older dogmatics' were bold to continue to carry the usage of the causality terminology of Aquinas and Aristotle to its logical conclusion, that the primary cause (God) overrides, and is enacted through, the secondary cause of the creature, so that God's will is always accomplished. Although Barth does retain language of causality, it is reinterpreted in a manner that tries to increase the specifically Christian content.

A few examples of this critique of causality illustrate the positive understanding of *concurus*. Firstly, 'cause' can seem automatic, a neutral term employed by 'natural philosophy and modern science'. So, if one billiard ball hits another 'causing' the second

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<sup>307</sup> Green translates this roughly as 'the question of *concurus* is among the most difficult in theology'. *Doxological Theology*, p. 59.

<sup>308</sup> *CD III.3* p. 92.

<sup>309</sup> Barth actually employs this analogy in the next section on *gubernatio*, p. 162. but the point remains.

sphere to enter the pocket of the billiard table, we might justifiably say that the initial movement 'caused' the motion of the second. This is an inappropriate type of 'cause' for theological purposes. Secondly, causal language invites the error that the primary and secondary causal agents have to do with two 'things'. But neither the creator God or the human person is a 'thing':

'The human thinker and speaker is always at risk of forgetting the inconceivable mystery of their existence and being...imagining that he can think and speak of them directly as though they themselves and also their relationship...were somehow below him.'<sup>310</sup>

The desire to objectify the experience of humanity, to observe oneself, ignores the reality of the mysterious delicacy of life and tries to elevate the individual to a god-like status, musing upon humankind. As Hunsinger phrases it, 'it is an axiom of Karl Barth's theology that theology is self-involving'.<sup>311</sup> To attempt to talk neutrally is a mistake. Further, by potentially construing the divine and human as 'things', one may come to believe that 'cause' refers to two types of acting subjects within the same genus.<sup>312</sup> This would be a catastrophic error for two reasons. Firstly, an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent god-thing might be a despot, but one cannot talk seriously about Jesus in this manner.<sup>313</sup> The second way in which Barth attempts to redress the balance is that one must recognise that 'between the two subjects...there is neither likeness nor similarity but utter unlikeness'.<sup>314</sup> God is not man spoken of in elevated tones. This radical unlikeness is 'indispensable' to understanding the accompanying action of God in creation. Regarding cause, language about primary and secondary cause can suggest points in sequence yet the *prima causa* is not just quantitatively superior but, as *causa sui*, provides the ground for all other causes. This therefore posits not just greater potency but something altogether and qualitatively different. This qualitative difference means that Barth will not tolerate speech about

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>311</sup> George Hunsinger, 'Truth as self-involving' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 41-56.

<sup>312</sup> Although Barth does not use the term, this protest recalls our prior discussion of radical transcendence.

<sup>313</sup> *CD III.3*, 'what can there be in common between Jesus Christ and a despot?' p. 106.

<sup>314</sup> *CD III.3* p. 102.

competing freedoms of creation and creator; they are different. The 'how' of different operations requires an appeal to mystery.<sup>315</sup>

Green's commentary on III.3 uniquely brings out Barth's particular concern that providence is understood through prayer.<sup>316</sup> On bended knee, the qualitative distinction is preserved and in this arena of prayer, the Christian is even permitted to know the first cause. Prayer keeps the Christian away from suspicious 'fears' of the benevolence of God and close to Christ, in whom there is no fear of despotism so that the individual is not 'passed over' as a powerless instrument. Instead, the creature is truly confirmed in their own particularity and variety when they acknowledge the rights of God.<sup>317</sup> Finally, in prayer, the Christian can acknowledge the operation of God in the world in all seemingly secular events, as revealed through the particular, sacred history of the revelation of Christ. In Christ, God is revealed to be constantly present; even when concealed and hidden. Barth's understanding of providence is less a comprehensive account of God's action in creation and more a confession of faith that God has not abandoned or dominated it.

#### **2.4 Gubernatio**

Although *gubernatio* is literally translated as 'government', in III.3 Barth frequently prefers the term 'rulership'. If *conservatio* provided the foundation, *concursum* supplied the modal quality of providence, then *gubernatio* considers the goal and purpose of providence.

'Proceeding from God and accompanied by God the creature must also return to God. The movement towards God is the meaning of its history.'<sup>318</sup>

This movement can only be known through the revelation of Christ. It is not known through historical observance. Indeed:

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<sup>315</sup> We will return to this point of the *concursum* in more depth in the following chapter.

<sup>316</sup> Green is the only commentator I have discovered to emphasise the integration of practice and theology in Barth, so here in a final section, Green writes with energy: 'Barth writes his doctrine of providence on his knees. Like "sinking Peter," who turns away from anxiety towards Christ in a moment of dire need, he soberly assures us that this is the correct stance of the theologian before the Lord of history. Therefore, he prays his way through the doctrine of providence, and he does this according to the prayer that is given to him by the Lord.' *Doxological Theology*. P. 220.

<sup>317</sup> In sermonic tones, Barth offers a psychological analysis of the church as a form of 'fear complex' that drives the anxiety of the church to represent a 'divine/creature' power balance correctly. Prayer assuages this anxiety into a position of childlike trust. p. 147.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

‘What we can see is only necessity and contingency, continuity and discontinuity, law and freedom...That is why God laughs at all our attempts to see His rule with the eye of our human reason...’

In faith, the rulership of God is believed but not seen; revealed fully only in the eschaton.<sup>319</sup> Consequently, Barth is particularly concerned to ensure that the rulership of God extends to, and beyond the miraculous, so life is full of surprises even for the wise. For Barth, there are no truly secular spheres, God rules all in all, guiding all world occurrences towards his own glory. Consequently, the common division between general and special providence is collapsed as being both unnecessary and unhelpful. By distinguishing the government of God; ‘general’ seems the norm and ‘special’ is the exception, so that ‘divine acts’ are only considered aberrations to be placed under scrutiny.<sup>320</sup> Barth reverses the polarity, so the general is understood by reference to the particular - the mundane reality of weather patterns, the roll of a dice and the movements of an ant are now understood and given significance by reference to the revelatory life of Christ. This is a true article of faith and cannot be demonstrated by world events, only through a return to the scriptures. Instead, the unique privilege of the Christian is to participate in a special ‘understanding’ of the world governance. In an exemplary passage:

‘he (the Christian) is faced every day afresh with the riddles of the world-process, with the precipices and plains, the blinding lights and obscurities, of the general creaturely occurrence to which his own life’s history also belongs. Of course, he can only keep on asking: Whence? and Whither? and Why? And Wherefore? Of course he has no master-key to all the mysteries of the great process of existence...he will not be like an ant which has foreseen everything in advance, but like a child in a forest, or on Christmas Eve; one who is always rightly astonished by events that open out to him and the events, by the encounters and experiences which over take him...He is the one who is constantly forced to begin afresh wrestling with the possibilities which open out to him and the impossibilities which oppose him.’<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-186.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., p. 242.



What then is true understanding? In an almost post-modern mood, Barth refuses the 'master keys' or grand narratives, exchanging them for the trusting image of a child before a father. This is not a cognitive but a relational understanding; a trust in the other that is not dependent on the situation or historical contingency. Throughout his doctrine, Barth has been keen to emphasize both parties in the relationship but in the *gubernatio*, the language is somewhat stronger when relating to the relevant powers and positions of God and humans. Green argues that *gubernatio* requires an eschatological hermeneutic in order to understand it, so that the strong statements about rulership are understood as an idealised form of the fully realised eschatological state.<sup>322</sup> Instead I propose that this is another example of a Hegelian *aufhebung* with which Barth emphasises both the human and divine power and prominence at different points. However, unlike a Hegelian scheme. Rather, Barth does not attempt a synthesis, rather the relative dignity of the two parties is maintained and the 'solution' is not discovered or resolved. The sense of competing tension between the two partners is almost removed by the relationship graciously offered by the creator.

So, we conclude our account of Barth's doctrine of providence. A summary of this length does not pretend to be comprehensive and I have not attempted to include the multitude of secondary interpreters at this point, unless to clarify a point. Nevertheless, we have summarised Barth's formulation in adequate detail for our further discussion of mystery. We turn now to Maurice Wiles for the perspective of our second interlocutor.

### **3. A biographical sketch of Maurice Wiles**

Born in London in 1923, Maurice Frank Wiles was the son of Sir Harold and Lady Wiles. His father was a senior civil servant with responsibility for the rehabilitation and employment of wounded soldiers following the first Great War. John Macquarrie, a personal friend and colleague to Wiles, suggests that it was this familial background of pastoral concern and

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<sup>322</sup> If this is the case, Green does not explain why Barth, who is no stranger to eschatology, does not make this explicit in the text. See G.C Berkouwer 'From the beginning of Barth's theological development, eschatology has played an important role in his thinking. Even in the earliest phase of his thinking he emphasized that eschatology should not merely be a concluding chapter in works on dogmatics but that this should permeate the whole of our reflection on the gospel.' *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Trans HR Boer (Grand Rapids: WMB Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), p. 151. I believe Berkouwer is referring to this from Der Romerbrief, 'If Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship with Christ'. Barth, *The Epistle...*p. 314. The developed, though admittedly unfinished, Barthian eschatology means that Green's account builds rather too much on silence.

service that led him to offer his services to the Church of England.<sup>323</sup> Wiles had ‘church in the blood’ in the form of contrasting Grandfathers, one a strict Baptist pastor, the other a more liberal Church of England priest.

It is not our place to offer some pseudo-psychoanalysis of Wiles or his development, but it is legitimate to take Wiles’ own insight into his development. In *Scholarship and Faith: A Tale of Two Grandfathers*, Wiles ostensibly writes a historical piece that contrasts the passionate struggles over the relationship of scholarship and faith between two grandfathers; in actuality the work is a piece of family history. The rationale for undertaking any family history is mixed but can often include the desire to find personal relevance and connections revealed in ancestry.<sup>324</sup> It is typical of Wiles’ desire for honest objectivity that:

‘Nor, now that my knowledge about them has grown and found expression in this record, do I see them as significant influences on the path that I have followed.’

Nevertheless:

‘There is enough similarity in the basic issue which they and I have had to face to make some comparison worth pursuing, despite the immense changes in knowledge and culture that have taken place over the two generations that divide us.’<sup>325</sup>

In these comments Wiles displays his academic training, so that even his own biography and family tree require justification to exist in the public domain. This rigour applied to his own life story was similarly applied to his own faith. During his time at Tonbridge School, Wiles attended an evangelical summer camp for school boys. He later joked that this was rather like having Dwight L Moody and Ira D Sankey for mentors.<sup>326</sup> Following the aforementioned interruption to his studies due to the war, Wiles was ordained Deacon in 1950 and served a two-year curacy in Stockport, followed by a brief teaching tenure in Ibadan, Nigeria. Returning to England, his career was a stratospheric series of teaching and professorial appointments in Cambridge, King’s College London and Oxford. Wiles’ obituaries describe him as a humble man of great honesty and integrity, a paragon of ‘Oxonian theological

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<sup>323</sup> John Macquarrie, ‘The Theological Legacy of Maurice Wiles’, *Anglican Review* 88:4 (2006), p. 597-616.

<sup>324</sup> C.f. A Kramer, ‘Affinity and connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives’ *Sociology*, Vol 45. no.3, (June 2011) pp. 379-395.

<sup>325</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Scholarship and Faith* (Cambridge: Biograph, 2003), pp. 137-8.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

openness' that combines rigorous theological inquiry with deep respect for personal piety and parish life.<sup>327</sup> This is not mere eulogy; during Wiles' position as Chair of Theology in Oxford he continued to attend Iffley Parish Church and assisted his wife with the Sunday School lessons.<sup>328</sup>

When Wiles changed from youthful evangelicalism to become what John Hick describes as Britain's leading 'liberal or radical theologian', remains unclear.<sup>329</sup> Macquarrie notes the disparity between Wiles' heavy critique of patristic and creedal texts with his lighter gaze directed towards the New Testament in his first work, *'The Spiritual Gospel'*. Indeed, it now seems remarkable that Wiles was considered too conservative for the doctrine commission's *'Soundings'* in 1962 when compared with the volcanic response to *'The Myth of God Incarnate'* from 1977.<sup>330</sup> Macquarrie suggests that it was during his time in London that Wiles' theology 'opened up', arguing that the 'road from his early evangelicalism to what he would call "critical theology" was a difficult one and required time'; a gradual progression rather than a sudden conversion.<sup>331</sup> From Wiles' own account, Macquarrie has rendered the progressive quality of this journey correctly, but posits an earlier start to the slip from evangelical certainty. Following his sojourn in Bletchley Park, Wiles details a walk with John Stott, during which Stott urged the young Wiles to avoid reading Philosophy due to the 'observed fact that the study of philosophy frequently led in practice to the loss of a true evangelical faith'.<sup>332</sup> Stott's pronouncement came true, but not immediately. Although Wiles was disappointed to find that Philosophy in Cambridge (1945) was more A.J. Ayer than Plato, nonetheless these undergraduate grappling with language left Wiles with an abiding concern for the meaning of religious language.<sup>333</sup> Ensuing studies of biblical texts continued the move away from evangelicalism so that Wiles writes:

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<sup>327</sup> Malcolm Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), p. 44.

<sup>328</sup> Author unattributed, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2005/17-june/gazette/canon-professor-maurice-wiles> [accessed 7/8/15]

<sup>329</sup> John Hick, 'Interpretation and Reinterpretation in Religion', *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. S.Coakley and D.Pailin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 57.

<sup>330</sup> Macquarrie, p. 600-601, also Robert Morgan, 'The Rev. Professor Maurice Wiles', <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/jun/10/guardianobituaries.obituaries> [accessed 7/8/15]

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., p.602 Macquarrie supports this argument by reference to Wiles' inaugural lecture in London 'Looking into the Sun' which can be found in *'Working Papers in Doctrine'*, pp. 28-37.

<sup>332</sup> Wiles, *Between...*p. 140.

<sup>333</sup> Wiles is highly critical of the extremes of such positivistic philosophy. Firstly, the post-war period required more moral and religious guidance than the claim that words were meaningless in themselves and secondly that the circular logic of positivism undermined it's claims; 'any statement whose truth or falsity could not be

'By the time I was ready to set out on the work of an ordained minister...I was convinced...that a critical approach to scripture and the history of the church was not only valid but inescapable.'<sup>334</sup>

On reading Wiles there is a consistent sense of the inescapability of critical thinking to faith. Following the publication of the '*Myth of God incarnate*', Wiles felt further impelled to define what is meant by 'God's action'. This was informed by pastoral malpractice; one 'Christian' friend telling a widow that her husband would have survived if only she had prayed harder; moral outrage led to loss of faith and so Wiles wrote the revisionist '*God's Action in the World*' to which we will turn shortly.<sup>335</sup>

Finally, Maurice Wiles is no longer a popular 'name' even within theology; which considering his career means it is worth asking why this might be.<sup>336</sup> Like his predecessor at Clare College, Cambridge, John Robinson, Wiles did provoke public interest with his contribution to '*The Myth of God Incarnate*', although his name was partially obscured by the collective authorship.<sup>337</sup> Wiles did not engage in any form of grand public disputation (how readily is Gaunilo mentioned without Anselm?).<sup>338</sup> Neither did he found a school or establish some kind of easily discernible 'Wilesian' system. The question that seems to exercise Wiles is how to relate theology to the modern world. In many ways, Wiles work constitutes a doctrinal counterpart to Bultmann's demythologisation process for biblical studies.<sup>339</sup> Defining theology as 'reasoned discourse about God', theology, must be genuinely open to novel development as reasoned discourse progresses. Liberalism is necessarily a dynamic movement, suggesting a freedom from the prevailing hegemony, rather than holding any

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determined by observable differences in our sense experience are meaningless' is a principle that renders itself meaningless. Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>336</sup> Wiles is quoted twice in McGrath's *Introduction to Theology*, but not given any distinctive comment. Similarly Wiles only features in a list of liberal Anglican theologians in Ford's *Modern Theologians*. Finally, Wiles is referenced only six times throughout the *Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology*. One paragraph is substantive, and the rest are only footnotes. This is especially striking for the handbook represents a collated work, which if he were still alive, he would likely have been a contributor or editor. This short section of biography has been stitched together through Wiles own smattering of biographical comments, Macquarrie's helpful article and newspaper obituaries. I could not find a single biography devoted to Wiles.

<sup>337</sup> Another contributor to the volume, John Hick reports that the volume sold 30,000 copies and was discussed in the national press. Author unattributed <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article16.html> [accessed 20/6/16]

<sup>338</sup> The '*Myth of God Incarnate*' was a text with multiple authors so that Wiles did not receive the full ire.

<sup>339</sup> Wiles quotes Bultmann's demythologisation thesis enthusiastically, Maurice Wiles, *What is Theology?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 25 also p. 33. Macquarrie also affirms this link, p. 598.

content peculiar to itself. A historically liberal theologian may well appear decidedly conservative when measured by contemporary theological standards. Perhaps it is this openness which has caused Wiles to be left behind in more contemporary theological discussion; if one's methodology focuses attention on 'reasoned discourse' then, as the wider discourse evolves to reflect the zeitgeist, the questions posed at that time eventually sink into relative insignificance.

Despite these caveats, it is my contention that Wiles is a significant theologian and that his particular attitude to theological mystery and his abiding fascination will provide not only a neat counter-balance to Barth but offer resources for the contemporary theologian to understand how to approach mystery in an appropriate fashion.

### **3.1 'God's Action in the World'**

It is difficult to imagine two formulations of providence more opposed than those of Wiles and Barth. We will assess Wiles concentrated look at the doctrine in his work, '*God's Action in the World*' a book converted from the 1986 Bampton lectures. The flow of argument in these lectures is deeply critical rather than constructive, as though Wiles is discounting various options before deciding on a final choice; consequently, the concluding doctrinal content is minimalistic with Wiles' actual position on the issue only revealed in the final two paragraphs of the argument.

'Does God act in the world? No question is more fundamental to Christian theology today.'<sup>340</sup>

Despite Wiles' reputation as a patristic scholar, '*God's Action in the World*' is, in many ways, a particularly modern systematic piece, not unrelated to his body of work but a culmination of the questions and difficulties raised within earlier texts.<sup>341</sup> Whereas Barth leaves his discussion of *das Nichtige* until the end of his doctrine of providence, Wiles begins with examples that undermine the notion of God's involvement with world events. Firstly, the confusion of a service thanking God for the end of the Falklands conflict – with 'no agreement about what it was appropriate to thank God for'. Secondly, following an aeroplane hostage situation, after which the pilot thanked the Lord for his care, Wiles asks,

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<sup>340</sup> Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

‘where was his care for the hostages when one of them was murdered and his corpse thrown onto the tarmac?’ These confused statements are a source of ‘profound embarrassment for the reflective Christian.’<sup>342</sup>

If the issue for ancients was how to understand action by an impassible deity, Wiles identifies the modern problem as, ‘how’ and ‘where’, in a world of regularly ordered patterns, is it possible for a divine agent to act; the problem is the ‘location’ and ‘identification’ of divine action.<sup>343</sup> Both the study of history and natural sciences have progressed spectacularly by deliberately setting aside questions of divine activity. Further, the biblical and traditional sources of religious authority, Wiles claims, cannot be simply accepted but must be rigorously questioned to establish their abiding value.<sup>344</sup> The dual tasks of the theologian are the study of sacred texts and crucially, the question of their intellectual coherence for contemporary human experience and practice.

For Wiles because all language is culturally generated, the ancient biblical and creedal authors faced the same difficulties that confront modern theologians; language is an imperfect vehicle for the transcendent. Therefore, Wiles rejects the notion that certain language about God is specially revealed to the authors. No special status can be awarded to the biblical writers or the authors of the creed. Wiles’ solution is to use Farrer’s definition of analogy that ‘language an only function as a distant analogue to God.’<sup>345</sup> Wiles does not take the opportunity to develop how he is using analogy, instead the implication is that the theologian should not be afraid of revising traditional language about God as a part of an evolving discipline that requires new communicative tools to address a modern audience.

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>343</sup> Wiles does not consider the possibility that the problem of a closed causal nexus actually also makes human freedom at least difficult if not impossible. C.f the helpful introduction in Kirk Wegter-Mcnelly, ‘Fundamental Physics and Religion, *Oxford Handbook of Science and Religion*, ed. P Clayton and Z Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 156-171.

<sup>344</sup> In ‘*Reason to Believe*’, a work intended as an introduction to Christianity for a popular readership, Wiles sets out the following problems with traditional notions of providence, a) the claim that God acts in history to help the downtrodden does not fit the facts, b) the time scales do not fit the biblical conception, c) we cannot coherently conceptualise how God could change hearts of individuals in a realistic fashion. Finally, and decisively for Wiles, interventionist providence provides a ‘moral difficulty’ for why God does not prevent atrocities like Hiroshima or Auschwitz. I propose that the final difficulty is the propulsive problem that drives Wiles to reject traditional notions of providence. Maurice Wiles, *Reason to Believe* (Canterbury: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 15-16.

<sup>345</sup> Wiles, *God’s...* p. 9-10.

The second question of intellectual coherence for this modern audience occupies the rest of the book.

With prolegomena established, like Barth, Wiles sets providence under the heading of creation and accepts the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, stating 'Creation is creation out of nothing or it is nothing.'<sup>346</sup> Particularly sensitive to the complaint of process theologians that an ex nihilo creator necessarily implicates a deity as 'absolute controller', Wiles seeks to affirm the freedom of the creature through a refined conception of divine power as releasing, not restricting, autonomous creatures.<sup>347</sup> Although humans have no experience of such an activity, this contention does not fail the 'law of non-contradiction' and so opens the possibility of a God who has chosen to create 'out of nothing' a world of free beings with a measure of independent power against himself.<sup>348</sup> Wiles contends that this position allows him to retain a robust divine omnipotence and for God to be affected by His creation because He has chosen to do so. The ensuing question is how God still relates, if at all, to his independent creation.

'To call something an 'act', then, is to give a unity to what would otherwise appear only as random occurrences, and to do so by bringing them together as contributory to some overall intention.'<sup>349</sup>

Whilst humans might experience events sequentially, (Monday followed by Tuesday) for God, the world is not a series of 'micro' acts but one act in total. The question Wiles poses is whether this one act inhibits the language of God's agency relating to specific world occurrences. Following Austin Farrer, Wiles argues that creation is not made of 'things' but energy expressing itself in multitudinous ways, that the world is built 'bottom up', so 'God wills that the physical elements should continue to be themselves and act in accordance with their nature.' If we take the Lisbon earthquake as an example, it is God's will that geological movements take place, not as judgement on those affected but as elements of the earth acting in accordance with their nature. At this juncture, Wiles is trying to establish radical freedom for the creature and yet avoid an 'unacceptable deism'. The need is to find

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>347</sup> n.b. Wiles wants to have the same conclusion as a process theologian of genuine human freedom without sacrificing the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-25.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

an appropriate analogy to convey the one-act God and the corresponding relationship with the world. Rejecting the scriptural image of the potter and clay as unhelpfully misleading, Wiles proposes the image of an improvised drama in which the director sets the basic characters and the actors are left free to develop the roles and situations. The advantage of this approach is that this work can rightly be attributed as the work of both the director and the actors.<sup>350</sup>

A significant motivation in the development of this doctrine is the need for theodicy.<sup>351</sup>

‘We have to acknowledge the fact of evil as in itself pointing away from faith in God, it does not do so in a manner that outweighs other aspects of our experience that point towards such a belief.’<sup>352</sup>

For Wiles ‘weighing’ this material is difficult; analogously, we might decide to trust someone even if elements of their character were untrustworthy.<sup>353</sup> For both the theologian and the individual believer, a ‘reasonable faith’ must continually ask and search these questions. The Augustinian account of original sin must now be discounted because it is internally problematic and in a Darwinian age cannot be credibly considered historical. Once such ‘radical dualism’ is rejected, Wiles offers three partial responses in full cognizance that they are not satisfactory even when combined. Firstly, the free will defence is deployed to explain that for human and other creatures to enjoy genuine freedom they must have capacity, to do terrible, evil things to one another. Permitting evil is part of the risk that God has taken in bringing a world into being. The moral question of whether God should have created anything at all, is found on the lips of Hamlet: ‘to be, or not to be’. Reluctant to be drawn by Leibniz’s question of the ‘best possible world’, Wiles does believe that ‘Something’ is better than ‘Nothing’, that creation, with all its flaws, is superior to the chaos of

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<sup>350</sup> It is interesting to note that Wiles does not refer to Hans Urs Van Balthasar for this example. For good summaries on theology as a form of drama, see Ben Quash, *Theology and the drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) or Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>351</sup> See above for the pastorally insensitive comments that helped crystallize Wiles position – locating the quotation here clarifies this further; ‘At first my reaction was simply one of anger that anyone could write with such insensitivity. But gradually it came home to me that I did not really believe that God acted in that kind of way at all, decisively determining the outcome of particular events in accordance with the measure of intensity of the intercessor’s prayers.’ Wiles, *Scholarship*, p. 149.

<sup>352</sup> Wiles, *God’s...*, p. 41.

<sup>353</sup> Wiles does not pursue this analogy, we might ask whether this would result in the strange position of God being both trustworthy and not trustworthy depending on the observer.



nothingness but he is hesitant to affirm the goodness of creation in the face of massive suffering. A second theodical point is John Hick's contention that evil not only makes free will possible but allows for the maturation of the created order. Wiles affirms this, albeit cautiously, as a possibility.<sup>354</sup>

Finally, Wiles attempts to reintroduce the theme of Christian eschatological hope as part of the response to evil. Wary that this might reintroduce a theology of God the 'absolute controller', he affirms eschatological hope in the 'most general' sense, at an unspecified date, in an unspecified manner, so that it is a 'genuinely unknown future' that is described. Wiles does not try to argue that this hope is rational or even internally cogent, but,

'we will be speaking out of our faith in the God who has taken the risk of creating the world, the unremitting character of whose love the Christian believes he has seen in the figure of Christ...the world will be ultimately expressive of God's will in some way which is not true now.'<sup>355</sup>

Careful and deeply critical, Wiles retains faith in God's ultimate providential rule. There is a genuine tension within his account concerning how to retain Christian hope of final redemption along with the radical freedom he wishes to secure for the creature, and so it must be emphasised that this faith does not mean that God intervenes at any particular historical points, including by miracles. So, history is not following a path guided by the hand of God, instead it is God's will that humans make the history of the world. Divine guidance is rejected because one cannot make a coherent account of instances where 'double agency' would occur,<sup>356</sup> especially in cases where the human agent seems to reject the ostensible 'will of God'.<sup>357</sup> The 'non-intervention' of God in the spatio-temporal world extends beyond miracles to moments of conversion. So, it is not God calling Paul on the Damascus Road

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<sup>354</sup> Wiles affirms Langdon Gilkey's criticism that the moral defence of evil for human maturity is too 'public school' and ignores the enormity of the atrocities of evil by claiming it is 'good character building'. See p. 47.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>356</sup> Again, Farrer provides the conceptual background for Wiles argumentation but here Wiles rejects the mystery required by his account of the causal joint. See Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (London: A&C Black, 1967). Also, Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

<sup>357</sup> Wiles has in mind, a character like Cyrus of Persia hailed by Jews as guided by providence. Wiles contends that the motive of military conquest cannot be conflated with Jewish preservation without an 'unacceptable absolute controller' theology. pp. 67-7. Also, 'there does not seem to be any intelligible way of relating the intention of God and the human deed performed, which would be a necessary condition for describing it as a specific action of God'. p. 98.

but the choice of Saul. If God were to make the call to faith so efficacious that it could not be resisted, this would represent an intolerable infringement of Paul's free will. The Christian ascription of meaning to previous life experiences is not recognising a providential pattern to them but rather providing a unified narrative to give meaning to the progression of life.<sup>358</sup>

Testament to Wiles desire for coherence and intellectual integrity, even the incarnation and resurrection are not spared his denial as being special instances of God's action. Refusing a theology of 'absolute controller' and 'interventionism', Wiles understands the significance of Jesus as one who stands out as 'the fullest expression of that divine intention for human life and thereby as creative of future possibilities of appropriate response to God. The uniqueness of Christ is not found in power, work or identity but as one who embodied the openness of life and exercised this freedom in an exemplary fashion.'<sup>359</sup>

One final word on prayer summarises this formulation of providence. Petitionary prayers are not granted by the intervention of God but are gradual forms of self-reciprocating words. So, when the Christian offers the Lord's Prayer, it is not *really* a request for the supply of bread but a recognition of the contingency of creation and the need for the development of managerial ingenuity to spread the wealth of food even to Ethiopian children.<sup>360</sup>

To conclude, Wiles opines that he may have increased the plausibility of faith rather than stoked the fires of faith.<sup>361</sup> The final epitaph offers this account as a form of faith in the 'living God' who 'is the source of all life and authentic life which his worshippers seek to realize in grateful awareness of his all-pervasive and sustaining presence'.<sup>362</sup> This formulation is openly revisionist, so that it is difficult to imagine an account further from his evangelical roots.

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<sup>358</sup> This question reflects Wiles' evangelical heritage – why some are saved and not others is a perennial question within evangelical circles traced back to Luther. C.f. the recent flurry of interest regarding Rob Bell's populist soft universalism, *Love Wins* (London: Collins, 2012) and the resultant evangelical backlash summarised here Rob Colunter 'If Love Wins, What is Lost? A response to Rob Bell'. <http://www.bethinking.org/christian-beliefs/if-love-wins-what-is-lost> [accessed 5/7/16]

<sup>359</sup> Wiles, *God's*, pp. 83-94 and 102.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-7. When Wiles wrote these lectures, Ethiopia was suffering a famine which is why the specific reference is retained here.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The overall thesis that within Christian theology, God is fundamentally mysterious and that this is well demonstrated through the doctrine of providence has required a substantive consideration of the varying formulations of Barth and Wiles. This extended consideration has included biography and theology for providence is not an abstract doctrine and the life stories of these men have reminded them as fellow human beings succeeding and struggling with the vicissitudes of life. By devoting space to their variant doctrinal constructions, we can confidently claim to accurately represent their perspectives and so move forward to a consideration of how their understandings of mystery and providence interact. As we shall see for the ebulliently verbose Barth who embraces mystery and the cautious economy of Wiles that avers from it, both require mystery as a fundamental basis for their theological claims.

## Chapter 6. The use of Mystery in Karl Barth

### 1. Introduction

The predominant focus of this thesis is that within Christianity, God is fundamentally and inscrutably mysterious, a quality which is richly manifested in the doctrine of providence. To demonstrate this thesis, we began to explore different ways in which the term mystery is used. We have established four different types; the comprehensible mysteries – investigative and undisclosed; the inscrutable mysteries - epistemological and ontological mystery and given special focus to the two types of inscrutable mystery. In order to move beyond a mapping exercise, we are developing a contrastive dialogue between Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles. The biographical information and summaries of their respective doctrines in Chapter Four has provided a foundation that allows us to investigate their relative uses of mystery. We shall begin with a contrast of their sharply divergent doctrines of providence and additionally consider wider uses of mystery. What we will discover is that even with wildly different approaches to providence, both theologians appeal to mystery as a basic substratum of their doctrinal formulation. This evidence strongly supports the overall thesis that mystery is an inescapable dimension of Christian theology.

#### 1.1 Hermeneutical approach

Investigative, undisclosed, epistemological and ontological mysteries are terms unique to this study and so we will not discover them used by Wiles or Barth. There is a temptation to squeeze our interlocutor's uses of mystery into my own phraseology. At the outset this is quite inappropriate and so, to preserve the integrity of the original theologian's voice, I will review their use of mystery before any attempt at correlation between their syntax and my own.

I have considered producing an encyclopaedic index of every single use of the term mystery across their various works.<sup>363</sup> Although this would provide a certain satisfaction of completion, I have avoided this cataloguing impulse for several reasons. Firstly, this is not a thesis primarily concerned with exposition of Barth and Wiles; instead their varying usage provides a focus to give meaning to theological mystery and establish the theme as a

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<sup>363</sup> A thorough index of *'Church Dogmatics'* already exists; Wiles' more occasional works have a non-exhaustive thematic index at the back of the book.

foundational point of Christian theology. This constructed dialogue is not to be a plenary echo of all their earlier works, but an edited soundscape to discover insight the place of mystery in theology. Secondly, cataloguing would amass unwieldy amounts of data, without necessarily yielding particularly significant results. The breadth of this data set undoubtedly requires editing. Thirdly, the desire to exhaustively index would be an interpretive choice that pretended to be neutral; a grasping attempt at objectivity in order to avoid the difficulties of interpretation. Finally, cataloguing every reference to mystery within their works might suggest that Barth and Wiles have written all that can be said about the subject. The reality is that our interlocutors' use of mystery is varied, limited and human, occasionally banal, often profound. The biography in the preceding chapter reminds us that our interpreters are faced by those same limitations that confront all theologians.

This thesis argues that providence is a pre-eminent demonstration of mystery, thus our analyses of mystery will be founded primarily upon their formal doctrines of providence; for Barth, *CD III.3* and for Wiles '*God's Action in the World*'. Our stipulative definition of providence as 'the action of God in creation' helpfully permits the discussion to progress. However, it is rather inadequate for the task of surveying our theologians use of mystery. If strictly followed, this dictum would disallow Barth's entire notion of the *conservatio*; a truly intolerable situation when this notion contributes to such a distinctive and substantial portion of *CD III.3*. Combining our web imagery of systematics with the discussion of providence in the last chapter, it is clearly difficult to restrain discussion of providence from straying beyond formal considerations of the question of divine action to other doctrines. For example, Wiles' difficulty with the creedal understanding of the incarnation results partly from his questioning the meaningfulness of the statement 'God incarnate' and partly from his deistic beliefs. One cannot separate these issues without damaging the integrity of these theologians' perspectives on mystery and providence. Similarly, Barth takes in the cross and incarnation as being connected to the *conservatio*. That these two themes are not frequently addressed within the study of the doctrine is no reason not to study them as examples of God acting to reveal himself as mystery.

We now turn to a critical description of Barth's use of mystery. Following our rubric to use providence as our primary doctrinal focus, much of our attention will be focused on *CD III.3*;

this volume will act as point of entry into other portions of Barth's thinking where the related theme of mystery is expanded and developed in different ways.

## 2. *Conservatio*

### 2.1 The Election to Existence in CD III.3

Kierkegaard's existential musings illumine Barth's own question of existence:

'I stick my finger in existence – it feels like nothing. Where am I? What is the 'world'? What does this word mean? Who has duped me into the whole thing and now leaves me standing there? Who am I? How did I come into the world; why was I not asked, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but thrust into the ranks...Where is the manager, I would like to make a complaint!'<sup>364</sup>

Kierkegaard's pseudonym voices an acute existentialist anxiety. The surprising realization of one's existence is disorientating. Here the character is perplexed, feeling tricked into being, granted autonomy without having been able to use the autonomy to request such a life. For Kierkegaard's pseudonym, existence and continued existence brings disquiet and angst.<sup>365</sup> In a less dramatic tone, Karl Barth reaches the opposite conclusion; Barth is not seeking the manager in order to complain but to rejoice in Him. Although the '*modus* of the divine preservation is inconceivable', this is assuredly not a source of anxiety but a source of wonder.<sup>366</sup> Such stupefaction flows from the contingency of creation, so that every moment relies on the faithfulness of God to continue preserving the creation in existence. This faithfulness to creation is an overflowing of his love and therefore His incomprehensibility.<sup>367</sup> The creature continues to be the object of the love of God because of the election of Jesus Christ as representative of all humanity. This election is not compelled by an external force but has an internal basis in the active majesty of God. Therefore, godself is the internal guarantee and guarantor of the continued existence of creation, thus meaning that it is continually reliable and trustworthy. So, this 'election is not capricious' but joyful, not anxious but wonderful, an expression of the faithful Lordship of the Father. Left alone, the creation is unable to maintain its own existence; instead, this

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<sup>364</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetitions and Philosophical Crumbs*, Trans. M.G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.

<sup>365</sup> This anxiety is present at least for his pseudonymous character rather than Kierkegaard himself.

<sup>366</sup> Karl Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 67.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

marvellously mysterious preservation stops the creature and creation being overcome by the forces of nihil. So:

‘The whole of creation is related to the preservation of God as is the atmosphere to the sun which illumines it...the atmosphere becomes bright because it partakes not of the nature of the sun, but of its illumining. If the illumining were to cease, it would become dark...the creature...can have continuity only as God gives it.’<sup>368</sup>

Barth’s extended point is to emphasise the contingency of the creature and continually refuse any ‘natural’ or ‘given’ quality to the created order, so that it could somehow exist independently of God. The mystery of creation is that it is there at all. Latterly, Barth describes this as an ‘immanent’ mystery; not the immanence of Christ or some hidden mystery of God but the mystery that human life is ‘there’. The declaration of this mystery is the ‘great light of the creaturely world’ most especially because it has no obvious basis, no ‘why’ or ‘wherefore’. Instead the fact of life and its limitation (death) gives ‘salutary peace’ to life as a creature as well as ‘dispeace’ with the continual question of what can be improved or bettered.<sup>369</sup>

The contingency of creation does not seem to be a particularly obtuse or difficult notion, so the remaining question is, what is particularly mysterious about this description?<sup>370</sup>

‘Inconceivable’ literally means ‘not able to be thought’, yet Barth does not use the term in a negative manner, rather it has the positive sense of ‘astonishing’. It is not difficult to stretch this term to fit within the boundaries of Barth’s rather loose understanding of mystery, so that here the inconceivability of the *conservatio* would become a positive form of Barthian

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>369</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.1*, ed. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Tran. G.W. Bromiley (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers 2010) pp. 149-150.

<sup>370</sup> We note that it does not seem particularly mysterious because of the ubiquity of the notion. Referring back to Verkamp’s category of Aesthetic Mystery, we could note that even the most ardent atheists express wonder at the *fact* of creation. This transference of existential anxiety into a joyful wonder is expressed from numerous sources, so Dawkins: ‘We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia...In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I in our ordinariness, that are here. We privileged few, who won the lottery of birth against all odds, how dare we whine at the inevitable return to that prior state from which the vast majority have never stirred?’ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 1. Despite the strange unity of Barth and Dawkins, it is sobering to reflect that this marvelling at the fact of creation is by no means universal. So, we have already mentioned the inherent anxiety with existential thought, we may also consider the opposite the Buddhist noble truth that ‘life is suffering’ (I acknowledge that there is diversity of interpretation of dukkha as suffering, yet this does remain a consistent teaching within Buddhist thought).

mystery. I use the term 'positive' because it seems that the quality of mystery does not lie in whether the fact has been revealed by God at some historical juncture; instead, the revelation itself is known as a mystery.

## 2.2 The Mystery of Election in CD II.2

'Nay but, O man who are thou that repliest against God?'<sup>371</sup>

Continuing our theme of Barth's mysteries of elective grace, we turn to the mystery of election found distinctly in II.2. Barth's version of election is revisionist.<sup>372</sup> Election is an incredibly powerful and therefore very difficult doctrine to discuss.<sup>373</sup> Here the focus is less on individual human beings elected or damned before the beginning of all creation; rather, the body of Christ is elected under Jesus Christ, who is elected to the glory of God.<sup>374</sup> This doctrine takes Barth to the uncomfortable position of positing a pre-incarnational theology; 'what takes place in this election is that God is for us.'<sup>375</sup> Summarised so neatly in John 3.16, election is the choice of God for 'the world he so loved'. Whence the mystery? The mystery here is that one cannot get behind this mystery. The electing will of God to be for, and not against, the creation is the equivalent of an opening premise in philosophical argument, a beginning point that will not be repealed. As in Romans 9.20, the proper and indeed only possible human response in the face of this mysterious will is silence. This silence is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, in order to hear the will of God. Secondly, in order to obey.

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<sup>371</sup> Romans 9.20

<sup>372</sup> In the foreword, Barth admits that this volume gives him 'great pleasure and anxiety'. The revisions were clear 'I would have preferred to follow Calvin's doctrine of predestination much more closely, instead of departing from it so radically...As I let the Bible itself speak to me on these matters.... I was driven irresistibly to reconstruction.' *CD II.1*, p. x

<sup>373</sup> We recall again the example of its power, see Max Weber's influential '*Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*'. in which Weber argues that Calvin's doctrine of predestination (related but not identical to election) was one of the principle factors in the growth of economic capitalism in Western Europe. Whether Weber's interpretation of Calvinism was correct or not is beyond our remit, however for the power of the doctrine to be considered in this way by one of the founding fathers of sociology is highly symbolic for how important the doctrine of election and predestination are.

<sup>374</sup> I admit that this is an oversimplified summary – Barth devotes an entire, careful section of *II.2* to 'The Determination of the Rejected' – but a more robust assessment of this formulation of election is beyond our purview here.

<sup>375</sup> 'We are looking beyond these to a supposedly greater depth in God (and that undoubtedly means nothingness or rather the depth of Satan).' Despite choosing to use this form of speculative theology, Barth is extraordinarily reluctant to allow any variation to his Christocentric pattern. *CD II.2*, p. 25.



‘The mystery of the election of God summons to obedience. It does so because it is the mystery of the living and life-giving God and not of an enthroned but lifeless idol beside which we could only sit in an equally lifeless fear or confidence...the other side of the matter: that when the mystery of God in election comes into the life of the creature demanding, compelling and disturbing, it is really grace and loving kindness and favour which visits the creature.’<sup>376</sup>

Despite referring to a ‘pre-Christ’ will of God, Barth is keen that no attribute of God, freedom or love or power, is absolutized in God away from the person of Christ. It is the revelation of God in Christ that allows the creature not to cower in silence at the fear of election to damnation, but to stand in confident silence that God chooses to elect in love.<sup>377</sup> Again and again the doctrine is grounded in the person of Christ, so that it is not allowed to become systematised, and somehow decoupled and depersonalised away from the Father revealed in Christ. It is this personal quality that ensures that the mystery of election is light and not dark; for we know and trust the one who elects.<sup>378</sup> It is clear that we only know the mysterious election of Christ through the providential and revelatory act of the incarnation to which we now turn.

### 2.3 The Mysterious Election of the Incarnate One in CD I.2

‘Our crucial first statement, “that the eternal Word of God chose, sanctified and assumed human nature and existence into oneness with Himself, in order thus, as

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-30.

<sup>377</sup> We should note that *II.2* is one of the longest volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* and so Barth did not mean that the doctrine should not be discussed, rather this is the practical response in the face of elective grace.

<sup>378</sup> *CD II.2*, p. 146-7. n.b. Whilst it must be admitted that election and predestination are not identical doctrines, they are certainly related, so Calvin understood his strong doctrine of predestination to be a source of comfort for his readers; ‘Once the light of divine providence has illumined the believer’s soul, he is relieved and set free, not only from the extreme fear and anxiety which formerly oppressed him, but from all care. For as he justly shudders at the idea of chance, so he can confidently commit himself to God. This I say is his comfort, that his heavenly Father so embraces all things under his power...’ John Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 13. Weber’s analysis indicated that far from a comfort, Calvin’s description caused mass religious anxiety. Weber, p. 112. The further question raised by this quote from Calvin is whether Barth understood Calvin correctly. From the last chapter, we understand that Barth’s primary criticism was that reformation thought – including Calvin – was too mechanistic and overlooked the personal elements of the doctrine of providence. This quote, if not totally refuting Barth’s critique, certainly qualifies his attack. To this we might add references to Calvin’s distaste at concepts of fortune and luck that obscure the majestic of God’s power (pp. 119-121). The question is whether Barth is any more successful than the objects of his critique to make the person of Christ rather than conceptual constructs the standards by which providence is understood.

very God and very man, to become the Word of reconciliation spoken by God to man”, signifies the mystery of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>379</sup>

For Barth, the incarnation provides the primary point and basis of the New Testament witness and indeed, all of theology. The incarnation is the point which we cannot ‘get behind’ but can only be ‘described again and again’ as a mystery - indeed an ‘ultimate mystery’. A truly incarnational Christology must never be repealed or transformed into ‘non-mystery’,<sup>380</sup> only ‘contemplated, worshipped and confessed’.<sup>381</sup> This mystery of God’s incarnational act is multi-layered. We must ask our question, what is mysterious about it and how is it so? ‘Christology deals with the revelation of God as a mystery’.<sup>382 383</sup> It is difficult to rid ourselves of the common notion of mystery as something to be investigated, unravelled and solved. This is a mystery not to be elucidated but acknowledged as mystery. Barth’s comparison of the relative constructions of Christology by ‘primitive and modern’

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<sup>379</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2*, ed. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Trans. GT Thomson, H Knight (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) p. 124.

<sup>380</sup> By ‘non-mystery’ I understand Barth to mean that the incarnation should never be treated in such a way that the mystery is ‘resolved away’ (p. 125). A mystery is resolved when it is unravelled, when the elements that make the subject/object mysterious are displayed. Once revealed the object loses the quality of mystery. Here I understand Barth to be marking a distinction between, in our terms, comprehensible and inscrutable mysteries.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-5. There are two possible objections to positioning this material here. Firstly, the incarnation as described here does not particularly focus on the gracious choice of God as has been indicated by the rest of the *conservatio* and perhaps might fit better in connection with the *concursum* or *gubernatio*. My response is that mystery is fluid but that the opening line refers to choice and action so this element could fit in multiple places. The second more serious charge is whether this investigation is collapsing all of christology into a form of providence. I noted earlier that this review of mystery would start but not conclude with the formal consideration of providence. Yet this secondary question fundamentally concerns what Barth understands God to be. The summary statement in *CD II.1* is instructive: ‘God is who He is in the act of His revelation...But he is this loving God without us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit...’ Barth neither collapses God into ‘pure act’ so that he does not fall into the unfortunate position of God requiring creation to be God, but neither does Barth allow us to go behind the ‘starting point’ of revelation, to pierce through veil to a ‘pure God’. To try and peak behind revelation leads to error, a mistake that Barth suggests Melancthon took at great risk to Protestantism. Barth, *CD II.1*, pp. 257-272. My response to the second objection is that this complaint lies with Barth rather than my account of him. God is He who acts made known in the incarnation; human beings are confronted by the supreme moment of revelation that is both an act of providence and the ‘ultimate mystery’. To conclude this excursus, it would be scandalous to exclude Barth’s understanding of incarnation as mystery and indeed a mystery of providence in this survey.

<sup>382</sup> *CD 1.2*, p. 131.

<sup>383</sup> From *II.1* we will approach the subject of the ‘hidden God’ more properly at a later point but at this stage of talking about the mystery of the Word revealed it is incumbent to mention the recurrent but slightly varying theme in *II.1*. ‘This is the nature of God disclosed in the revelation of His name. God loves...All our further insights about who and what God is must revolve round this mystery – the mystery of his loving’. Similar to Barth’s astonishment at the fact of creation that *is*; Barth can only repeat and amplify the mystery of a God who freely and abundantly loves his creation. This language is reasonably close to hymns of praise or Paul’s doxological outbursts. The mystery is located precisely in the decision of God, without external compulsion, love his creation. pp. 283-5.

theologians is instructive for his understanding of an appropriate, interpretive approach to mystery. Firstly, it is true that the Church Fathers, scholastics and ‘post reformation orthodox theologians’, (‘primitive’ theology) sought to verify with incredible and ever greater precision what is meant by ‘very God and very man’. Barth acknowledges Herder’s critique that this approach was ‘intellectualist’, demonstrated by the meticulous and extravagant polemics by which each side attempted so vigorously to assert their position; however, Barth does not concur that such attempts perverted the reality of Christ. Instead, the New Testament actually invites these queries.<sup>384</sup>

Secondly, Barth takes issue with the ‘modern theologians’ approach; to distil the portions of the text deemed ethically permissible away from the unacceptably magical world of the early church.<sup>385</sup> Barth attacks the *a priori* assumptions of modern theologians that adroitly classify acceptable divinity and unacceptably primitive mythology. If ‘primitive theologians’ made mistakes in their efforts to understand and exposit the mystery, for Barth this remains infinitely preferable to the modern approach of de-mystifying the incarnation to make the mystery less mysterious and more palatable to modern moral-intellectual sensibilities. In response to our own question, ‘what is mysterious about the incarnation?’ for Barth, it is clearly John 1.14, that ‘the word was made flesh’ echoed in the creed as ‘very God, very man’. How is this mysterious to us? In Pauline terms it is the ‘offense’ against the wisdom of the world;<sup>386</sup> so the mystery of the incarnation is that the irreconcilable God and man are reconciled through a decision and act that stands starkly against all standards of human intellectual and metaphysical understanding, presenting an ‘ultimate mystery’ that will not be repealed. In the face of this mystery the correct approach is both theological wrangling and intellectual exposition of the doctrine but finally the appropriate response is a surrender of faith.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Herder’s criticism of ‘primitive’ theologians has a lot of similitude with the neo-liberal critique of cognitive-propositional theology that by removing the stories from their originating context as stories, they are misshapen into a naïvely intellectualist literalism. c.f. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* p. 2ff.

<sup>385</sup> Bultmann is not mentioned here but the ‘horror’ at miracles and the ‘natural elements’ of theology are clearly related to his demythologisation thesis. As Barth says in a later volume of the dogmatics, ‘I have found myself in an intensive although for the most part quiet, debate with Rudolf Bultmann. His name is not mentioned often. But his subject is always present before me...Karl Barth, *CD IV.1*, p. ix.

<sup>386</sup> I am aware that when Paul speaks of ‘offense’ he primarily has the cross in mind (Gal5.11 and 1Cor1.18-25). However, this primary meaning of the text does not prevent its relation to the incarnation.

<sup>387</sup> *CD I.2*, pp. 132-33.

In our own terms this is clearly an inscrutable mystery. However, the incarnation does not easily lie within a category of epistemological or ontological mystery. For in the epistemological sense, the incarnation is an offence to the intellectual and conceptual grasp of what it means to be divine and human. Yet to categorise a doctrine of divine enfleshment as epistemological in character risks sliding towards a docetic denial of the enfleshed humanity of Jesus, an experienced historical reality which we might more readily place within an ontological sense of mystery. This quandary could indicate a weakness in our categorisation, but it might be fairer to take Barth's description of this as the 'ultimate mystery' than to expect such a unique mystery to incorporate both epistemological and ontological senses of mystery and thereby transcend further categorisation.

Within Barth, the incarnation is the pivotal doctrine which stands as an affront to human ratiocination; it is the ultimate mystery and simultaneously the supreme example of the act of God in creation. Returning to our final subsection of the *conservatio* in III.3, the providential event of the cross deepens the holy mystery of God's action.

#### **2.4 The Mystery of the Cross and Election in III.3**

In the *conservatio*, the 'mystery known' is most clearly presented in the crucifixion of Christ. Barth imagines that the situation could be otherwise:

'Why should the creation of wrath be a false one?...God did at first will to preserve the creature even after creation...But now he has had enough of us. Where formerly He exercised patience He now allows free rein to His wrath. He abandons it to the chaos towards which it always strove...the creature is now threatened again by an *annihilatio* beyond which God will be alone again and glorious in himself.'<sup>388</sup>

With merely the promises of providential fatherly care, this frightening scenario could be a reality. Nevertheless, 'the only valid answer is that it is not so, according to the work and revelation of God in Jesus Christ.'<sup>389</sup> At the cross, God displays and achieves his desire to preserve the creature from non-being, Barth's original phraseology is more poetic than my paraphrase could attain:

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<sup>388</sup> CD III.3, p. 78.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

‘He placed Himself within the contradiction. He drew to Himself and bore away the whole enmity and problem and power of the non-existent...He allowed Himself to be denied in order to remove the denial, thus completing the work of wrath but also the work of grace, uttering a complete No but also a complete Yes and giving the creature its freedom.’<sup>390</sup>

Located only within a philosophy of human contingency,<sup>391</sup> we are able to imagine the frightening scenario of divine abandonment. It is characteristic of Barth to place the activity of Jesus at the centre of theology and here Barth gives the notion of *conservatio*, a distinctly, non-philosophical and Christian identity. The cross provides evidence of the will of God to preserve the creature.<sup>392</sup> There is no hidden will of God waiting to surprise the creature, but the creature is affirmed and protected through the providential act of preservation. The cross affirms the freedom of the autonomy of the created order; preserving its being:

‘The known and unknown creatures of this cosmos may continue, following their own path in relation to man and in that autonomy over against Him which to us is shrouded in mystery.’<sup>393</sup>

‘Shrouded in mystery’ is not particularly clear. Given the surrounding co-text, it seems that Barth is arguing that the cross does not preserve creation in a static, frozen state, but the freely chosen sacrifice of Christ becomes the guarantee of freedom for the creature, even freedom to rebel against the creator. Therefore, it is a mystery that the love of God should extend to preserve the creature’s ability to rebel, even when the forces of nihil are vanquished at the cross. God’s ‘Yes’ to creation preserves it from the ‘no’ of nihil, but in this

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>391</sup> We could read Aquinas’ argument from efficient causes as an example of an argument proceeding in a purely philosophical mode to prove the contingency of humans and non-contingency of God. However what Aquinas is trying to achieve through his five ways is hotly disputed and would be a distraction from our current study of Barth. See Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) for an opposing view see Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) and for a summary see William Placher, *The Triune God*.

<sup>392</sup> In his preface to the majestic *God as the Mystery of the World*, Eberhard Jüngel argues that the cross actually makes the possibility of non-being ‘thinkable’. In the cross, that creation could not be is confronted and defeated and in this act thereby makes the very notion thinkable. Jüngel does not really expand this position but asserts it. It is questionable why we should accept that the death of Jesus makes the possibility of non-being anymore thinkable than the experience of death which thwarts daily human endeavour. p. ix.

<sup>393</sup> *CD III.3*, p. 84.

very act, the possibility of the shadowy '*nihil*' is conserved. This mystery is an extension of the strange and universal question of why anything exists at all; questioning why God permits anything to continue. Here, the concept of mystery functions to reflect surprise at the faithful conserving love of God.

So far, we have noted that Barth uses mystery in *III.3* to refer to the way in which God chooses to preserve the creature from his wrath and the creeping chaos of *das Nichtige*, because of the election of Christ, expressed most mysteriously and clearly through the cross of Christ.

## **2.5 Summary of the Mystery of *Conservatio***

Within the collected uses of mystery grouped under the *conservatio*, Barth has repeatedly started his doctrine from an embrace of mystery. From election through to the incarnation and cross, that a totally sovereign God should choose to elect is an inscrutable mystery that can be accepted and adored, but never repealed or 'got behind'. The unusual inclusion of the incarnation and the cross in a study of providence reflects Barth's consistent concern that the doctrine of providence retains a specifically Christian character. The *conservatio* is a significant affirmation of the central thesis that God is fundamentally mysterious, displayed so clearly in providential action.

## **3. *Concursus***

### **3.1 The mystery of the God hidden in secularity in *III.3***

One should not underemphasize the degree to which Barth understood God as intimately involved with his creation:

'To describe the *concursus divinus* we cannot use the mathematical picture of two parallel lines. But creaturely events take place as God Himself acts. As He Himself enters the creaturely sphere – and He does not cease to do this but does it in the slightest movement of a leaf in the wind – His will is accomplished directly, and His decisions are made and fulfilled in all creaturely occurrence both great and small.'<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> *CD III.3*, p. 133.

Recalling our earlier discussion of primary and secondary causes in providence, Barth affirms both the totality of God's Lordship and the dignity of the autonomous creature.<sup>395</sup> These two persons do not compete in some manner, but are totally and radically different, not just in quantity but quality:

'In the operation of God as a co-operation with that of the creature we have to do with the mystery of grace in the confrontation and encounter of two subjects who cannot be compared and do not fall under any one master-concept.'<sup>396</sup>

Referencing Job 28 and Psalm 139, it is not possible to offer descriptions of the 'how' of the divine *concursum*, but Barth is unequivocal that the creature cannot opt in or out of the accompanying work of God. The *concursum* is a reality which we all experience, whether or not it is acknowledged by the creature.<sup>397</sup> The 'confrontation and encounter' of two subjects who cannot be compared, in which the creature outworks the will of God is a 'high mystery of grace'. What does Barth mean by 'mystery' here? I suggest two things. Firstly, as explored in the preceding section, there is the mystery of grace, by which God chooses to invite the creature into the divine activity. There can be no compulsion on a sovereign God, so divine election is not axiomatic, but is chosen by God. Secondly, the mystery of the *concursum* lies in how the two distinctly different orders of creator and creation can interact and even work in union. This remains a mystery to us because we are unable to give a sufficient linguistic account of it.

### 3.1.1 How?

'We now proceed to answer positively the question of the How? of the divine operation...From first to last it must do justice to the inconceivability of the being and work of God. It must speak quite definitely of the divine mystery. But it certainly cannot take the form merely of an ignoramus...'<sup>398</sup>

We should ask two questions of this quotation from the *concursum*. Firstly, where is the mystery located and secondly, what does Barth mean by 'the form of an ignoramus'? The

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<sup>395</sup> This passage bears witness to Barth's preference to advance his argument through exalted speech about God rather than demeaning speech about the creature.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>397</sup> 'What takes place in the divine operation is always inconceivable, unexpected and unmerited'. *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139

co-text indicates clearly that the location of the mystery is ‘the being and work’ of God and the role of the theologian is to give right ‘justice’ to it. Preceding this description of the mystery, Barth offers a list of conditions that a full version of the doctrine would have to both negatively avoid and positively provide. Negatively, the *concursum* must not rely on creature to creature analogy for the relationship, avoid notions of a mechanical relation or rely on principle or emanationism. The positive elements require speech about the *genuine* quality of the creator-creature dynamic and give voice to the richness of the being of God and his manifold work. This is not an apophatic, rhetorical strategy but an acknowledgement of the limitations of human speech; a reality of the strange otherness of the creator-creature relation. The ‘insuperable difficulty’ of this task leads us to acknowledge the mystery. Thus far, Barth’s use of mystery has been at the starting point, a mystery that one cannot ‘get behind’ or refute. The position is now shifted towards the mid-end point of discussion. Humans cannot meet the multiplicity of conditions required by the doctrine.

### 3.1.2 ‘Not as an ignoramus’

So, we pose our second question, what does Barth mean by ‘not as an ignoramus’? Here, mystery does not equate to leaving the question ‘open’, it is not equivalent to saying ‘I do not know’.<sup>399</sup> Barth is concerned to guard against the negative errors listed above and especially concerned that mystery must not leave a problem open to a ‘general philosophy’ which refuses to speak about particularity of God or is unable to speak of the action of God. Again, for Barth, Christian theology moves always from the inside to the outside, the formal question of ‘how’ of God’s activity only takes place in God’s action of coming in Christ:

‘Christian Theology...first knows the activity of God in a particular cosmic action in which God has made himself known. It perceives that the One who acts at this point and in this way is the supreme being. And in the light of that perception it sees that this God is at work in and over the activity of the creation as a whole. It is not an assertion but a confession of the divine operation.’<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>400</sup> Barth does not specify a particular philosophy or philosopher that he is attacking, the complaint goes against the whole field of ‘general philosophy’.



The confession concerns the Christ of the Johannine prologue; ‘the operation of God is His utterance to all creatures of the Word of God which has all the force and wisdom and goodness of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>401</sup> This Trinitarian providential action takes place in the Old Testament as the *modus operandi* of the accompanying providential presence of God.<sup>402</sup> This is not an attempt to address the technical problem of how to speak of the conflict or complementarity of human/divine wills, but opens a further layer of theology. A significant part of the problem surrounding providence is linguistic; how to find the appropriate analogy for the relation of God to creation.<sup>403</sup> So Barth refuses scientific, philosophical or cultural analogy in favour of a theological version. We have encountered one of the core questions to be pursued in our final discussion, whether theological language requires an additional and external analogue, or whether it can stand as an independent explanatory and analytical category. This a fundamental part of the divergence between Barth and Wiles and a fuller discussion awaits in our final section. Meanwhile a few questions are relevant at this point to illuminate Barth’s thought. Does a theological description of a mystery tip a theology towards fideism? Although fideism can be used in a pejorative manner, is this what Barth, following Anselm, means by *fides quaerens intellectum*? If only God can reveal God and particularly only Christ reveals God, then a certain amount of circular argumentation seems inevitable; the ensuing question is whether this is legitimate and on what grounds one might make a claim to legitimacy or falsehood? Barth repeatedly refuses to apply any ‘neutral’ tests to theology, whether scientific, experiential or philosophical; instead, the ground and subject of theology remains Jesus Christ. In the refusal of the possibility of a non-theological analogy, does Barth rely on a presumption of a type of sacred language that is untouched by other realities? Such a notion is highly problematic and lead us to our next form of mystery on the secularity of God.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., p. 142

<sup>402</sup> Inspired by Barth, Vanhoozer describes the action of God as a ‘speech-act’. In scripture, God is presented as one who presents himself in speech. ‘God appears as speech agent in scripture and as the ultimate speech agent of scripture. Divine speak-acting serves as both material and formal principle of remythologizing theology. There is not a generically causal but with a specifically communicative joint; God’s relation to the world is a function of his triune authorial action, the self-communication of God the Father through the Word in the Spirit.’ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing*, p. 302.

<sup>403</sup> It is striking to reflect on how certain theologies are made memorable by virtue of their principle analogy. So, deism is perfectly recalled through William Paley’s watchmaker or the critique of high Calvinism as ‘puppetry’ or ‘chessmen’ makes a theological legacy endure.

<sup>404</sup> This question is revisited in our final chapter.

### 3.2 Revelation as Mystery; the Hidden God in Plain Sight in CD I.2

‘Mystery does not just denote the hiddenness of God but His revelation in a hidden i.e. non-apparent way which intimates indirectly rather than directly. Mystery is the concealment of God in which He meets us precisely when He unveils Himself to us, because He will not and cannot unveil himself except by veiling Himself.’<sup>405</sup>

Mystery is connected with the major doctrine of revelation and the minor theme of hiddenness, although Barth did not subsume revelation under providence or providence under revelation; the revelation of God occurs most distinctly in the paradigmatic event of providence, the incarnation of Christ. Certainly, within our understanding of providence as the action of God in creation, the revelatory actions of God in Christ can be considered within the doctrine of providence. In the above statement, God’s revelation comes to the creation as mystery. The notion of revelation normally has some sense of making a truth that was previously unknown, known. This notion is not really different in Barth, but the truth unveiled is not more information, but the reality of the veiled God; in revelation God comes as mystery, so God is revealed as mystery. This is a robust sense of mystery that cannot be repealed; one must accept it as a total and complete. Humans are not given an additional sensory organ with some type of ‘*sensus divinitas*’. Instead, faith is the response to ‘that which was from the beginning which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have looked at and our hands have touched.’<sup>406</sup>To move directly from 1John to Barth;

‘The search for the possibility of getting such a handle, the search for a receptacle of human experience, attitude and teaching which would be undoubtedly and unequivocally the receptacle of the divine content – this search is not one that should be pursued further and further into every new and hitherto unknown or even undreamed –of area of human reality, no matter whether it is a matter of new positions or merely of the possible limits of this or that or even all possible positions. The insight that is needed here is that this search is pointless. Therefore, one cannot see both sides; it is not possible to state how far ‘the veiled Word now means

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<sup>405</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, Second edition, ed. G.W Bromiley and T.F Torrance, Trans. G.W Bromiley (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) p. 165.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

unveiling or the unveiled word now means veiling'. To know both sides would be a mere paradox in which we could pierce through the veil to control and know the other; the revelatory encounter in the incarnation can be accepted but without attempts to balance both sides.<sup>407</sup>

The hiddenness of God is a significant theme that is inextricably related to Barth's conception of mystery. This does not mean that these themes are synonymous for there are instances where Barth does refer to the hiddenness of God without using the term mystery.<sup>408</sup> Rather, the term 'mystery' is used more broadly, occasionally inconsistently and without precise boundaries; by contrast, 'hiddenness has the narrower sense of hiddenness in revelation.

'The speech of God is and remains the mystery of God supremely in its secularity. When God speaks to man this event never demarcates itself from other events in such a way that it might not be interpreted as part of these other events.'

Barth's point echoes the prophet Isaiah; if we imagined ourselves in first century Nazareth and happened to see Jesus of Galilee walking, then 'he had no form or majesty that we should look at him'.<sup>409</sup> Unlike in religious art, no halo adorns Jesus' brow and no hallowed light surrounds him. On meeting him one would not have experienced a mystical ecstasy or Otto's holy terror, rather we would have observed another Jewish Rabbi with dusty feet accompanied by a band of followers. The difficulty of God revealing God is that the form, indeed any form, is not suitable for the subject. Any form can so readily become an idol.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., p. 174-175. The debate about the proper place and meaning of paradox is a major area of contention between Barth and Tillich. In Tillich, paradox means 'against the opinion of finite reason'. Consequently, in the action of God finite reason is superseded but not annihilated; so, the incarnation is not a logical contradiction but a transcendence of human understanding, breaking into human reality but one which cannot be derived from ordinary expectations and possibilities. Tillich attacks the 'impossible possibility' sense of paradox that Brunner employs to make a virtue of nonsensical affirmations. It is fair to include Barth within his critique. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 56-8. See fn. 407 for Barth's contrasting view of paradox.

<sup>408</sup> For example, *CD II.1*, p. 182-185.

<sup>409</sup> Isaiah 52.2

<sup>410</sup> We recall here Barth's Calvinist opposition to the installation of stained glass windows in Basle Cathedral. Busch, *Karl Barth...*p. 385.

The form veils as it unveils- God, the subject of revelation.<sup>411</sup> This veiling is not an unfortunate lack of divine planning or an element which will be disposed of in the future:

‘Revelation means the incarnation of the Word of God. But incarnation means entry into this secularity. We are in this world and are through and through secular. If God did not speak to us in secular form, He would not speak to us at all.’<sup>412</sup>

Barth has little time for mystical revelations in which the true and pure ‘God behind’ is revealed.<sup>413</sup> Secular humans cannot see God and live; the concealment of God has not, and will not, be set aside, instead the incarnation, a mystery revealed as mystery enables the creature to know the creator.<sup>414</sup> As Barth phrases this in II.2, ‘Jesus Christ...is not merely the revelation of the mystery of God. He is the thing concealed within this mystery and the revelation of it is the revelation of Himself and not of something else.’<sup>415</sup> This language is veering towards tautology, but two points clarify Barth’s meaning. Firstly, one must always refer to the infinite qualitative distinction and acknowledge that ‘His ways remain higher than our ways.’<sup>416</sup> Secondly, the purpose of this revelation is not to ‘occasion specific thoughts or attitudes’ but to ‘bind us to himself’. Veiled in Christ, we are confronted by the mystery that God is with us. This is a speech act that is not merely linguistic or performative but relational. Creature and creator are brought together through the Word of God manifested through the Holy Spirit. Here, providential act and revelation are one: as God acts, the creature knows the creator as mystery.

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<sup>411</sup> Hart phrases it, ‘The need for it (revelation) will and could never disappear whenever the distinction between God’s existence and human existence is taken seriously, because what faith discovers in its encounter with the living God is that this God is wholly other than the creature and confronts it as such in absolute mystery’. Trevor Hart, ‘Revelation’, *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 42.

<sup>412</sup> *CD I.1*, p. 168.

<sup>413</sup> Barth contends that the fundamental problem of mysticism is the denial of the ‘veiling’ secularity of the word of God; the mystic proceeds through discarding the scriptures and Christ as mere signs in the pursuit of the depths or heights of God, *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, Barth prefers the term mystery to paradox for two reasons. Firstly, paradox has led to many confusions (p. 166) and secondly, a paradox presents two sides of a concept, both of which are affirmed as true despite their seeming contradiction. For Barth, although this principle is understandable, theologically, we do not know both sides to be true in the way that a paradox requires. (p. 174) Mystery is more total than the partial insight promised by paradox.

<sup>415</sup> *CD II.2*, p. 104.

<sup>416</sup> From the second version of *Der Romerbrief*, ‘if I have a system it is limited to what Kierkegaard called the infinite qualitative distinction...’. Karl Barth, *The Epistle...*, p. 10.

If Barth can be charged with attempting prolegomena, this is found in the first volume of *'Dogmatics I.1/I.2'*; in accordance with our discussion of the *concursum*, here the mystery has focused primarily on the mystery of *how* God remains mystery amongst revelation. Barth has offered no special sphere of sacred history in which revelation takes place, God is amidst the secular. Indeed, we might ask whether the secular, that is a truly godless state or history devoid of spirituality, can exist for Barth. Perhaps the refusal of any neutral system or external rationality can be extended so that no moment in history can be considered or conceived of as dissonant from the presence of God. Barth requires the Christian to have faith in the providential action of God, even as we encounter it as mystery.

Langdon Gilkey once opined that:

'Unless we have some conception of how God acts in ordinary events, we can hardly know what our analogical words mean when we say: "He acts uniquely in this event"'.<sup>417</sup>

For Gilkey, unless the language of divine action or speech is given the philosophical foundation of a God-world relation, repetition of its occurrence becomes 'meaningless'. This critique is especially striking because Gilkey is fond of Barth.<sup>418</sup> However, the use of 'some conception' is almost desperate language, seeking ways to squeeze the divine into the causal nexus of the universe and finding none. Barth's conclusion takes the opposition approach, so that the mystery of God means we cannot give a proper descriptive account of His action, nevertheless we must acknowledge and accept it. As we will see in the next chapter, for Wiles this approach is unacceptably fideist; for Barth this is the life of the Christian. This division is the root of the cleavage between Wiles and Barth and poses the question of whether faith has a meaning within systematic theology. This discussion awaits us in our final chapter, now we continue our exposition of Barth's conception of mystery.

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<sup>417</sup> Langdon Gilkey, 'Cosmology, Ontology and Biblical Language', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (July, 1961), p. 194-205

<sup>418</sup> See his 'breathless praise' of *CD III.3* in Langdon Gilkey, 'The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jul.1963), p. 171-192.

### 3.3 Revelation of the Hidden God in CD II.1

Barth begins every new section in his *'Dogmatics'* with a dense summary statement. *II.1* is the beginning of his Doctrine of God and the opening compendious statement is an emphatic iteration of how important mystery is to Barthian theology:

'The knowledge of God occurs in the fulfilment of the revelation of His Word by the Holy Spirit, and therefore in the reality and with the necessity of faith and its obedience. Its content is the existence of Him whom we must fear above all things because we may love Him above all things; who remains a mystery to us because He himself has made Himself so clear and certain to us. <sup>419</sup>

The content of divine revelation is a mystery because the content is the creator; the revelation is the revealed one. Therefore, this revelation is inalienably mysterious, because we recipients of revelation are finite creatures, and the content of the revelation is the uncreated creator. If one were to present a God who was not a mystery, we would be staring at a god, not a God. This truly mysterious God is only known in His own light. Contra Feuerbachian fears of religion as a form of projection of the self, that God is proclaimed as a mystery is an affirmation and guarantee of the 'clarity' with which God has revealed himself as a mystery. Idols of wood and stone are manipulable, the mysterious God-man is only known through the light and power of the Holy Spirit. Mystery guards against idolatry and the fear of projection.<sup>420</sup> Barth again appeals to the infinite qualitative distinction, so that one cannot speak of God properly without speaking of His mystery. Here, this is offered as a doctrinal point regarding the ontological relation of God and humanity and yet we would be mistaken in thinking that Barth only intends to make an intellectual and academic statement. The pastoral tone of the writing suggests a desire that the mystery of God should exert a spiritual effect on the reader instilling humility and caution before the majestic, mystery of Christ.<sup>421</sup>

Barth resurrects the theme of mystery on several occasions throughout *CD II.1*. The preceding discussion on the hiddenness of God is clarified and Barth seems anxious to

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<sup>419</sup> Karl Barth, *CD II.1*, p. 3.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43. n.b. Barth does not refer to Feuerbach at this juncture. However, the inclusion of '...we are not making God in our image' is an allusion, if not direct, to Feuerbach's central thesis.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40. 'How can or dare we make that positive statement without at once speaking also of this limitation?' The language of daring is more devotional than systematic.

repeat any sense that the God veiled in the unveiling act of revelation is somehow a different God from the one 'behind' the revelation:

'The very hiddenness in which He is here revealed is only the mark of grace of his revelation, with the knowledge of which our knowledge of God must begin and never depart. But in the revelation of God there is no hidden God, no *Deus absconditus*, at the back of his revelation....it may often look like this...in Luther. But in the witness of Holy Scripture it does not appear like this. Here also God is God and therefore mystery.'<sup>422</sup>

In a starkly dialectical mode, Barth expresses a direct contradiction, both extolling and denying the hiddenness of God within a single sentence. We must ask whether such sharp contradictions remain within the bounds of meaningful speech. Using our categories of nonsense this approximates to Wittgensteinian nonsense. The infinite qualitative distinction is an acknowledgement of the otherness of God beyond all language and conceptuality and yet within the bounds of human experience it is who God is encountered in Christ. The ensuing context indicates that Barth is concerned to affirm the veracity of the revelation of God. Creatures know that Christ reveals God, not because of any test we may invoke but because it is God who is revealing God. This revelation is epistemically self-justifying. However, this genuine revelation of God does not prevent the act of divine revelation revealing a genuine mystery. Indeed, building on an earlier point, that God comes to us as mystery, might be presented as a guarantee of the reliability of that content. In Christ, we find God revealed as love and this is a genuine manifestation of the identity and will of God. The life and death of Jesus demonstrates the love of God, 'for us' and so fears that the 'secret will of God' (c.f. Calvin) or *Deus Absconditus* might *really* be capricious is dispelled by Christ.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., p. 596. See also the contrast with John Calvin's, *Secret Providence of God*, is quite startling. In this short book, Calvin admonishes Castiello for failing to accept the two wills of God by which God. For example; 'The one who is supremely good wisely uses evil for the damnation of those he justly predestines to punishment and for salvation of those he predestines to grace...when they are acting contrary to his will they were accomplishing his will in a wonderful and ineffable way nothing happens contrary to his will even that which is contrary to his will.' Calvin later supports these quotes with biblical references to God dwelling in unapproachable light. The question Barth might pose – is can we trust this God that Calvin postulates? Is this secretive God, the same one revealed by Jesus Christ? Barth is concerned to show that whilst mysterious, the

Revelation is mysterious because of its divine content and form and so the theologian and preacher finding themselves in the impossible position of being 'unable to speak of God, must speak of God'. The recognition of this situation forms humility in the speaker and also encourages them to continue in the act of theology, even whilst recognising its inadequacy. So, there is a sense in which theological talk follows the mode of incarnation, unworthy vessels mysteriously representing and making known the divine.

### **3.4 Summarising the Mysteries of the *Concursus***

To conclude this section, although the *concursus* only relates formally to the 'impossible' technical question of the cooperation of creator/creation, it is clear that material on the hiddenness of God form an inseparable witness to the confession of God in providential and revelatory acts. In our terms, the *concursus* is a bountiful source of inscrutable epistemological mystery. For Barth, it is Christ who provides the analogue for the whole of God's hidden providential action; it is the bafflingly unbecoming nature of flesh to conjoin with spirit, the superlative kenotic act that remains a mystery to those who behold it. If we ask what is specifically mysterious about the hiddenness of God, it is impossible to disentangle the form from the content. The form is the content and the content is the form. This can only be confessed on the basis of Christ's example and never inferred from philosophical discourse ('every cause has a first cause'), natural observation ('the interior rationality framework of creation') or personal experience ('I knew God was guiding me').

### **4. *Gubernatio***

The section entitled *Conservatio* considered the mystery as a 'wonder of grace' and the *Concursus* concerned the technical question of 'how' God mysteriously relates to creation. This section, under the sub-heading of '*Gubernatio*', will consider the mystery of events. Although Barth clearly affirms the Lordship of God over all events, Barth does not propose that the sovereignty of God is obvious from historical observance. Mystery is utilised for the difficult problems of creaturely free will and the occurrence of evil. There is some duplication in this section regarding the technical questions of how providence occurs, and we will not repeat questions that arose during the previous section.

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Christian really can trust the identity of God. John Calvin, *Secret Providence of God*, Trans. K Goad (Wheaton: Crossley Publishers, 2010) p. 66, also p. 76.



#### 4.1 The Mystery of God's Rule in CD III.3

There are places in III.3 where we might expect an appeal to mystery, but Barth does not pursue them:

'We can and must accept the fact, without demur or resentment, that God does actually control creaturely activity. This activity is always the individual and free activity of the creature...The control of God is transcendent.'<sup>424</sup>

When considering the doctrine of providence and the question of evil, theological thinking tends towards dramatic examples. It is rare to find a meditation on whether God ordains, permits or was uninvolved in missing a train or stubbing one's toe, but relatively commonplace to question God's involvement with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the horrors of the Holocaust. Barth does not adopt this dramatic, sensationalist tone. The rule of God is not only in the 'significant' events of history, but in the growth of caterpillars, the 'clothing of the grass' and in care for oxen.<sup>425</sup> Nothing is too small or insignificant to escape the gaze, interest and control of God.<sup>426</sup> So the dignity of the creature is not found in isolation from God but in coming under the kingship and Fatherly care of God. Barth is consistent in emphasizing the importance and fact that this control is an aspect of the transcendent creator-creature personal relationship, rather than being the micromanagement of a bureaucratic body. The question is, what does this transcendence actually mean? Where we might expect to find it, Barth does not employ or appeal to mystery, instead he fleshes out the meaning of transcendence by reference to the events of the Old and New Testaments. Again, a cultural or philosophical analogy is refused, so the revelation that the 'I am' is the King of Israel is the analogy required to understand the

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<sup>424</sup> *CD III.3*, p. 165.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.* p. 173. Barth lived through both world wars and was significantly involved in the Second World War, famously the chief author of the Barmen Declaration, Barth was significant enough to be banned from public speaking and understood his role to be intellectual resistance, writing a multitude of support to academics, ministers and politicians throughout the period. However, through his theological writing Barth rarely makes references to the turbulence of his time. There is an exception here in which Barth argues that God's rule ought to be affirmed in every small thing in order to avoid the totalitarianism of East and West that relies on the hierarchies of making some items of 'lesser and greater importance'. We should recognise the radicality of Barth's belief in divine sovereignty in a such an acutely chaotic period. Finally, note the contrast that Wiles argued that God's rulership offends the dignity of the creature; for Barth the opposite is true, if every small movement is controlled by God, all things are dignified by His interest.

*gubernatio*. This is present in world occurrence generally – but only in ‘hidden form’.<sup>427</sup> The rulership of God is confessed by the Christian looking at the scripture; but not seen or discerned by historical observation.<sup>428</sup> With the Bible in one hand, the Christian is to confess that God rules in every detail and with the newspaper in the other hand, we must confess the hiddenness of this rule amidst all events. Barth contends that we are to proclaim Jesus as Lord, while we acknowledge that we do not know the way in which He is Lord. This is hidden from us. Cautiously, Barth does affirm that there are signs of divine governance; the scriptures, church history, the existence of the Jews and the limitation of life; yet, like the incarnation in *CD I.1* these require ‘eyes to see’ and are not obviously delineated in a way that cannot be missed.

#### **4.2 Hidden Rule**

The term ‘hidden’ is preferred to ‘mystery’ in this section.<sup>429</sup> As we have seen, Barth can interchange some terms without difficulty. In this instance, I suggest that Barth prefers hiddenness because he understands the hiddenness of God’s rule to be temporary, a concealment that will be repealed in the eschatological consummation.<sup>430</sup> Therefore, while we must acknowledge a certain fluidity, Barth tends to use hiddenness for something which is temporary, and mystery for something more permanent, rather like the distinction we made between comprehensible and inscrutable mysteries and within the comprehensible, we named this an ‘undisclosed mystery’.

#### **4.3 Signs of the *Gubernatio***

If we might expect Barth to speak of the scriptures and church history as signs of the rule of God, then the continued existence of the Jews is a rather more surprising inclusion. Suffering through innumerable persecutions, the diaspora and most especially the destruction of the temple, the Jews’ existence is less an ‘indication’ of God’s rule and more

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>428</sup> ‘...this economy and disposition are identical with the economy and disposition of the saving events of biblical history which culminate in Jesus Christ and derive from him. But it is not at all the case that this economy and disposition can be understood directly from world-occurrence itself, as though this occurrence were a second bible’. Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>429</sup> The signs of God’s rules are listed as ‘mysteries’ but this is done in a rather vague fashion meaning ‘unknown things’ rather than given any development. Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., pp. 199-200. The remarkable preservation of the Jews refers ‘back to the central event’ and forward to ‘the consummation’. I understand Barth’s use of ‘forward to consummation’ to mean a future eschatological state.

‘an actual demonstration of it.’<sup>431</sup> In astonishment, Barth questions how such a tiny people group could manage to continue to exist, persist and even thrive without losing their identity. This example is a useful illustration of Barth’s layers of mystery; the Jews are preserved because of the wonder and mystery of their election (*conservatio*); that they are surviving, even thriving amidst such opposition is a sign of the ruling Lordship of God (*gubernatio*).

‘Why does He will to control all creaturely activity and its effects, and to what extent is this control really an ordering? The answer is that God controls all things because in and with and by and for all things He wills and actually accomplishes one thing – His own glory as Creator...’<sup>432</sup>

Note how the goal of creation is not concealed; the created order exists for the glory of God and is directed towards God through his ruling hand. The Christian is to confess this overall march of history without irony. The mystery lies in how specific occurrences fit into the overall scheme for the glory of God. This is an undisclosed mystery that will be made known in the eschaton.<sup>433</sup>

There are points when Barth offers contradictory statements:

‘...the *concursus*, *conservatio* and *gubernatio*’ are just as visible to the Christian in the developed form of the divine operation as are happenings in the street to the man looking out of a window.’<sup>434</sup>

Only for him to state two pages later:

‘In practice, of course, he (the Christian) is faced every day afresh with the riddles of the world-process, he has no master keys to the mysteries of existence...’<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 168

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-200. ‘In world-occurrence it is a question only of the hiddenness of God and of the ruling power of God. We can and must expect the removal of this hiddenness by the revelation which He has already given to us, but we cannot achieve it by ourselves. Even the history of the covenant and salvation is not yet complete. It will be complete only when we can see the reach of the grace of God and of his love for all creation...’

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., p. 242 (parenthesis added)

Although Barth may conceivably contradict himself within a few pages, a more generous reading might find the answer in the initial question posed; what does providence seem like for the insider of faith? The answer is to affirm the position of faith amidst confrontation by the 'mysteries of existence'. Here faith is not a position within an argument or a theological facet, but a lived life in which the Word of God has genuine and real practical impact. In this sense, providence is a 'live doctrine' that requires participation on the part of the believer. For Barth, this participation takes place in faith, obedience and in prayer and we will briefly look at prayer.

#### **4.4 Prayer and Providence**

Looking towards the Lord's Prayer; the activity of prayer is understood as 'simply asking'.<sup>436</sup> The core of this 'asking' is a relationship founded on Christ; 'The mystery that God is the Father of man and man the child of God, is a mystery which has been revealed to him.'<sup>437</sup> Within the relationship of Father to child, the creature is permitted to approach and ask with the expectation of a child that he is to receive. Ultimately, the response to these petitions is the divine gift of Christ as the fulfilment of all human longing. However, this should not be understood to mean that prayer is a reflexive activity that only has an effect on the internal sphere of the Christian. Rather, in petitionary prayer, Barth contends that the Christian is gifted a share in the universal Lordship of God:

'The will of God is not to preserve and accompany and rule the world and the course of the world...in such a way that he is not affected and moved by it, that he does not allow Himself to converse with it, that He does not listen to what it says, that as He conditions all things He does not allow Himself to be determined by them.'<sup>438</sup>

Following the strength of Barth's earlier statements on the sovereignty of God this statement ought to make us breathless with surprise. It is not that the creature is now naturally imbued with some autonomy to compete with God, but rather that the creator is not a prisoner of his own sovereignty and so can allow himself to be affected, even determined by the will of his sinful creature. This is made possible because the creature is taken up into the body of Christ, so that the Christian living in this present life is also seated

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., p. 269 We refer back to the sense of mystery established under the sub-heading of conservation.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

with Christ in the heavenly places; finding themselves in the seat of all governance, 'at the very heart of the mystery and purpose of all occurrence'.<sup>439</sup> Here the mystery is twofold. Firstly, it is the mystery of grace that unholy ones are welcomed into the place of holy governance. Secondly, the mystery of occurrence remains. Although welcomed into such a position, the Christian is not really afforded any 'special knowledge' of the troublesome questions of existence; they remain an undisclosed mystery to him. Despite the voluminous length of this work, it is surprising that Barth does not allow more space for this surprising turn in his doctrine. The painful reality of prayer is that many petitions are simply not granted. Barth does not employ mystery in this reality; instead, again and again, mystery is fundamentally focused on the providential relationship between creator and creature.

#### 4.5 Mystery and Sacrament in CD IV.4

Our final example of Barth's use of mystery is drawn from some of his final words written before his death. Barth's understanding of baptism was radical, rejecting any sacramental understanding of baptism and repositioning the ritualised washing with water to be a liturgical affirmation of the baptism in the Spirit that has already taken place.<sup>440</sup>

Consequently, Barth rejected paedobaptism and any sacramentalist version of the rite. The detail may seem a distraction, yet if we recall that the Greek term *μυστήριον* was translated into the Latin *sacramentum* in multiple places in the Vulgate, we may understand Barth's desire to rectify this usage.<sup>441</sup> In order to refute baptism as a sacrament, Barth offers some biblical exegesis on mystery. For Barth, *μυστήριον* has two uses. The lesser and infrequent

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>440</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV.4*, ed. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Trans GW Bromiley (Peabody: Hendricksons Publishers, 2004), p. x. Writing at 80 years old, Barth was apologetic that the 'elder Barth' could not devote more energy to the task of theology; suffering a stroke and the serious illness of Charlotte Von Kirchsbaum he died not long after finishing this volume. Even at 80 his irascible intellectual energy pushes him to utterly contradict his albeit short and earlier publication on the matter in 1942. Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*, Trans. R Birch Hoyle (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006).

<sup>441</sup> For the textual detail see the older but relevant See Theodore B. Foster, "'Mysterium" and "Sacramentum" in the Vulgate and Old Latin Versions' *The American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Jul., 1915), pp. 402-415 for a more catholic perspective see Maximillian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger Life in the Church and Living Theology*, Trans. Michael Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005). Tertullian is universally cited as the first person to translated translate mystery as sacrament partly in order to avoid the connotations that mystery had with the 'mystery religions'. Tertullian's 'On Baptism' an apologetic refutation of a preacher against 'viper woman' from a Cainite sect is the earliest example I can find of baptism as a 'sacrament' but the term mystery is entirely absent. *De Baptismo Liber*, Trans. and ed. E. Evans (London: SPCK, 1964)

use describes the puzzling, tolerant patience of God for a limited time period, such as the partial hardening of Israel (Ro 11.9) or the whore of Babylon drunk on the blood of the witnesses (Rev.17.5). Barth prefers a more positive use of the term; 12 passages of scripture are used to support his case, including Mk4.11 in which the divine seizure of power in Jesus is hidden to many yet revealed to a few, and Col2.2 the mystery is Christ in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge exist. Mystery is an event in the 'world of time and space, which is initiated and brought to pass by God alone...in distinction from all other events, it is basically a mystery to human cognition in respect of its origin and possibility.'<sup>442</sup> In sum, mystery is something from the action of God alone; it is not part of the human reaction in sacrament or deed.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this brief section of IV.4. Firstly, Barth's enthusiastic use of mystery, as belonging principally to God alone, is entirely consistent with our study so far. The second is why Barth has largely refused to use the term mystery in this negative sense that he outlines in IV.4 elsewhere in the '*Dogmatics*'. The most natural place for its inclusion would have been in the section examining '*das Nichtige*' in III.3. I have not included any longer review of Barth's account of nothingness, for it does not contain any substantial sense of mystery or hiddenness.<sup>443</sup> *Das Nichtige* is often praised for its original approach and development of evil as a non-thing.<sup>444</sup> However, even amongst scholars positive about the formulation, there is a lingering doubt whether Barth really accounts for the reality of evil.<sup>445</sup> It is deeply questionable for a theologian writing a mere 5 years after

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<sup>442</sup> CD IV.4, p. 108.

<sup>443</sup> '...the more the strange mystery of the true nothingness between Creator and creature is reduced to fantasy, the more freely and surely nothingness can take its course and exercise its power'. p. 309. The term mystery is used here without any special meaning apart from to convey further the strangeness of the situation.

<sup>444</sup> For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff describes Barth's discussion of evil as 'extraordinarily rich, insightful, imaginative and provocative...' *Inquiring about God*, ed. T. Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 280. also, Von Balthasar's comment "[Barth has taken evil] more seriously than [any] purely human experience or philosophical reflection [has ever done] see *The Theology*...p. 231.

<sup>445</sup> Two examples suffice. Eberhard Jüngel can ask 'Has Barth failed to recognize the "seriousness of the situation" of our world? In the end has he not minimized evil? These questions press themselves forward. When we pose these questions, we should certainly not suggest that Barth was naïve that he himself should fail to ask these questions.' That Jüngel even has to affirm that Barth *must have* thought about the issue indicates the account does not somehow convince. Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, trans. A. Neufeldt-Fast and J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 141. Similarly, after a thoroughly positive interpretative essay Nicholas Wolterstorff writes 'Despite Barth's insistence that evil is incomprehensible and inexplicable "there is much about evil that Barth professes to comprehend and explain – more than he should'. There is a sense here that Barth does not fully commit to the nonsense of nothingness; it is difficult to state that something is indescribable only to continue in verbose description. Wolterstorff seems to be employing a

the 'final solution', to write that evil is 'finished'. Barth's rationale for this statement is Christological; the cross is the final word on evil which must be maintained in the face of any menace. Yet Barth's response remains unsatisfactory; for as Rodin phrases it, Barth must be credited for constructing a doctrine of evil devoid of such a concept'.<sup>446</sup> *Das Nichtige* may eloquently express how the genuine power that does not exist menaces the creature. But the 'why' of evil and the resounding cry of 'how long O' Lord?' remain. Finally, it is disappointing that Barth does not employ this lesser form of mystery identified within the scripture to his own doctrinal formulation of providence.

This excursus on baptism may seem to be a distraction from our review of mystery and providence. On the contrary, Barth demonstrates a negative understanding of mystery that would complement his generally favourable use elsewhere. Barth neglected this negative sense of mystery to his wider work, a note which stands as an example of unfulfilled potential that could have helped tame critical voices on Barth's understanding of providence and evil.

#### **4.6 Summarising the mysteries of the *Gubernatio***

Barth's use of mystery within the *gubernatio* continues the themes found within the *concursus*. The divine government is hidden to the observer and yet is known through the confession of the work of Christ; the Christian is drawn into the divine government through the act of prayer. The main shift in the *gubernatio* is an increased emphasis on the place of humanity in the divine economy; this shift is mainly tonal, God remains utterly sovereign yet gracefully and indeed mysteriously, the Father draws creatures into his design.

When applying our own categorisation of mystery to the image of divine government, the picture is complex. There are elements of undisclosed mystery that relate to petitionary prayer and the question of evil even if they would benefit from substantial expansion. Additionally, the divine drawing of the Christian into the seat of sovereign governance has hints of ontological mystery to it, although it is not particularly described in the ecstatic sense that Otto uses.

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Wittgenstenian type of nonsense. Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Barth on Evil' *Faith and Philosophy* 13, 4 (1996) pp. 584-608.

<sup>446</sup> R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the theology of Karl Barth* (New York: P. Lang, 1997), p. 114.

## 5. Conclusion

We have concluded our review of Barth's use of mystery throughout the '*Church Dogmatics*' that has attempted to avoid the repetition that comes from exhaustive summary and still retains the most significant developments in the concept. The material on this subject is substantial and has not previously been considered in the sustained manner we have just attempted. The novelty and size of material has necessitated a certain level of critical description without recourse to external voices.

To return to our opening question on the use and function of mystery, the contributions of Barth have clearly enriched our understanding of the use of mystery. In Barth, mystery functions as an irreducible part of theological discourse, providing the astonishing foundation of election, interweaved into the *concursum* and somehow guiding historical occurrence towards consummation. Rather than an embarrassing signification of theological failure, mystery courses throughout Barth's doctrine of providence, it is embraced, defended and celebrated. Overall, mystery in Barth is not particularly characterised by absence of knowledge but the superabundance of God's being and the consequent human inability to adequately express the glory of the divine reality. This stands as an exemplar of my thesis, mystery is fundamental to Christian theology as demonstrated through Barth's formulation of providence.



## Chapter 7. Maurice Wiles use of Mystery

### 1. Introduction

‘What will perhaps have appeared less self-evident to some is whether the doctrine envisaged is genuinely Christian doctrine and whether the kind of changes advocated constitute a remaking rather than an unmaking.’<sup>447</sup>

Maurice Wiles held some of the most senior positions of theological authority in England. As head of the Doctrine Commission for the Church of England and Chair of Theology at King’s College London and Oxford, Wiles was unintimidated by his office and did not temper his theology into a form more amenable to tradition. He was a radical theologian; no doctrine was sacrosanct from the inquisition of rational criticism. The desire to say only what we can, rather than speculate about what we cannot say, has led to the charge that Wiles was a positivist.<sup>448</sup> As we noted in the review of his doctrine of providence, Wiles frequently dispenses with various theological options before constructing his own shorter formulations. Wiles may be described as a positivist, although we ought to regard the term cautiously for two reasons. Firstly, logical positivism is out of fashion and therefore often employed in a pejorative sense and secondly because it is not totally accurate. If we understand positivism broadly as a rejection of metaphysics in favour of observable phenomena, then it should be noted that Wiles was an Anglican priest who retained a belief in God to the end of his life. Indeed, he rejected ‘strict positivism’ because it would render whole tracts of ordinary speech meaningless.<sup>449</sup> In his festschrift, Rowan Williams argues that Wiles was not ‘a positivist with a pious gloss’.<sup>450</sup> These caveats aside, there is a reason

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<sup>447</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Remaking*, p. 103.

<sup>448</sup> C.f. Vernon White, *Providence*, p. 91. Derek Stanesby, *Science, Religion and Reason* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) p. 44. Studying theology in Oxford during the ascendancy of AJ Ayer also supports the charge.

<sup>449</sup> The full quotation is instructive: ‘These varied accounts of religious language have an imprecise and suggestive character about them. It is not surprising that their validity has been strongly challenged...the challenge takes various forms. In the strongest form of positivism, it has been held that propositions only have meaning if we can verify them as true or false (or at least know how we would verify them) by the difference they would make to our sense experience. In this extreme form the challenge would render vast tracts of our ordinary speech – most of our moral discourse for a start – and few would uphold it in that form today. But it is not unreasonable to claim that when we make an affirmation we ought to be able to state what counts as evidence for or against it.’ Maurice Wiles, *What is Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 63.

<sup>450</sup> There is some careful wordplay here from a friend and colleague of Wiles; the fact that this apologia is even required indicates the problem. Rowan Williams, ‘Doctrinal Criticism’, *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine; Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. S. Coakley and D. Pailin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 240.

why the suspicions of positivism will not dissipate. Principally, his concern for economy and coherence as a core theological principle means that he is very wary of the limits of theological speech. Wiles is keen to say what can be said and not to stretch these boundaries. A good example of this tendency can be found in his introductory work for undergraduates:

‘Is it possible to develop reasoned discourse about a subject whose very existence is denied by some eminently reasonable men?...At the outset we must acknowledge that...the elusiveness of its essential subject-matter gives to theology a highly problematical character.’<sup>451</sup>

The problematic subject matter of theology leads some to disavow the project and conversely drives others to employ the concept of mystery. As a professional theologian, Wiles never dismisses the enterprise of theology or the possibility of mystery as a theological category;<sup>452</sup> what make his contribution interesting in comparison to Barth is his refutation of mystery that drives the reconstitution of major doctrines and his liberal use of mystery elsewhere. The primary aim of this thesis is to establish the fundamental quality of mystery to theology; the secondary aim is to show that providence is a pre-eminent demonstration of theological mystery. This chapter will support this thesis by considering Wiles’ use of mystery in the published form of the Gifford Lectures *‘God’s Action in the World’*, consider the effect of his patristic studies on his embrace of rationalism over mystery before turning to *‘Faith and the Mystery of God’*. In an effort to group material together, subjects will be collated where possible to avoid repetition.

## **2. God’s action in the World**

### **2.1 Mysterious phenomena: Free Will, Evolution and Consciousness**

In a chapter considering the various ways that God might be said to exert his will upon physical bodies, Wiles considers the influence of process theology:

‘The novelty that characterizes the emergent evolution by which our world has developed is a mysterious phenomenon. But to try to account for it in terms of the

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<sup>451</sup> Wiles, *What...*, p. 2.

<sup>452</sup> We may recall that there are those who simply deny the intractability of mystery from Bernard Verkamp, *Senses*, pp. 1-18.

lure of divine love winning a response from the most primitive forms of physical existents is to add confusion to mystery.<sup>453</sup>

This polite ire is directed towards a form of Whiteheadian process theology which postulates that everything in existence, including minerals, vegetables and animals exert a type of volitional power at every moment. Whether a stone really does have a type of free will is not critiqued; it is simply dismissed as lacking credibility. This is an example of 'exclamatory' nonsense. The popularity of process thought has waned since Wiles submitted these lectures and it is beyond our concern to defend the idiosyncratic philosophy, rather we can note how mystery is employed. 'Mystery' refers to the process of evolution. The process is known but the novelty that drives these processes forward remains unknown.<sup>454</sup> Wiles is an evolutionist, so this 'mystery' does not present a question mark on the validity of the theory or its explanatory power for the growth of life.<sup>455</sup> Darwin's theory describes a process but it is not concerned with postulating why certain cells multiply and divide and others do not; Wiles considers this question a mystery. At root, this is a variation of the question of why anything exists; why is there something and not nothing? The answer is simply unknown. The context does not supply enough information to ascertain whether Wiles considers that the answer to the question might ever be knowable. The addition of 'add confusion to mystery' appends fascinating boundaries to the concept of mystery; so that mystery is not an amorphous absence of things we do not know, but rather the integrity of a mystery can be threatened by the introduction of nonsensical propositions. To make an appeal to mystery does not unnecessarily introduce confusion, it is not nonsense; talk of mystery is a legitimate manner of speaking about things we do not understand.

The second example of this type comes within a discussion of providence in personal life. Wiles states:

'Why is it that some people come to faith and others do not?...In the first place the mystery of a genuinely free human choice must not be eliminated.'<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Maurice Wiles, *God's Action...*, p. 33.

<sup>454</sup> This is Wiles' perspective, for our purposes it does not matter whether this accurately describes evolutionary theory.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, see p. 36 and 103.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

The importance of free will in *'God's Action in the World'* cannot be overstated. The emergence of creatures with the evolved capacity to use free will is the ultimate purpose of the creation of the world. This development is one of the only elements that humans can know about the will of God.<sup>457</sup> It should be noted that Wiles does not explore the notion of free will, so that what type of free will he intends is never quite clear.<sup>458</sup> Further, there is no consideration of any of the considerable philosophical difficulties one encounters before establishing such a position.<sup>459</sup> For a theologian of his calibre, it is inconceivable that Wiles is not aware of these debates; an appeal to ignorance is inappropriate. Instead we must recognise that the format of *'God's Action in the World'* is not the *'Church Dogmatics'* but a series of lectures published with little additional annotation that does not even attempt to explore every possibility or clarify each point.<sup>460</sup> Wiles proclaims 'genuinely free human choice' to be a mystery that must not be eliminated. By 'eliminated' we may suppose that free will could be discounted from argumentation (perhaps in some deterministic framework) but should not be, and so free will is a form of un-eliminable mystery. In this second sense, the mystery of free will precedes discussion as a type of opening premise that

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<sup>457</sup> To clarify it is not only the sole purpose of divine will accessible to humans but the only purpose of God at all: 'This, then is the fashion of God's acting in the world – making possible the emergence, both individually and corporately, of a genuinely free human recognition and response to what is God's intention in the creation of the world...our association of ourselves with it is not merely a means towards its furtherance in other aspects of life (though it is that) but is also itself a part of the fulfilment of that purpose. p. 103. Departing from tradition, there is no 'overall' purpose or plan for life imposed by God; God's 'purpose' is that life might exist in freedom.

<sup>458</sup> The word 'genuine' suggests that Wiles seems to consider free will as ultimate origination in which the agent has genuine choice to 'do otherwise'. Using this exact quote, Marilyn McCord Adams argues that Wiles is using a form of 'Incompatibilist' freedom'. The radical freedom appealed to throughout this work may be incompatibilist, however as the author leaves the question vague it does not seem wise to try and guess his precise position within a highly contentious and subtle field. See Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Evil and the God-Who-Does-Nothing-In-Particular', *Religion and Morality*, ed. DZ Phillips (New York: St Martins Press, 1996) p. 108.

<sup>459</sup> This is a deliberately generous reading, but it must be admitted that this is strange considering how frequently Wiles complains that his opponent's options are not philosophically credible.

<sup>460</sup> Whereas Barth's *'Dogmatics'* allowed him space to consider many different avenues that sprang to mind; Wiles is delivering public lectures, a form which requires penetrating analysis in an accessible format that does not permit time for a full justification for every statement. Barth does follow this pattern as well, a contrast illustrated by the contrast between *'Church Dogmatics'* and *'Dogmatics in Outline'*, a series of published lectures, which do not allow for all angles of topic to be considered. This does not mean we are comparing documents inappropriately or unfairly. Wiles did not write grand detailed tomes, his longest work I have encountered is *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) yet this is a mere 216 pages. One of the great strengths of Wiles' writing is his consistent clarity and economy yet these necessitate a shorter, less detailed format.

must be accepted for dialogue to proceed.<sup>461</sup> This initial premise cannot be 'got behind' but must be accepted;

'The mysterious phenomenon of human consciousness has arisen in it not by chance, but as a result of the intention that constitutes the God world act.'<sup>462</sup>

Here, we may recall Wiles' thesis that creation is not a series of micro-acts but falls under one 'master act' of God. The purpose of this one act is the emergence of independent, conscious beings. 'Mysterious' is directly connected with 'phenomenon', so that whereas the previous point proposed the mystery of free will as a necessary starting point for dialogue, here mystery has the quality of an experience that is strange and unexplained. The concept and experience of consciousness is mysterious.<sup>463</sup> As we have seen, Wiles has a minimalistic, almost deist version of God's involvement with the world. The question raised by the above statement is how mystery is attributed to the action of God. For Barth this would not raise a problem; yet Wiles has rejected the possibility of God determining anything within the spatio-temporal world. Two questions must be asked. Firstly, without interacting with the created order, how could God guarantee the development of conscious and thinking beings? Secondly, given that we now find ourselves consciously reflecting on our own ability to think, how, in the absence of any antecedent revelatory voice of God, can Wiles be so insistent that the development of human consciousness is due to the will of God? It must be admitted that neither of these difficulties are addressed in this work and Wiles has cut off an appeal to mystery by his own deistic rules.

## **2.2 Mystery as Obfuscation; Mystery as Cautious Faith**

'The problem of evil...is the Achilles heel of a rational Christian theism...the proposal for the abandonment of theodicy is a tempting one...Does not the form of God's

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<sup>461</sup> Elsewhere Wiles refers to this fundamental type of argument as he casts doubt on the traditional interpretation of the incarnation, so 'I am calling into question the church's traditional belief in Christ as both God and man only in the sense that I am insisting that it cannot properly be taken as the starting point of our enquiry; we have no right to treat it as an unquestionable axiom.' Freedom does play this sort of 'initial premise' function in the text above. It is interesting to reflect that this single statement demonstrates the fundamental difference between Barth and Wiles; for Barth the incarnation is the consistent and only proper starting place, for Wiles this cannot be. Wiles, *Remaking...*, p. 43.

<sup>462</sup> Wiles, *God's...*p. 102.

<sup>463</sup> We might recall that atheist Colin McGinn considered the fact of human consciousness a mystery that will not be understood by any means. *The Problem of Consciousness* (Oxford: Basil-Blackwell, 1991), pp. 1-2. Elsewhere, Wiles uses consciousness as an analogy of the existence of God that is not excluded by scientific experimentation, see Maurice Wiles, *Reason to Believe*, p. 2.

answer to Job out of the whirlwind teach us that suffering is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be accepted in an existential awareness of the incomparability of God's being?'<sup>464</sup>

Here mystery plays an obfuscating role. It is an easy temptation for a theologian to avoid an issue, so ignoring theodicy by appealing to great divine characteristics is a renouncement of 'the use of critical reason in relation to faith altogether'. An appeal to mystery is a type of theological resignation; a device to evade thinking about difficult issues and here theodicy is a perennial problem that cannot be circumvented by such theological pedantry. With reluctant valour, Wiles does not suppose that he will be successful, admitting that evil is a factor that 'points away from faith in God', but suggests we can 'fail in a stronger or weaker sense.'<sup>465</sup>

Wiles concedes, in a hesitant manner, that a form of both the free will defence and Irenaen Soul Making theodicy are 'possible lines of argument'. The removal of God's 'interference' in creation means that the theodical issue is distanced from a traditional area of questioning; whether God could have prevented a particular evil; rather, the question becomes whether this is the best possible world. Uninterested in an argument that has descended to this level of 'generality', Wiles theodicy, or at least 'failing in a weaker sense' makes two claims that emphasize the hope of redemption rather than a justification of God. Firstly, that Christ 'suffers with us' and secondly, an appeal to the Christian hope of redemption that, in the end, God will provide final succour. For our purposes, we might note the oddity of the language of God 'with us' when He has elected not to act but it the question of final hope which provides reflective material for us.

'Two grave difficulties attend a contemporary affirmation...that of conceivability...the most I believe that can be claimed is that our experience of ourselves as somehow transcending the components that constitute those selves makes the notion, however difficult not philosophically absurd.'<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Wiles, *God's...*, p. 39.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

What does Wiles mean by 'conceivability'? Perhaps the ability to state a proposition; yet the statement has just been made, so we might assert that this at least implies conceivability. If we can think something, the proposition becomes conceivable.<sup>467</sup> Alternatively, the use of 'responsibly affirmed', suggests that a system of epistemic justification is employed to prevent one from falling into philosophical absurdity. Readers are encouraged to accept and believe what is 'non-absurd' and is reasonable, yet it is not at all clear from this work what would constitute a non-absurd, conceivable belief. Philosophical tools are employed to dismiss arguments as 'unreasonable' or 'absurd', but this is a peculiar use of philosophy in which the meanings of these terms are presumed but not elucidated; there is a clear desire to be 'reasonable' without trying to set out the grounds upon which we could talk reasonably about something we do not know.

To summarise, traditional forms of providence are rejected because they do not conform to the demands of rationality. Yet precisely what these demands are, and why they should be accepted is not clear. The decisive factor is not actually philosophical coherence or scientific credibility, rather a moral distaste of the level of suffering tolerated by a God who will not act to prevent it. This decision is presented as a purely rational choice, when in fact it is driven by emotion. For our purposes, we are not concerned with the very real difficulties this issue raises but with the weakness of Wiles argumentation. An appeal to rationality that is not demonstrably rational must be unmasked; it is legitimate to ask why Wiles feels the need to employ the sheen of 'rationality' to his thesis rather than to articulate protest towards the seemingly absent, silent God in the face of extreme suffering.

Finally, Wiles does appeal to a sense of mystery or at least to a sense of the unknown to continue the work. Faced with what he terms, the 'weaker' failure in the face of unspeakable evils, theodicy remains an open question that is not satisfied by dispensing with God's interactions with creation, or free will, or the human ability to grow through suffering or the hope of redemption. The final point is that both theologian and the Christian are to continue struggling with evil, armed with answers that offer temporary intellectual and emotional relief but not total peace.

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<sup>467</sup> The philosophical discussion on zombies considers the question of conceivability in a helpful and idiosyncratic manner. This discussion is beyond our purview. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zombies/> [accessed 28/7/16] for a helpful introduction.

‘Although we must continue to walk by faith and not by sight, this perspective may enable us to claim, hesitantly but honestly, that that faith is not a wholly blind and unreasonable faith.’<sup>468</sup>

This is not a robust sense of mystery but a partial acceptance of the unknown in order to continue a life of faith. To reach this negative position of not ‘wholly blind and unreasonable’ faith Wiles trades some of the foundational elements of Christianity. The loss of these fundamental elements results in a rather insipid form of mystery, which does not even admit that it remains a mystery. Perhaps a stronger acceptance or even proclamation of what is unknown and mysterious to us might have provided a richer resource towards the development of more substantial tools to engage in this difficult theological area.

### **2.3 Incarnation and Mystery**

‘It is unphilosophical, if you have once accepted the Grand Miracle, to reject the stilling of the storm.’<sup>469</sup>

The inverse is also true. At the beginning Wiles rejected the possibility of the miraculous; no special case is allowed for the incarnation and resurrection. The incarnation and resurrection are doctrines that fundamentally rest on the providential work of God and Wiles applies his non-interventionist understanding equally to all doctrines. The reasons for this are unchanged from the previous discussion of divine action; such interventionism is philosophically incoherent and in the light of the occurrence of evil acts, morally indefensible.

The implication of the change in the doctrine of providence for the incarnation is most clearly outlined in the *‘Myth of God Incarnate’*. Citing EL Mascall’s rhetorical question of whether the two natures of Christ are ‘unreasonable’, Wiles responds:

‘The only answer I can give is “Yes, it is unreasonable”. The argument seems to me to have reached a conclusion far beyond anything that the evidence could conceivably justify. In entering such a demurrer, I am not claiming that one ought to be able to perfectly fathom the mystery of Christ’s being before one is prepared to believe. We do not after all fully understand the mystery of our own or one another’s beings. But

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<sup>468</sup> Wiles, *God’s...*p. 53.

<sup>469</sup> C.S Lewis, ‘Miracles’, *The Complete CS Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), p. 427.



when one is asked to believe something which one cannot even spell out all in intelligible terms, it is right to stop and push the questioning one stage back.<sup>470</sup>

The term mystery is applied to two different subjects. In reverse order, we lack ‘full understanding’ of our own existence. Precisely what Wiles means by ‘we do not... understand the mystery of our own being’ is vague enough to be open to a myriad of interpretations.<sup>471</sup> What is significant is his willing acceptance of the presence of mystery at all. Like the ‘mystery’ of free will, it is not clear whether he considers the mystery of ourselves to be something that will one day be completely known and understood. There is a certain practicality to this description; a truly Cartesian philosopher might agonize over the truth of solipsism, yet this is not a practical concern, we accept the mystery of ourselves on practical grounds. This acceptance does not mean we understand the complexities of conscious thought and its origins, but it reflects our experience and allows us to continue life and discussion.<sup>472</sup>

The second subject of mystery is the being of Christ. From this passage alone, Christ is mysterious in the same way that the author and readers of this paper are mysterious; nothing more and nothing less. This does not mean that Jesus is no longer considered important to Christianity; this would be a misrepresentation of Wiles’ thought. Instead the significance of the life of Jesus is not found in credal affirmations but as an exemplification of the ideal moral life and that Jesus most clearly expresses the self-giving love of God. Although he recognises that to predict the impact of this change is difficult, Wiles suggests that the shift away from a special ontology will result in a less exclusive claim about the supremacy of Christianity. An ‘evangelist’ in this vein might make aesthetic claims about the attractive qualities of Jesus but may not claim any special need or demand to follow the example of Christ. Finally, as above, the lack of any special revelation means that although one can now speculate that the life of Jesus may refer to the self-giving love of God, one cannot say with any authority what the character of God is. Wiles could have employed

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<sup>470</sup> Maurice Wiles, ‘Christianity without Incarnation’, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. J. Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>471</sup> Wiles has already referred to the mystery of human consciousness, but the lack of additional comment means it is not possible to know precisely what he meant here.

<sup>472</sup> Famously, Descartes would write his philosophy is bed; perhaps overwhelmed by the possibilities of non-reality. For a fascinating tale of how this reputation developed see Richard Watson, *Cogito, Ergo, Sum: The Life of Rene Descartes* (Boston: David R Godine, 2002), p. 126.

mystery to speak of how we receive a 'sense' of the character of God in Jesus, yet he elects not to take this path.<sup>473</sup>

## 2.4 Resurrection and Mystery

So far, Wiles has not been concerned with historical questions. Turning to the historicity of the resurrection; Wiles echoes the question posed by Schillebeeckx, how did such faith in the resurrection arise without ascribing a unique and supernatural character to the appearances of Jesus? Wiles approvingly quotes David Brown:

'What is sufficient to tip the balance towards endorsement of the objectivity of the disciples' experience will appear 'highly doubtful unless one has already accepted a theistic, as distinct from a deistic interpretation of God's activity in the world.'<sup>474</sup>

Here is a very clear choice between theism and deism. Neither option is easy, mystery awaits on both sides. Theistically, one may accept the occurrence of the incarnation and resurrection and accept what Anglican liturgy calls 'the great mystery of faith'. The second choice, that of a deistic mystery, recognises that one cannot explain the origin of the belief, but it rejects the significance of this gap in historical knowledge. It is a choice between faith amid inscrutable mystery and scepticism amid historical mystery. Acknowledging that his choice of deism has difficulties, Wiles refers back to the 'tipping scales' argument elucidated near the beginning of the work:

'I do not wish to underestimate the difficulties of my own position, either when it comes to giving a historical account of what followed the death of Jesus or to giving a theological justification of my faith in God as supremely revealed in Jesus. But I do not believe that the difficulties in either of those spheres are as great as the difficulties that would arise were I to bring into those accounts the category of some distinctively different form of divine action.'<sup>475</sup>

In this statement there is an admission of two mysteries, one personal and one historical. On a personal level, Wiles maintains his faith in Christ as a revelation of God's character, even when he considers the possibility of divine action incoherent and impossible.

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<sup>473</sup> Wiles, *Myth...*, p. 9.

<sup>474</sup> Wiles, *God's...*, pp. 92-3.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

Secondly, the historical mystery is how to account for the growth and development of Christianity without affirming some kind of divine act. These difficulties do not 'tip the balance' towards traditional faith, for they cannot outweigh the embarrassing cultural irrelevancies,<sup>476</sup> the undermining evidence of historical criticism that erodes biblical certainties,<sup>477</sup> internal biblical inconsistencies<sup>478</sup> and moral difficulties that make theism difficult and deism comparatively simple.<sup>479</sup> The extent of these problems casts doubt on the ability of the theologian to make a confident and reliable affirmation in the way that the tradition would seem to demand. These are not mysteries. They are negative assertions about the reliability of Christianity. Cumulatively these doubts mean that traditional Christology do not aggregate to anything believable to a rational person. In the absence of evidential certainty, there is no need to appeal to mystery or paradox to explain metaphysical intricacies. In choosing deism, the untidy cobwebs left by the inconvenient question marks raised by the emergence of Christianity and the sheer intellectual awkwardness of the incarnation and resurrection, are swept away.

## **2.5 Summary of Mystery in 'God's action in the World'**

Wiles' view of mystery in his main work on providence is generally negative; the phrase is obfuscatory and frequently employed to sustain weak theologies. Mystery is to be avoided, but where there is an unavoidable choice between two mysteries, the more transparent and less complex option should be selected. However, there are striking uses of mystery throughout the work. Firstly, there are fundamental epistemological mysteries: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does the evolutionary process progress at all? Secondly, a weak embrace of the unknown is required to enable faith to continue at all in

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<sup>476</sup> With the caveat of lacking the full blooded apocalypticism of the Christ message as in Schweitzer, Wiles accepts the conclusion from the first quest for the historical Jesus that Jesus is actually uncomfortably alien to our contemporary world, Maurice Wiles, *Explorations in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>477</sup> Wiles accepts these results without real examination or repetition. An example of this sense of inevitability is found in the work designed for non-specialists enquiring in the faith, *Reason to Believe*. 'The growth of scientific and historical study over the last two hundred years has led to a transformation of our understanding of the world and past history. The Bible too has been the subject of intensive scholarly study during that same period...The cautious view of how much we can say historically about Jesus with any confidence...is an inevitable consequence of such study'. p. 57.

<sup>478</sup> 'We are faced with the fact that no single figure (of Christ) may be available to us. This may make more explicable the fact that down the ages people have found so many different models of Christlikeness on the basis of the same set of records – as ascetic and a worldly Christ, a pacifist and a revolutionary Jesus and so on. All have some roots in the records of Jesus; none squares with all the evidence.' *Remaking*, p. 17.

<sup>479</sup> We explored Wiles' rationale for moral difficulties involved with interventionist providence in the section under the problem of evil.

the face of evil. Thirdly, in Wiles weakest point, the emergence of conscious beings is the overall purpose of creation, so a traditional component of providence is established without any means of God bringing this purpose to fruition. Wiles has to rely on mystery to establish his theology, but this is a negative mystery, a gap in human knowledge, rather than a positive feature of divinity.

'*God's Action in the World*' is the antipodal formulation of providence from Barth and yet, even in this somewhat positivist and even deistic version, Wiles relies on mystery at multiple points. This confirms the contention of this thesis that God is fundamentally mysterious and that this is displayed through the doctrine of providence. We turn towards our second section exploring the effect of patristic studies on Wiles' refutation of mystery.

### **3. Patristic Studies**

Mystery was an important concept in the patristic era it was not a particular focus of Wiles' research; instead his historical study shapes his understanding of rationalist theology that seeks to exclude mystery from the theological task.

#### **3.1 The Two Obligations of Theologians: Historical Exegesis and Doctrinal Development**

In his early career, Wiles was principally a patristics scholar specialising in the exegesis of the Church Fathers with a particular interest in Origen and Arius, including a popular textbook for students '*The Christian Fathers*'.<sup>480</sup> These earlier historical works rarely stray beyond historical-critical exegesis, so that amid their penetrating analysis of ancient figures, Wiles restrains his own voice; intentionally concealing his own opinion amid historical argument.<sup>481</sup> Yet there is a deep connection between his early patristic work and the latter radical work. Indeed, Wiles is explicit about the need for both elements to be distinct, for example:

'The Christian theologian, I believe is faced with a dual obligation. On the one hand he must be very firmly grounded in the history of the tradition. It has often been

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<sup>480</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers*, (London: SCM Press, 1966)

<sup>481</sup> At times Wiles is explicit about the need for historical questions to be a distinct area of study distinct from latter relevance or his own personal opinion: 'In raising a question about the legitimacy of those claims (n.b. of Arius) in concluding epilogue to this book, which is of primarily historical nature, my comments will be characterized by...breadth and brevity'. Maurice Wiles, *The Archetypal Heresy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.183

pointed out that the man who despises history is usually a slave to very recent history which he has failed to understand...On the other hand, the theologian must be prepared to challenge openly and explicitly any attempt to tie him too specifically to the ways and insights of the past; he must affirm the propriety – indeed the necessity – of genuinely new and creative work in Christian theology.’<sup>482</sup>

Considering that entrance to Oxford University was formerly dependent on acceptance of the 39 articles, it is worth pausing to note the magnitude of the statement that in his inaugural lecture to one of the most senior of English theological seats, an Anglican priest, who repeats the Nicene Creed in virtually every service, argues that the tradition of the church, including the creed is not binding for contemporary Christian belief. For Wiles the first task is historic research, conducted for its own sake without recourse to contemporary implications. Two examples will suffice to show his method. The secondary task of ‘new and creative work’ develops from the two lessons that study of the Fathers has taught him; a changed understanding of revelation and a changed historical consciousness.<sup>483</sup> In the quote above, ‘new and creative work’ is the ‘the secondary task’ of the theologian but this was gradually retitled as ‘doctrinal development’ and can be traced through *Working Papers in Doctrine* through to *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, reaching apotheosis in *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*.

## 3.2 Historical Exegesis

### 3.2.1 In Defence of Arius

Our first example is the 1962 article *‘In Defence of Arius’*. Piqued by H.M Gwatkin and Dr Pollard’s argument that Arius position is ‘illogical and unspiritual’, Wiles seeks to demonstrate that Arius position is logically cogent and motivated by soteriological concerns which are taken from the heresiarch’s biblical exposition. The detail of this debate does not concern us; indeed, he is not particularly concerned by whether Arius or Athanasius offer a ‘true’ or ‘orthodox’ account:

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<sup>482</sup> Maurice Wiles, ‘Jerusalem, Athens and Oxford’, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976) p.178-9

<sup>483</sup> First articulated in this clear form in ‘Maurice Wiles ‘The Consequences of Modern Understanding of Reality for the Relevance and Authority of the Tradition of the Early Church in our Time’ *Working...*p 91-94

‘All this is not to say that after all Arius was right, not is it to accuse Athanasius of illogicality or unspirituality...It is to suggest that the difference between the two sides is not as absolute or clear-cut as has traditionally been assumed.’<sup>484</sup>

Wiles is defending the honour, rational and spiritual capabilities of Arius without adjudicating on whether Arius account is right or wrong. For deciding on whose account is ‘true’ or ‘orthodox’ is not a historic question but a judgement placed 1500 years after a debate which was limited by Arius own rigid philosophical limitations.<sup>485</sup>

‘As a result, Arius’ teaching is certainly an inadequate account of the fulness of Christian truth’

Few within Christian orthodoxy would disagree with this statement, yet Wiles continues:

‘But that is true in some degree of every Christian theologian, ancient and modern. Even if it is true of Arius in a comparatively high degree it would not seem to be in such a high degree as to merit the description “utterly illogical and unspiritual”’.<sup>486</sup>

First, we confirm that Wiles’ motive is primarily defending Arius’ honour. Secondly, it is not just Arius but also the orthodox Athanasius and the ensuing creeds that are inadequate accounts of Christianity. Discovering the meaning of historic theological wrangling is intrinsically interesting and guides the contemporary theologian from being bound by similar errors. The error here is not variant understanding of ὁμοούσιος but the hubris of claiming true divine insight which shuts down variant options. God is not captured by any position because all positions are limited by their socio-historic relativity; the term ‘mystery’ is not explicit but implicit. God is wholly other and not captured by human gaze. At this point, Wiles’ theology seems to have resonances with apophatic theology, and we will return to this question at the end of the chapter.

### **3.2.2 The Doctrine of Christ in the Patristic Age**

Our second example is the 1967 article ‘*The Doctrine of Christ in the Patristic Age*’. Wiles is responding to claims that the Fathers deserted a ‘living response to the person of Christ and turn to arid formulations’ in a manner that perverts the biblical witness to Jesus.

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<sup>484</sup> Maurice Wiles, ‘In Defence of Arius’, *Working Papers in Doctrine*, p.28-37.

<sup>485</sup> It would be consistent for Wiles to include Athanasius within this judgement.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid*, p.37

‘In the execution of that proper and necessary intellectual task they did not regard the mysteries of faith either as sacred preserves into which critical enquiry should not be allowed to enter or as philosophical puzzles which could be solved by the application of the rational intellect alone.’<sup>487</sup>

First, we note that ‘mysteries of faith’ is not expanded but considering the context we can take it as a traditional reference to the immanent Trinity with the consequent questions for the person of Christ. Secondly, Wiles commends those ancient fathers who sought to communicate the gospel in the idiom of their time; this was not a perversion of a pure Hebraic gospel but a natural evolution. At Nicea, the interaction of Hellenistic philosophy with the Christian gospel crystallised a novel uniformity of doctrine that was enforced and legitimated by the presence of the Emperor. ‘Heretics’ drive doctrinal exposition but are pronounced ‘heretics’ when orthodoxy is delineated. From this point, Nicea becomes a fixed starting point from which all later debate would be conducted. The bulk of the article concern distinctions between the Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and as before the detail stretches far beyond our remit. For Wiles, these distinctions were significant and important, but both parties could only debate in terms that were dependent on accepting premises laid out at Nicea. This meant that the ‘debate between Alexandria and Antioch was being fought out with both combatants having one hand tied behind their back.’<sup>488</sup> If Nicea had actually been questioned, then the debate could have progressed in a more fruitful and productive manner. The conclusion of this article is that, unfortunately, Nicea remains the unquestionable starting point for contemporary theology; a judgement which fails to recognise the weak cosmology implicit in the notion of divine action, the scandalous particularist qualities of ascribing the Logos philosophy to a single human being and the historical conditioning of the conciliar statement.

These two examples illustrate the lessons that contemporary theology must learn from the Patristic era: the changed understanding of revelation and a changed historical consciousness. These lessons are most clearly explicated in the article ‘*The Consequences of Modern Understanding of Reality for the Relevance and Authority of the Tradition of the Early Church in our Time*’, to which we now turn.

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<sup>487</sup> Maurice Wiles, ‘The Doctrine of Christ in the Patristic Age’, *Working...*p.38

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49

### 3.3 Two lessons

#### 3.3.1 'Changed understanding of revelation'

Amid the diversity of historic understandings of revelation, the one constant has been that 'the only complete way to the knowledge of religious truth involves appealing to a revelation whose reliability is guaranteed to us by supernatural authority'.<sup>489</sup> For Wiles, this traditional view of revelation was possible until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The dawn of the enlightenment began shining light into previously undisturbed areas of thought but within modern understandings of reality it is untenable to protect a limited area of religious truth from critical assessment. The modern world requires critical assessment at all levels and there is no 'holy of holies' that can be restricted from such analysis. Wiles is unafraid of the results of such an enquiry and his favourite example is the rise of biblical criticism. As once scripture was held beyond question and yet such analysis has not invalidated their use, so now we must apply the same principles to the historic doctrines of the church.

#### 3.3.2 A changed historical consciousness

"What is the essence of this changed historical consciousness?...We are all today, in one degree or another historical relativists. This does not involve abandoning absolutely the categories of 'true' and 'false'...but it does involve abandoning the category of 'absolutely true'"<sup>490</sup>

The language of ancient Greece is not the language of heaven, but a historical-cultural product that is unsuited to the task of carrying 'eternal truth' to all subsequent generations. The writings and conciliar decisions of the Fathers do not teach eternal verities but the interaction of a particular philosophy with a particular form of Christian faith in the 4-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are no longer any Arians or any Athanasians; their whole world view is unknown and unsupportable for modern readers.<sup>491</sup> Even beyond the famous heretical splits, it is not possible to speak of an orthodox *consensus patrum*. Such a fanciful notion

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<sup>489</sup> Wiles, 'The Consequences...' *Working...*p. 91

<sup>490</sup> Ibid, p.93

<sup>491</sup> Wiles' defence of Arius could give the impression that he was an Arian himself. Such a view would be mistaken. By Wiles' research, the revival of Arianism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was quelled not by the poverty of the ideas but Arianism's reliance on a supernatural world of intervening spirits of which Christ is the 'chief creature'. The existence of such a world is no longer thinkable so that Wiles cannot be an Arian. If anything, his position is closer to an Ebionite, although Wiles does not take this position openly. See Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy...* pp.157-164



ignores the reality of the real divisions and instability of the patristic era and these divisions heartily undermine any sense that the creeds are binding authoritative statements.

Wiles' example of the Cappadocian Fathers approach to the Trinity makes the implication of these changes very clear:

'No one could be more sensitively aware of the mystery of the Godhead and the inadequacy of all human talk about God than were the Cappadocian Fathers...they believed that God revealed himself in a direct and precise way in scriptures. And secondly on the basis of this revelation and God-controlled use of human reason it was possible to make affirmations about the nature of God as he is in his own being.'<sup>492</sup>

Neither of these presuppositions is tenable. The first is precluded by scientific understandings of the world; the second by the inadequacy of human language to transcend their cultural relativity. Implicit in this statement is that the Cappadocians are right to affirm the transcendent mystery of God but mistaken to consider that such truths can be adequately contained within human language. God remains a mystery and, in a sense, cannot reveal himself.<sup>493</sup> Consequently, Wiles concludes that the church should not tightly clutch the patristic notion of the Trinity and instead seek new truths about the divine.

### **3.4 Development of Doctrine: The Remaking of Doctrine**

The twin lessons of a changed understanding of revelation and a changed historical consciousness culminate in the theme of 'doctrinal development'. First laid out in *'The Making of Christian Doctrine'*, Wiles demurs from tightly defining his new phrase, instead the task is described as:

'Study of the motives which led the Church along the road of doctrinal development cannot settle the question of the validity of the doctrines thereby developed. The truth or otherwise of those doctrines depends upon the validity of the reasoning by which they were determined.'<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Wiles, 'Consequences...' *Working...*p. 101

<sup>493</sup> We note the consistency here between Wiles' earlier work and the *'God's Action in the World'* reviewed earlier. The second point will be echoed in *'Faith and the Mystery of God'* in the last section of this chapter.

<sup>494</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967)

The historical task alone does not give insight into the meaning and truth of events; improved research only improves the lucidity of our view of these historic figures. The 'truth or otherwise' of the doctrines developed is evaluated through logic. The terms 'validity', 'reasoning' and 'determined' is the language of formal logic and it is the application of logic that will determine the truth of doctrine.

This rationalistic approach to doctrine finds clearest expression in *'The Remaking of Christian Doctrine'*:

'What, then is the particular purpose of the Christian doctrine that I shall be seeking to discuss and to develop in these lectures? The two words that best describe my objectives are 'coherence' and 'economy'...An unfriendly critic might describe them as euphemisms for 'rationalism' and 'reductionism'....<sup>495</sup>

Revelation through tradition or scripture are not criteria for the truth of Christian doctrine, instead it is the piercing application of reason to Christian truth claims that will justify or condemn them. Reason is described as 'coherence' and 'economy'. Echoing our earlier complaint that Wiles fails to define philosophical terms that he uses liberally, Wiles does not expand on the specific meaning of these terms throughout the rest of the work, but we might try to interpret them through his own concerns (the 'unfriendly critic') and his wider work.

### **3.4.1 'Coherence'**

I propose to interpret coherence as both internal coherence of a single concept and external coherence with other branches of systematic theology and human knowledge. Internal coherence may question whether the statement Jesus is God incarnate is even meaningful.<sup>496</sup> Doctrine which cannot demonstrate internal coherence should be rejected, not accepted. External coherence is more complex but presumes a unity of truth between different disciplines that genuinely affect one another. For example, scientific models of the universe demonstrate that providence is an impossibility, therefore theologians should accept the changes that modern understanding demands. Reason determines the

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<sup>495</sup> Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking...* p. 17 'These lectures' refer to the fact that *Remaking* is taken from the Hulsean lecture series delivered in 1973

<sup>496</sup> For example, Wiles poses this exact question in dialogue with E.L Mascall see p.176 of this thesis.

meaningfulness of Christian truth claims. Therefore, rather than pretending that divine action is a mystery, one must reject the notion as irrational and develop new doctrinal forms. What is especially interesting about this rationalistic approach is that it is not clear which non-theological disciplines that theologians should now embrace. It is almost as though the question is obvious and does not need addressing. Exhibiting enlightenment levels of confidence in the gift of reason, Wiles has a high regard for 'scientific' disciplines and mathematics but does not venture comment on phenomenology, psychology or sociology. This means that Wiles cannot entertain any possibility of religious experience and our sense of 'ontological mystery' is excluded by such pure rationalistic analysis. Sarah Coakley draws this argument well and contends that Wiles is stuck in a 'sceptical bog' by embracing an overly stringent rationality that will not countenance experiential knowledge. Drawing on Vladimir Lossky's mystical theology, Coakley points to the surprising experiences of the mystics and Anglican charismatics who through prayer find themselves drawn into the 'inner life' of the Trinity.<sup>497</sup> Coakley's own position on the trinity is beyond our purview but her case alerts us to Wiles' *a priori* rejection of experiential evidence. This refusal runs contrary to Wiles' own aim for doctrinal development that claims to seek new insights into Christian doctrine.

### **3.4.2 'Economy'**

An obvious consequence of Wiles' economy is his very short books. Yet economy has a serious theological function clearly related to mystery. Economic theology should say what the evidence allows us to say and stop; speculative theology is specious. Much theology is 'luxuriant growths that require pruning'.<sup>498</sup> Wiles' own internal 'unfriendly critic' suggests that this is reductionism and yet we must ask why this would be an uncharitable description. For example, Wiles' doctrine of providence is reduced to deism, his Christology is no more than Ebionite and consequently the Trinity disappears entirely. Doctrinal development was in fact, doctrinal deconstruction and what remains is severely reduced. For Wiles, theologians should restrain their excitable pens and resist building theologies on non-existent, incoherent foundations. As we shall see in the final section of this chapter,

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<sup>497</sup> Sarah Coakley, 'Why Three? Some Further Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity' *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine...*p. 48-50

<sup>498</sup> Wiles, *Remaking*, p. 18

'economy' is partly a desire to retain the transcendent mystery of God that cannot be described by creatures.

### **3.5 Concluding our review of Wiles' Patristic works**

This section has provided a retrospective of Wiles' chief patristic works that witnessed the rise of 'doctrinal development' which he had hoped would mirror Bultmann's attempt to demythologise scripture. This lifetime of endeavour was not successful in this aim but does provide us the context for his coherent and economic or rationalistic and reductionist methodology that largely seeks to exclude mystery from the theological task. Now we turn to Wiles' most mature work as he reflects on his own faith and the continuing presence of mystery in it.

## **4. 'Faith and the Mystery of God'**

### **4.1 The Mystery of the Origins of Faith**

Following the vociferously critical works we have examined in the last section, in this later volume (1982) Wiles attempts to rebalance rationalism with a 'more personal approach' to theology.<sup>499</sup>

'Where does the religious person stand? There are no clear-cut tests for the truth of his or her beliefs of a kind that the mathematician and up to a point the natural scientist can apply. He is more like the artist, for value-judgements and deep-seated imagery are a part alike of the content of his beliefs and the criteria by which he has to assess them.... whatever part philosophical argument and historical evidence religious faith is never a matter of logical deduction...'<sup>500</sup>

Latterly, in a similar tone, he continues:

'In general, such critical analysis changes the situation much less markedly than might have been expected. It does not do away with the problematical character of

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<sup>499</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. viii.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

faith. It neither shows religious belief to be something demonstrably unreasonable nor does it 'prove' the reality of the divine.'<sup>501</sup>

Wiles consistently celebrated the power of critical analysis. At this late juncture in his career, the supposedly radical appraisal has effected very little change. To begin, we must recognise the oddity of these sentiments; from our survey of his work, distinctive and foundational doctrines of Christianity including traditional conceptions of providence, the incarnation and the Trinity have been pronounced radically incoherent and unfit for modern belief. To radically undermine these doctrines and then to suggest that little has changed is astonishing. Yet Wiles is a serious theologian with vast learning, who is not prone to making casual or unplanned remarks. How have the 'acids of criticism' managed to remove such foundations and leave the edifice untouched? How are we to regard the strange persistence of faith? It is my contention that 'little changes' refers to the practice of faith. Within Wiles' Anglican tradition, the richness of traditional theology survives in liturgical form. Perhaps faith still 'looks the same' but is disconnected from practice.

*'Lex orandi lex credenda* may be a sound principle, but *vox orandi vox credenda* is not. The use of language in the articulation of faith in prayer and worship is very different from the use of language in critical reflection.'<sup>502</sup>

A cognitive dissonance is introduced and nurtured between the words of faith and their meaning. One may pray for an individual suffering from cancer, but one is not required to believe that this prayer, though uttered, will have any more than a placebo effect. The liturgical practice of faith remains strong; the practicalities of life are unaffected.<sup>503</sup>

'I have so far found less difficulty in reassuring myself about the existence of some transcendent referent of experience, some reality corresponding to the word 'God' than in reassuring myself about God's personal, active involvement with the world. Yet the latter is vital to Christian faith...am I then faced with an insoluble conflict

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>503</sup> We may recall that Wiles continued as a regular at Iffley Parish Church including teaching the Sunday School with his wife. Unattributed author, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2005/17-june/gazette/canon-professor-maurice-wiles>

between the postulates of faith and the reasoned judgement of theological reflection?’<sup>504</sup>

Recalling Wiles’ fervent teenage evangelicalism, one must note how personal the language is here. Though calling elsewhere for a certain detachment in the study of theology,<sup>505</sup> here the discourse starts by voicing a personal quandary “I have found” develops through personal consolations (reassurance) and an existential crisis of faith (faith and reasoned judgements). The need to resolve this crisis stems from both intellectual demand and a personal need for settlement. Wiles route to resolution is a shift in the way religious language is understood.

### **3.2 ‘Creative and Disclosure Language’**

The aim of Wiles’ second chapter in *‘Faith and the Mystery of God’* is to move religious language away from literalistic naivety towards a rich symbolic understanding. Drawing from Tillich and Ricoeur, Wiles attempts to demonstrate that such an account offers a robust, coherent and creative form of theology.

Religious language differs from mathematical language; mathematicians use clear and simple concepts like odd and even numbers, theologians have concepts like love and hate. These religious-ethical categories cannot be described as clear and simple.<sup>506</sup> The linguistic tools of theologians are akin to poetic expression, offering imaginative possibilities that do not just disclose reality, but create it.

‘So religious language may be appropriately described as a form of ‘imaginative construction or of ‘symbolization’ ...to stress the imaginary character of poetic and

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<sup>504</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 17.

<sup>505</sup> ‘What is called for in a theologian, who is also a man of faith, is not that he should have less faith but that his faith should co-exist with a certain capacity for detachment’. *What is Theology?* p. 9.

<sup>506</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 18. It should be noted that the field of mathematics is not an area which somehow excludes ambiguity, even a certain mystery. Bertrand Russell discussed the concept at length in *‘Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), p. 172n. Or see Waismann’s reflection on impossible numbers; ‘when a student hears about imaginary numbers for the first time, he again experiences this impression of mysteriousness, which disappears later in proportion as he learns to use these numbers. However, the nature of these numbers is not made clearer by usage. We simply have to become accustomed to them and ask nothing further.’ Friedrich Waismann, *An introduction to Mathematical Thinking* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 8.

religious language is not to suggest that their concern is with the purely imaginary.<sup>507</sup>

‘Imaginary’ is not defined but implies a fanciful meaningfulness. Imaginative construction does not introduce a disconnection between theology and reality. For ‘reality’ is not a concept somehow known in a pre-existent fashion. Citing Ricoeur, Wiles explains that the power of metaphor can re-describe reality, so that a novel reality *really* emerges.<sup>508</sup> For Wiles, problems occur when the metaphoric character of theological language is lost, and divine acts are described in a literalist fashion, a fashion that reduces God to another agent in the chain of efficient causation. This leads to a ‘nest of absurdities’.<sup>509</sup> By reinterpreting God’s action as ‘symbolic act’ these absurdities disappear:

“‘Act of God’ is a symbol which discloses an existing reality, namely that there are occurrences in the world which embody and express...the will of God...such symbols...do not only disclose reality; they also create it.’<sup>510</sup>

Poetic form is precise and creates alternate ways of seeing. The poetic mode can offer concrete imagery that expresses universal truths. For example, Shakespeare’s Juliet proffering her goodbyes;

‘Good Night, Good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow.’<sup>511</sup>

We know the intensity, the thrill and tragedy of those star-crossed lovers that through the immense drama of their particular story, we find a universal echo of how love can be. The concrete example pushes the mind’s eye toward general affirmations of truth. This combination of disparate elements is made possible by the imagination but would be lost in the analytic mode.

Theological traditions offer symbolic meaning that affirm ‘truths’ that create reality for whole people groups and provide common narratives for action. Firstly, in the symbol of

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<sup>507</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 19

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>509</sup> This phrase is a quote from Tillich. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>511</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Romeo and Juliet’, *The Full Works of William Shakespeare* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p. 256.

divine fatherhood, the world is recognised as dependent on a source other than itself. Second, collective recognitions of certain activities in history as ‘acts of God’ provide the community with a common narrative and therefore a new reality to describe both its origins and identity. For example, the Exodus may be reimagined symbolically. This leads us away from literal divine acts to soften and harden the hearts of a ruler into a metaphor that functions as an origination narrative for a people group. The new interpretation provides a communal sense of identity which can become the basis for praxis. The new story motivates the gathered community to actualise the narrative and create a literal land of milk and honey.<sup>512</sup> Divorced from the literal, metaphoric language is unbound by its original context; the Exodus can be and has been used as a model for liberating oppressed communities.<sup>513</sup> Exchanging literalism for metaphor does not mean that the narratives have to change, but they can be interpreted in a manner suited to a modern mindset:

‘In speaking of God, the symbolic language cannot be replaced by a more direct, non-symbolic account.’<sup>514</sup>

One cannot go ‘behind language’ to a direct evocation or connection with the divine. Necessarily, theology is an imprecise discipline because the subject of theology, God, is elusive. It is not possible to develop a more precise account of the divine because God is transcendent; it is not desirable to develop a more precise account because we will simply make unnecessary metaphysical problems.

At this point we may note the similarity between Barth and Wiles’ dissatisfaction with the language of divine causation and the varying ways they combat it. Tinged with positivist residue, Wiles presumes that ‘non-symbolic language’ is a possibility for non-theological disciplines. We must question this presumption. Industrial or biological descriptions of reality that reflect a Newtonian model of physics do not provide an accurate account of reality that all other descriptions must fit within. Kuhn’s ‘paradigm shifts’ established that

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<sup>512</sup> This example illustrates how much of our language relies on metaphor. The human heart is a physical organ essential to life, yet does anybody conceive of Pharaoh’s actual heart being physically softened or hardened by the hand of God? Even the most hardened fundamentalist would likely concur that the heart is a metaphor for the conflicted will of Pharaoh.

<sup>513</sup> Boff and Boff describe the Exodus as one of the most popular texts amongst liberation theologians for exactly this reason. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (London: Burnes and Oates, 1987) p. 35.

<sup>514</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 29.



the models used within the natural sciences are not infallible but are subject to periodic radical change.<sup>515</sup> 'Paradigm' recognises that, like theology, the natural sciences offer a model of reality that is subject to change with the discovery of new information. For example, the remarkable mapping of the human genome presents a model of DNA as a twisting double helix structure. Communicating this remarkable achievement requires the adoption of cartographic language and construction of a 3d model. Immediately, we can recognise the use of metaphor; the structure is not a map nor is the model a direct non-symbolic image of DNA. One of the greatest achievements of science relies on metaphor/analogy to be communicated; human language requires metaphor. Wiles presumes that non-symbolic accounts of reality are possible for some disciplines; a presumption that he does not attempt to justify.

### **3.3 Creative language and the Eucharist**

The parallels in religious language are most clear in sacramental language. For example, at the Eucharist, 'this is my body' ostensibly refers to a piece of bread, however, the doctrine of transubstantiation requires that the bread literally, not metaphorically, becomes the body of the son of Mary, Jesus of Nazareth. The doctrine intends to represent the genuineness of the sacramental encounter and union of God and man; Wiles contends that this genuine sense could have been retained without introducing the confusion by applying Aristotelian categories of matter and form that resulted in a category mistake.<sup>516</sup> 'Changes in meaning are more radical than physical changes and are not dependent on them'.<sup>517</sup> What is required is a new sense of 'trans-signification', by which the meaning of the bread becomes Christ to me, without a miraculous change in the chemical constitution of flour, water and yeast. Such an approach:

'Can remove the mystification without diminishing the proper sense of mystery. It renders unnecessary the admission of a special form of logical incoherence, or the invention of a special set of epistemological rules.'<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Third Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1996)

<sup>516</sup> The language of category mistake rises most clearly from the classic positivist text Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949)

<sup>517</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

This short quotation summarises much of Wiles' approach to mystery. The theological truth is indeed 'proper' and, to some degree, should be protected. However, mystery and mystification are separated. Mystification is related to 'misleading puzzles and perplexities'. The theological issues of transubstantiation are simply unnecessary complexities that obfuscate questions about the reality of the situation. Therefore, mystery is distinguished as resolutely not logical incoherence or reliant on special epistemological rules. Further, fideism will not be countenanced, so mysteries should be publicly accessible and do not somehow belong to those who already believe them. The Eucharist also means that those receiving the sacrament are affirmed as part of an ancient community that expresses the love of God for them. The love of God and the unity of the community are the 'mystery', the loss of mystification affirms this truth without the mental and spiritual gymnastics that show that the 'bread-has-turned-into-Christ's-actual-body-but-not-in-a-manner-that-indicates-cannibalism'.

This is the first strong affirmation of a mystery that we have discovered in Wiles' work; yet it is still fairly undeveloped. Given that this example is primarily within the context of worship and the phrase 'proper sense' is appended to mystery, I understand Wiles to be using the term to reflect a sense of awe and respect. This description is too experientially mild to be placed under Otto's description of the terror and 'otherness' that results from an encounter with the wholly other. Wiles' mild mystery bears more resemblance to the aesthetic sense of mystery that Verkamp detected so strongly in scientists gazing at the wonders of the universe.

### **3.4 God's mysterious self-identification with creation**

Another non-sacramental example is taken from the Matthean parable in which Jesus says, 'Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me'.<sup>519</sup> Dismissing literalistic interpretations, Wiles resituates the command as part of a universal requirement for care and compassion for one's neighbour. The poetic force of the parable creates an impetus and powerful reinforcement of the idea that could not be replicated outside of a religious context.

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-48.

‘It is an imaginative construction which can make us see and experience our neighbour in a new way. But it is not pure creation. For it helps to disclose an inexpressible and mysterious truth about God’s relation to men and women...For God’s self-identification in love with his creation which is yet also emphatically other than himself, is something that cannot be directly described or precisely defined in words; it is best conveyed by that vision, ‘inasmuch...’<sup>520</sup>

This mystery is not about awe but the truth of God’s relationship to humanity. God’s self-identification with humanity is an inexpressible mystery in two ways. Firstly, God does self-identify with creation, but the expression ‘which is yet other than himself’ balances the continuing otherness of God. Redolent of Barth’s *conservatio*, this is a slight affirmation that hints that God could choose not to self-identify with creation.<sup>521</sup> Secondly, note the firmness of ‘cannot be described’. Wiles is unequivocal that the mystery of this relationship is not a factor that can be expressed cogently in language. Instead, the parabolic image of ‘inasmuch...’ offers a better description. That image remains incomplete. Perhaps the image can be described as the ‘best’, but it can never be a perfect representation of the relationship.

The assertion that God self-identifies with the creation is almost a Christian truism, underpinned by the events of salvation history. The Psalmist reminds Israel that God is with them because of the Exodus or, as the Johannine prologue narrates, ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’. Wiles’ rejection of the hand of divine providence in the Exodus and the Incarnation means that he is required to find another way of justifying the statement that God ‘self identifies with creation’. We note that this justification is not forthcoming. Without this justification we must ask how this ‘inexpressible and mysterious self-identification of God’ remains a meaningful statement without the detail of how God would do so.

Affirmation of divine self-identification with creation within a deistic framework is an inconsistency and a significant weakness of Wiles work. For our purposes, ‘mysterious self-identification’ is especially significant. So far, Wiles’ has tended to emphasise divine

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>521</sup> This is intimated but not stated in the text. We must admit that Wiles does not pursue this question and is generally unimpressed by such speculative theology.

transcendence to such a degree that it is accurate to describe him as a deist. Yet Wiles never adopts the label deism. For such a careful writer, it is surely significant that whilst claiming the utter transcendence of God, Wiles still affirms God's self-identification, and even love for his creation. Most notably, the only way that this can be reconciled is through an appeal to mystery. This is a weak type of mystery that helps cover an inconsistency. However, once again we find that mystery is held out as the defining possibility for providence.

### **3.4.1 Excursus: Is Wiles an apophatic theologian?**

The combination of utter transcendence and continuing relationship with creation might suggest that Wiles is developing an apophatic theology. Our earlier reflections on apophaticism understood the form, in Denys Turner's words, as a 'riotous verbosity' that demonstrates the inadequacy of language through stretching it to breaking point.<sup>522</sup> Clearly this description could not be applied to Wiles minimalist writings. Another approach to apophatic theology is demonstrated by Meister Eckhart. Eckhart's approach to the *via negativa* was a theology that frequently drew on a multitude of negative images; deserts, solitude and, principally, detachment.<sup>523</sup> As a desert is barren, so one can seek solitude in absence from community and detached removal even from the self; these negative images are forms of privation. This form of apophatic theology makes the otherness of God possible through the deathly silences of the images. We could consider Wiles to be pursuing this mode of apophatic discourse. Although one could read Wiles' theology in this manner, this does not seem to be an interpretation that the man himself would accept. A 'naked' or Eckhartian apophasis would normally seek bare minimalistic language to convey the sense

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<sup>522</sup> Turner applies this title to Denys the Areopagite's work. Barth's dialectical approach has been interpreted in this manner see Paul Brazier, *Barth's First Commentary on Romans (1919): An Exercise in Apophatic Theology?* *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol 6.4 (Oct 2004) pp. 387-403. For a contrasting evangelical view that rejects the label of 'mere apophatic' approach for Barth, see Kevin Diller, *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga provide a Unified response* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), pp. 48-50.

<sup>523</sup> From his *German Sermon 48* 'I say the same about the man who has annihilated himself in himself and in God and all created things; this man has taken possession of the lowest place, and God must pour the whole of himself into this man...' p. 197. Note the phrase 'annihilated himself'. Later from the same sermon 'Sometimes I have spoken of a light that is uncreated and not capable of creation and that is in the soul. I always mention this light in my sermons; and this same light comprehends God without a medium, uncovered, naked, as he is in himself.... Also, Sermon 83 'So if you do not want to be brutish, do not understand the God who is beyond words. "Then what ought I to do?" You ought to sink down out of all your your-ness, and flow into his his-ness, and your "your" and his "his" ought to become one "mine," so completely that you with him perceive forever his uncreated is-ness, and his nothingness, for which there is no name. These quotations give a flavour of Eckhart's 'naked' mysticism. Meister Eckhart 'German Sermons', *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, Trans. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (London: SPCK, 1981), pp. 177-208.

of barrenness of human theological knowledge. Wiles is conceptually minimalist (we can say very little) but his approach tries to maintain the full cataphatic language of liturgical worship. This fullness of language is not to stretch or bend language to breaking point (as we saw in Denys Turner). Rather, liturgical language has to become ironic, deliberately repeating traditional formulas that do not mean what they intone. Maurice Wiles cannot be categorised as an apophatic theologian. This move is more akin to postmodern readings as seen in our second type of nonsense. Liturgical forms do not mean what they say, they disrupt our mundanity towards moral actions.

How then to understand Wiles' language of divine self-identification with creation? The description of 'self-identification' does appear elsewhere in his corpus, so it is unlikely to be a mistake. Pertinent for our concern with mystery, it seems that the function of mystery is to allow Wiles to carry a foundational Christian point on the basis of a nondescript mystery. This breaks his own rules relating to 'proper critical reasoning'. However, every writer and theologian has some moments of conceptual inconsistency and I cannot see how else Wiles can justify this comment within his framework.

### **3.5 Mystery as 'special logic'**

The final portion of this section concerns the words of Jesus, 'I and the Father are one';

'So, the church has developed and insisted on a sense of identity which is as strong a sense of identity as is conceivable short of identity tout simple. And in doing so it had to develop...a special logic for describing the status of those paradoxes that it cannot understand but is unwilling to eliminate...'<sup>524</sup>

This special logic applies to both the Trinity and the Incarnation. 'Special logic' is not a term of endearment; it is a disdainful remark. We have already noted Wiles' rejection of the incarnation throughout this paper. Here the term paradox is essentially pejorative; the dual elements of the hypostatic union are not affirmed but considered an unnecessary illogical encumbrance to the life of faith. We might observe the power of the church which is forced to develop special logic because it is unwilling to dispense with the incarnation. It is very clear to Wiles that the value of the gospel narration is not the revelation of a secret element to the divine identity of Christ. Rather, that metaphysical speculation dulls the truly

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

remarkable, incredible lived life of Jesus that exemplifies a life lived fully before God. The secret of Jesus is the open secret of his secular lived example.<sup>525</sup> Attempting to introduce divine elements to the character of Jesus of Nazareth pushes the reader towards a docetic denial of the glorious flesh and blood life of Christ.

Wiles is fully cognizant that this is a move away from traditional interpretations of the person of Jesus and therefore the revelation of God. In anticipation of the question of revelation he considers Barth's dictum;

'We must understand that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation.'<sup>526</sup>

This quote highlights the divisions between our conversation partners. For Christocentric Barth, if God is not *identical* with his act, there is effectively no revelation. Wiles politely rejects this situation as implausible, asking 'is this the most fitting way in which to understand these affirmations that lie at the heart of the Christian's faith language?' Preferring a symbolic account, Wiles proposes the transfiguration as a hermeneutical key an invitation to the reader to ask:

'In the light of this man's story do you not see the vision? Does it not lead you to a new awareness of God's glory in the world and of the transformation of human life that it can bring?'<sup>527</sup>

The text invites the reader to be inspired by the example of Jesus but makes no demands on the reader's attention or loyalty. The beauty of the text is in the eye of the beholder, not inherent in the text itself. This is a severely reconstructed doctrine, in which it is only the reader who is inspired, not the text. If the 'inspiration' lies only in the reader, effectively there is no real distinction between the Gospels and Shakespeare, or the Pauline epistles and a Batman comic book. Inspiration and a transformed life are the goal; not obedience to a revelation.

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<sup>525</sup> We note here another parable with Barth's concern about the 'hiddenness of God in secularity'. Barth takes the opposite conclusion.

<sup>526</sup> Karl Barth, *CD 1.1*, p. 340, cited in Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 51.

<sup>527</sup> Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 53.

One might accept this perspective regardless of the position of faith. Yet the point needs to be laboured, for it confronts Wiles with an acute difficulty. If Wiles made no truth claims about the biblical witness to God's relation to creation, this would be unproblematic. Yet, Wiles does make truth claims from the scriptures; we may recall the urgency with which Wiles urges the 'self-identification' of God with humanity in the gospel accounts. The question is, what does this 'self-identification' of God with humanity mean? From his own account, a symbolic account is both descriptive and creative; as Jesus' life is described, a paradigm for human life is created. The detail of what Wiles considers inspirational in the life of Jesus is unimportant for our purposes. The question remains, if Jesus' embodiment of the God on earth is a symbolic projection onto him, why should one accept Wiles' own positive interpretation of the life of Christ? Why not read the life of Jesus as another man whose life ends in tragic death and humiliation, publicly abandoned by the god he claimed to serve?

It is conceivable that Wiles does not consider his interpretation of Jesus to have unique interpretive authority and is perhaps satisfied with a tragic reading of the life of Christ. Within an interpretation of general literature this relativism is permissible. Whether JD Salinger's Holden Caulfield is the inspired voice of a generation longing for authenticity or an obstreperous adolescent ignorant of his own privilege is an interesting essay question for English literature students. We may be able to imagine that the new 'reality' shaped by Salinger could have practical and existential implications for adolescents, parents and policy makers. Yet 'reasoned discourse' about God is not at the same level of interpretive relativism. Whether God identifies with creation or not, matters in a way that cannot be matched by other interpretive quandaries. A theological interpretation of the life of Jesus, that Jesus, somehow, represents the self-identification of God with creation and that somehow this communicates the *love* of God for creation is a powerful interpretive claim. Building on our extant knowledge of his understanding of providence, we will repeat an earlier question. How, if God does not make himself known but dwells in deistic isolation beyond a Kantian ontological barrier, can one reliably be informed of God's self-identification with his creation? This issue is not circumvented by saying that such self-identification is only metaphoric, not literal. The rejection of the incarnation is the culmination of an earlier rejection of providence, built upon a disavowal of epistemological

mystery in faith. Wiles' attempt to smuggle in the practical implications of Christian faith whilst removing the historical and theological foundations on which they are built, lacks intellectual integrity.

### **3.6 Existence as Mysterious Gift of God.**

Wiles' reinterpretation of justification by faith affords us another opportunity for a development of mystery in a positive sense:

'Our fundamental standing in the world is determined by our acceptance of God's free and gracious love for us and not by our own merits or achievements...'

Taken in isolation, this statement could be taken from a conservative evangelical textbook. Yet, transforming his own heritage, Wiles shifts the emphasis onto present thankfulness rather than future hope of justification at judgement day:

'It is the recognition that the fundamental character of life is that of gift. Both that we are and what we have it in us to become are not of our own contriving. They are grounded in the mysterious love of God from which the existence of the world and particular historical tradition in which we stand derive...the acceptance of that love, which for us is focused in the figure of Jesus, that our lives find their true meaning.'<sup>528</sup>

This important passage isolates both Wiles understanding of the meaning of Jesus and the meaning of human life. Reminiscent of Schleiermacher's description of the 'sense of absolute dependence', acknowledgement of contingency on the divine is vital. This dependency relies upon God as both source and future. Regarding God as source, the existence of creation is now rooted in the 'mysterious' love of God. This is a positive, non-critical and undeveloped use of the term mystery. We know God as source, not because of revelation but through reflection on the possibility of non-being. It must be asked why this constitutes the 'love of God'. Perhaps the language of gift provides the insight here. Whereas 'contingency' seems fairly unreliable and merely affirms the dependent nature of reality; a gift is derived not from compulsion but is intentionally given for the benefit of the receiver. A gift suggests a loving desire for the pleasure of the one who receives. The person

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<sup>528</sup> Ibid., p. 64.



of Jesus does not ontologically manifest the love of God but exemplifies a life lived supremely in the light of this gift. However, the question remains; why postulate that the existence of the world indicates that God has 'love' for the world? One might plausibly use the language of source as the commencement of the universe. A river has a source, but it would be perverse to say that the source of the river, loves the river.

The second portion of this 'mysterious' love concerns the future of the individual; 'what we have it in us to become'. This is a curious phrase for an author who has so strongly disavowed any sense of divine action in creation as destructive of human freedom. So, Wiles may be referring to biological or sociological determinism that shaped us prior to any sense of consciousness of self. This is possible but seems a strange thing to call mysterious or to attempt to 'ground in the love of God'.<sup>529</sup> If we were reading Calvin, this could refer to the future moments of the individual which remain out of their control, yet this is anathema to Wiles' utmost concern for human self-determination. Considering the connection with Jesus in the ensuing paragraphs, I propose to understand this statement as a compact consideration of the sort of extraordinary life that is possible when a human lives under the conviction of the mysterious love of God.

### **3.7 Indissoluble Mystery**

The conclusion of *'Faith and the Mystery of God'* contains Wiles' clearest analysis of our subject:

'I want to emphasize and emphasize as a Christian theologian...the limitation of that knowledge about God to which we can properly lay claim...For it is not a set of unquestioned beliefs that faith requires if it is to be properly grounded. It is rather the readiness continually to test, to review and where necessary to revise both traditional affirmations of faith and its contemporary insights.'<sup>530</sup>

This statement represents a culmination of Wilesian themes. Fundamentally there is his distinctive caution when approaching statements about God. Here Wiles seems to be striking a note of careful humility as creatures before a transcendent God. This is phrased

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<sup>529</sup> Although Wiles' own experience of education and parenting was gilded, it is more common to connect sociological determinism with excluding those who might otherwise change their circumstances rather than a feature to be celebrated.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

negatively so that the emphasis falls upon the creator/creaturely gulf; Wiles rationalistic approach does not welcome theological speculation, but this is a clear example of his faith in an unknowable, transcendent wholly other God. It is possible to have a fideistic faith; it may even be attractive to hold 'unquestioned beliefs'. Yet this path produces a faith that is not 'properly grounded' and may erode the reality of the divine otherness. Here mystery is positive and negative. A positive feature of the indescribable creator and negatively a shield against specious human speculation.

At the climax of the work, Wiles shifts to a markedly more personal tone, with the confession that he has subjected his own faith to these questions:

'I still find myself convinced of the personal reality at the source of things – one whose character of love is most fully evoked by the figure of Jesus in that parabolic way in which alone the ultimate can be articulated and whose presence is most fully evoked through life shared with others in the Christian community.'<sup>531</sup>

This paragraph indicates more of a shift in tone than theology. Distinctively, Jesus does not reveal but evokes the 'ultimate'. The tonal shift does indicate some of the reality that structures Wiles' neutral and rational thoughts on faith; he is 'convinced' of the ultimate as a 'personal' reality. The language of conviction is fairly commonplace in the parlance of faith, but it is certainly not the norm within Wiles' vocabulary; this is not faith by rational deduction from evidence. Indeed, one must question on what grounds Wiles is convinced of this personal quality in the absence of revelatory possibility or content. Further, if God does not make himself known through general or special revelation but remains largely unknown, how is the language of a 'personal' God still meaningful? For our purposes his answer is very helpful. Considering Augustine's conclusion that it is ultimately a mystery why some find the gospel persuasive and some do not, Wiles responds:

'The appeal to mystery can be an evasion of proper critical reasoning. But that is not its true implication.... For while mystery warns us against speciously attractive answers that would dissolve it, it also encourages us to continue with the looking, for

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

we can never tell whether we have reached the limits of human understanding. Indeed, it is such a continued search for understanding that faith commits us.<sup>532</sup>

Consistently keen that theology does not mean obscurity, criticality remains important even in a final appeal to mystery. Mystery performs two main functions that are vital to the life of faith. Firstly, mystery should not be dissolved; God will always remain a transcendent other. Secondly, the indissolubility of the mystery provokes exploration. The 'specious answers' are those that would seek to define and therefore control the mystery itself. Wiles' immediate concern is with Augustine's own Trinitarian theology which serves as a cautionary paradigm for all theologians who would simultaneously describe a mystery and claim that the described thing/element remains mysterious.<sup>533</sup> This is not substantially developed, yet there is a suggestion that a mystery is something that cannot be repealed. In our earlier categories this is similar to an epistemological mystery; that something once known remains unknown to us and beyond our understanding. God is known through critical reflection on the fact of existence but a being that radically transcends creation cannot be truly 'known', only acknowledged as a mystery.

### **3.8 Summary of 'Faith and the Mystery of God'**

Contrasted with *'God's Action in the World'*, *'Faith and the Mystery of God'* is much more positive to different conceptions of mystery. The most significant development has been the adoption of Ricoeurian sense of metaphor. This is a tactical theological change; the scything attacks on traditional formulations of theology are replaced by reinterpretations within a linguistic system that is close to postmodern forms of interpretation. This is especially clear when Wiles wishes to retain the body of faith and community through the eucharist. Here, mystery is foundational to the sacrament not because of strange Aristotelian shifts in substance, but because the mystery of God is evoked in the religious community and accompanied sense of the sacred.

The life of Jesus is presented, in a weaker sense, as a form of inspirational aesthetic mystery as generations of Christians are invited to imitate a life lived well. As a person aware of his creaturely status, Jesus embodies what it means to live an idealised human life. Mystery is

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>533</sup> Whether this is a fair description of Augustine's Trinitarian pattern is beyond our purview.

found in the wonder generated by followers inspired to imitate the words and deeds of Jesus.

Not all mystery is positive; the robust attack on the 'special logic' used to defend creedal interpretations of the trinity and incarnation and ultimately, providence is subjected to the full force of Wiles' disdain.

Strikingly, God 'mysteriously self identifies' with creation. This anomaly in Wiles' work is surprising because it seems similar to more traditionally theistic models of providence. It would be too far to argue that this remained Wiles' 'true' beliefs that betrayed his normal rationalism, but we must remember that this work ultimately concludes with an appeal to mystery. The object of faith, the creator God, is a mystery; the initial cause of human faith remains a mystery and it is faith that gives life meaning. Such mystery must be defended, not from rational enquiry, but from those who wish to project too much confidence on their theological constructions. It is mystery that drives faith and indeed the human thirst for knowledge.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Maurice Wiles was a brilliant critical theologian who subjected doctrines to penetrating rational analysis without hesitation. Even by own admission, his *'Remaking Christian Theology'* was more of an 'unmaking of theology'. When all the major doctrines are subjected to such eviscerating analysis that they are nearly all considered 'impossible', is there anything left for theology to talk about? Once one dismisses the central doctrines of the faith, what is left to criticise? At this point Wiles veers close to atheism. Don Cuppitt would be an example of a theologian who took the next step; gradually renouncing the doctrines of the faith and eventually ceasing to worship at all.<sup>534</sup> We might reconstruct Wiles into a more orthodox position by arguing that the continuing pursuit of knowledge meant he considered God might be knowable through a process of continuing critical discovery. This would not be an accurate reading, for mystery does not concern primarily concern 'knowability' of the divine; God remains transcendently mysterious and the ever-expanding boundaries of human knowledge will never bridge that ugly great ditch.

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<sup>534</sup> Cupitt's own website is happy to repeat the title of 'atheist' given by the British press and details his own move away from Christianity. Author unattributed, <http://www.doncupitt.com/don-cupitt> accessed 12/4/2018

In the final analysis, Wiles never follows Cupitt to atheism. Wiles remained professionally and individually active in his faith to the end of his life; the call of atheism was left unheeded and *something* drove him to continue the work of theology. Mystery serves as a foundation for Wiles' own faith and theology. This concluding type of mystery is very different from Barth's description. If we might summarise the Swiss theologian's understanding of mystery as 'things too wonderful to understand', Wiles contrasts an empty mystery, a void of human knowledge. God is a transcendent mystery, a fundamental reality that we simply do not know and cannot know about. The maintenance of mystery keeps us in wonder and worship and from idolatrous claims of knowing more than we do.

## **Chapter 8. Towards a conclusion**

### **1. Introduction**

The primary contention of this thesis is that mystery is an inescapable feature of theology. The doctrine of providence considered through such divergent interlocutors has served as a test case for this thesis and has been demonstrated to be a pre-eminent display of the ubiquity and necessity of mystery in the theological task. It is difficult to imagine theologians from the same religion offering more antithetical perspectives on providence than Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles, yet both require mystery as a substratum of their formulation. This reliance on mystery amid the acuteness of their disagreement, in both content and style, clearly demonstrates the necessity of mystery for providence and, I contend, for the whole theological task.

This final chapter will attempt to draw together the different strands of argument developed throughout the thesis. Firstly, that the conceptual mapping of mystery demonstrates that an appeal to the concept is a meaningful statement within a theological framework. Secondly, we will examine how the radical divergence of the theologies of providence in Barth and Wiles demonstrates the inevitability of mystery in theology. This section will briefly recapitulate their views before offering some contrastive evaluation. Finally, we will make a programmatic claim of the implications of mystery for the content, style and methodology of systematic theology.

#### **1.1 A note on Method**

This research has been conducted within Christian systematic theology and has not strayed into pastoral or biblical studies. At the outset, I described systematic theology as a type of epistemic 'web' in which all different doctrines are interconnected and interweaving. This analogy is especially pertinent to providence because it is neither possible or desirable to extricate providence from other doctrines; within a Wilesian pattern, providence is outworked in the doctrine of creation ex nihilo; similarly, within a Barthian framework we cannot speak of God's action without reference to God's action in Christ. Throughout the thesis, providence has been our focus, although the outworking of providence has encompassed other doctrines including the incarnation.

Within the subdiscipline of systematic theology, we adopted a Gadamerian framework in which two primary steps are required; firstly, the acknowledgement of prejudices and secondly, the consideration of whether these prejudices have allowed the thesis to be properly tested. The primary prejudice I brought to this research is central to this thesis; that mystery is not a weakness of theology but the substantive heart of theology. This has been scrupulously questioned throughout the opposition outlined in the first two chapters, Wiles' scepticism towards mystery as a weakness and the excursus on nonsense in chapter 4.

## **2. Mapping types of mystery.**

The extensive mapping exercise in the opening three chapters developed standardised linguistic tools for discussion of mystery. Developed in dialogue with Verkamp, Wainwright and Boyer and Hall, the results of this summary can be seen in table form on page 47. The excursus on nonsense forced the question of whether such categories were meaningful or another form of 'nonsense'.

## **3. The Ubiquity and Necessity of Mystery demonstrated in Barth and Wiles**

The dialogue between Barth and Wiles is the test case for the thesis, that mystery is an intrinsic part of theology. To allow the voices of Barth and Wiles to ring clearly and accurately, it has been necessary to treat them separately. Now we turn to the task of allowing constructive dialogue. Note the use of the term 'dialogue'. We have witnessed a few points of convergence between our interlocutors, but it is clear that their differences outnumber their similarities. Therefore, this discussion is not an attempt to harmonise our theologians. Their starting points are so radically different that this process would be injurious to the integrity of their beliefs. The extremity of the differences also makes evaluating their relative claims challenging, one cannot appeal to some 'neutral' authority, whether scripture, reason or tradition, to resolve their differences. So, it would be unfair to prefer Barth's version of the incarnation to that of Wiles because Barth adheres to a more traditionally biblical or creedal form. Wiles understands the profound implications of his view for traditional Christianity; he simply believes them to require unsentimental adjustment. Our focus is on the way that they have used or disregarded 'mystery'. Subsequently, we can evaluate how they have substantiated their claims and whether these substantiations have integrity within their own perspectives.

To avoid unnecessary repetition, we will refer to the previous chapters and summarise only in order to aid comprehension of the subject focus.

### 3.1 Interlocutors – Barth and Wiles

It is difficult to imagine two more divergent formulations of a doctrine within the same religion. Barthian providence is vociferous and complex, combining his dialectical approach with distinctive christocentrism to produce an idiosyncratic excogitation so that during the preservation, accompaniment and governance of creation, God is present and ruling. As we explored in Chapter 6, mystery is repeatedly appealed to as the foundation and development of these theological understandings. By contrast, within Wilesian providence, God is starkly absent, imbuing the universe with a broad theme of self-development at conception but otherwise practising absence from the world, thus lending his theology a deistic hue. In Chapter 7, we explored how Wiles’ rejection of traditional forms of providence does not remove the need for mystery but relocates the theme elsewhere within his doctrine. Mystery remains foundational. At the commencement of this study, the thesis was that mystery is a fundamental part of providence; the choice of two figures with such radically discordant doctrines, that still must rely on mystery, establishes the validity of the original thesis. Mystery is an inevitable part of the doctrine of providence.

This is further demonstrated by a summary of the uses of mystery by both Barth and Wiles that has been summarised into a table. This formatting may be regrettably utilitarian; but it is helpful in clarifying a large quantity of material into an accessible form. The table is not an accurate substitute for the exposition of Barth and Wiles in the last chapters; but it does form a helpful quick reference guide to the mass of qualitative data that such a literature review generates. We must admit that this table has followed Barth’s more cataphatic version of mystery. This reflects Wiles’ approach as a primarily critical, rather than as a constructive theologian. Further, the table does not pretend that Wiles presents a mystery where none is mentioned, instead a summary is given of his response to the problem that Barth raises. We turn now to a fuller comparison of our two interlocutors. Where there are significant points of overlap these areas will be combined to reduce repetition.

No	Area	TM	Barth	Wiles
1	<i>Conservatio</i>	EM	Statement: Election to exist and be maintained even amid	That anything exists is mysterious.



			sin is mysterious. Response: Joy	Response: Anxiety – Should this creation have been created?
2	<i>Conservatio</i>	EM and OM	Incarnation as ultimate mystery. Response – intellectual wrangling and surrender	Jesus as human example of love of God. But not ontologically separate from other humans. Not mystery just unreasonable. Response – Inspiration.
3	<i>Conservatio</i>	EM	Mystery of Election – God is for us in the election of Jesus. Reaction – election is light and not dark.	God mysteriously self identifies with humanity through Jesus. Response – Inspiration at model.
4	<i>Concursus</i>	EM	How God and creation interact – mysterious technical problem will not be resolved. Response: Confess the God world relation in theological terms.	How do God and humans interact? They do not – we cannot give a convincing account of how they might interact. Response – Abandon theism as inconsistent.
5	<i>Concursus</i>	EM	God reveals in a veiled fashion that is mysterious and cannot be pierced – mystery as mystery. Response – confession that God’s ways are ‘higher than ours’.	We cannot get behind language but are stuck in symbolic language. Response – transignification – do not try to maintain metaphysical nonsense but maintain pattern of faith and ethics.
6	<i>Concursus</i>	EM	Revelation of a hidden God. Response – confession of God amid hiddenness.	Mystery cannot be repealed because it maintains the search of faith. Response – continuing expansion of human knowledge.
7	<i>Gubernatio</i>	UM	God rules over all events but mysterious how God intends the individual to fit into the whole narrative. Response – Eschatological trust.	Evil is an expression of the freedom of human beings, it is not mysterious. Eschatological hope remains.
8	<i>Gubernatio</i>	EM and OM	The Christian participates in the divine governance through prayer. Response – Prayers	Prayer is not mysterious and does not affect anything in God or in creation but can have reflexive effects on the

				person praying. Response – continue prayers.
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Key:

TM = Type of Mystery

EM = Epistemological Mystery

OM = Ontological Mystery

UM = Undisclosed Mystery

### 3.2 The Mystery of Existence and Election

The most significant point of convergence between Barth and Wiles is the question of why anything exists at all.<sup>535</sup> Although Wiles' response is fundamentally philosophical, his writings on creation are his most traditional expressions of Christian theology. For Wiles, God possesses the power to create *ex nihilo*. This act is motivated by love, a feature of divinity that Wiles considers 'mysterious'. The overall purpose of this creation is the gradual emergence of rational, conscious beings. This divine intention is not guaranteed through any kind of causative knowledge or divine hand that gently adjusts course, this is just God's intention in creation. The way human beings understand their purpose and the mystery of divine love is resolutely not through disclosive revelation, but through philosophical reflection on the possibility of non-being. With one exception, Wiles' overall response to creation is to regard life as a gift; the possibility of non-being does not develop despair or the anxious nausea in the same manner as the existentialism of Satre or Kierkegaard. The slight caveat arises when Wiles considers whether God has created the best possible world. Ultimately, Wiles believes this question is unanswerable, yet the brute force of the question introduces anxiety to the meaning of creation as gift.

Similarly, to Wiles, Barth contends that the divine motivation for creation is love. After this initial agreement they diverge on three main points. Firstly, for Barth, both the initial moment of creation and the ongoing sustenance of creation rely fundamentally on the

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<sup>535</sup> Wiles does not put the question quite so bluntly – this question seems to be consistently present throughout the early sections on '*das Nichtige*' see CD III.3, pp. 289-302.

loving will of God, that elects the creation to be maintained in Christ. Secondly, it is the person of Christ who guarantees the goodness and reliability of creation. Finally, their method and corresponding tone are substantially different; Wiles adopts a 'neutral' philosophical approach, whilst Barth's formulation is consistently theological and fundamentally personal. In Wilesian terms, the purpose of creation is to create autonomous, rational creatures that are independent from God; in Barth, creation is never independent. The contingency of creation is preserved against *das Nichtige* that threatens creation and yet is held back by the fatherly care that preserves existence even amid sin. Jesus Christ stands as the elected one, in whom all are elected, and so saint and sinner are preserved by the love of God. This election is summarised at the cross, a point at which the mysterious love of God is expressed to preserve the whole of creation from the victory of death. The epistemological mystery lies precisely in the question of why God would elect to create and conserve creation at all. We should make the contradistinction between Barth and Wiles explicit; Wilesian creation posits independent, creaturely existence after the initial moment of creation meaning mystery is specifically located in the wonder of existence. For Barth, creation is wonderful not because of its independence from God, but because of the consistent preservation through the powerful love of God in Christ. Here, Barthian mystery is twofold; firstly, delight in the raw fact of existence; secondly, joy at the maintenance of life amid the continuing evil of humanity.<sup>536</sup> Neither of our interlocutors has to invent or construct this mystery, both are confronted by the mystery of existence.

Although this is a mystery acknowledged by both Barth and Wiles, there is no more than the most basic agreement. Indeed, apart from the most radical sceptic who remains unsure of his own existence, it would be difficult to imagine many who do not share this most fundamental mystery of life. Perhaps this observation is so common as to be anodyne, even banal.<sup>537</sup> However, on this occasion, unoriginality is not equivalent to unimportance. We have stumbled upon the most fundamental 'why' question of human existence. It would be

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<sup>536</sup> Note here that the question, how could a creator allow a creation with the possibility for such evil? Produces diametrically opposed answers; anxiety for Wiles and celebration for Barth.

<sup>537</sup> See Alistair McGrath's summary. The wondrous question of existence is 'hardly ever asked in philosophical circles nowadays – and then only by naïve young students whose lack of sophistication causes professional philosophers to cringe with embarrassment.' *The Great Mystery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2017), p. 5.

sheer arrogance to dismiss the question outright.<sup>538</sup> That this question persists is not due to a lack of answers; rather, as McGrath phrases it, we seem to be ‘born’ to wonder and not just to exist.<sup>539</sup> Mystery is an inherent part of this question.

### 3.2.1 Evaluating ‘mystery’ in Existence and Election

Turning to Maurice Wiles, it is disappointing that he fails to obey his own demand for consistency. Throughout his work, Wiles maintains that God is love; a nature that causes creation. Yet, as we have noted, this is an inconsistent move. The denial of providential acts cuts off theological appeals to disclosive revelation. With this in view, the decision to accept creation as a ‘gift’ reflecting the love of God is a subjective decision that carries little more than sentimental weight. Wiles’ lack of philosophical justification for this claim means that he simply asserts the case. In philosophical terms, he offers a conclusion to an argument that has no premises. The relationship between philosophy and theology is fascinating and fraught with challenge; yet Wiles seems to use both disciplines interchangeably, adopting the tools of logical positivism to deconstruct the claims to theological authority, yet refusing to even attempt to use these critical tools to re-construct a new philosophically based theology. Instead, the bare bones of a theology of creation are asserted without foundation. A further consequence of the refusal of providential revelation removes his doctrinal basis for claiming that humans exist because God loves them. One is impelled to ask Wiles why the bare fact of creation should be accepted as gift, rather than as in Ivan’s excoriating speech in *The Brother Karamazov*, a curse or sadistic trick?<sup>540</sup> Fatally, no answer is forthcoming.

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<sup>538</sup> The *‘Tractatus’* finishes with words to this effect. ‘We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem.’ (6.52-652.1) The philosophical sophistication required to reject such a universal question as not even worth asking is guilty of the most tremendous arrogance.

<sup>539</sup> McGrath, *Mystery*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>540</sup> Ivan’s speech must be recalled in part to convey its power: ‘Tell me yourself, I challenge – you answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me and tell me the truth.’ In fairness to Wiles, the power of this question is a challenge to all of theology but the point remains that Wiles has not done enough to assert that life is ‘gift’ only on the basis of its existence. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Trans. C. Garnett (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 222.

Barth's wholehearted refusal of creation as a 'given' necessity is not driven by philosophical deliberations; his motive is his theology of election. Creation need not be; that it is, rests on the grace of God. Barth does not lose the sense of wonder at the simple fact of existence, so the mystery of existence is maintained. Yet, by framing this confrontational reality as a consequence of divine election, Barth is able to present a robust and satisfying theological grounding to creation in the person of Christ. In doing so, the 'why' of creation is given a face.

### **3.2.2 The Incarnation**

Contrasting a chief contributor to *'The Myth of God Incarnate'* with one of the most famously Christocentric theologians in church history, we find that their divergent approaches to providence and mystery are centre stage once again. For our purposes, there is no merit in attempting to contrastive evaluation of the detail of their respective Christology. Instead, we will consider their respective uses of mystery in this area.

To summarise Wiles, we recall that Christ is the paradigmatic human who stands as a moral inspiration to all. This minimalist Christology rejects any elevated ontological status of Christ. Jesus is not divine or Arian 'chief creature'. Wiles denies the traditional creedal claim of Christ's divinity for two reasons. Firstly, the biblical and historical evidence of the church do not support the notion. There is no need to appeal to mystery when the evidence does not demand it. Secondly, the church has been unable to make logical sense of the incarnation. Mystery is presented because the church is unwilling to eliminate the unnecessary paradox of 'God in flesh'. For Wiles, there remain two unknowns; firstly, the person of Christ is a mystery in a manner identical to that quest for self-discovery in which all humans participate and secondly there is the historical mystery of why the earliest Christian community began to confess Jesus of Nazareth as a divine figure. For our purposes, the first of these questions is equivalent to the previous mystery of election/existence explored above. Wiles sets up the latter question as a choice between a complex and a simple mystery. If we accept the mystery of the incarnation as described in the Nicene Creed, one must overcome a complex multitude of metaphysical incoherence and difficulties. The simple alternative solution is to deny creedal incarnation. The simple solution instantaneously resolves the metaphysical challenges, leaving us with the historical oddity that the early church began to think that Jesus was divine. This can be classed as an

investigative mystery, a mere historical question. For Wiles, a substantial theological problem can be replaced by a question that is equivalent to the quest for the true identity of Shakespeare or Jack the Ripper. In our terms, a small investigative mystery is vastly preferable to affirming the nonsensical proposition of the incarnation.

For Barth, it is the biblical witness to Christ in the synoptic and Johannine tradition that forces the affirmation of Jesus as 'fully human' and 'fully divine'. Rejecting a historical-critical tradition that only permits secularised interpretations of history, Barth uses his dialectical approach to emphasise the unthinkable union between divinity and humanity.

'It is impossible to listen at one and the same time to the two statements that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and that the Son of God is Jesus of Nazareth. One hears either the one or the other or one hears nothing.'<sup>541</sup>

The difficulty of holding divinity or humanity in the one mind means that the incarnation is the 'ultimate mystery' that is known and revealed as mystery. It is not a mystery that can be repealed or pushed back but is consciously known as something that is beyond understanding. The two natures of Christ must not be tamed into a single conceptual system. 'Jesus Christ is not a system...it is the word of God itself'.<sup>542</sup>

### **3.2.2 Evaluating 'mystery' in Incarnation**

The contrast between Barth and Wiles could not be starker. A significant part of this evaluation relates to their regard for mystery; Wiles' frustration at metaphysical incoherence is matched by Barth's expectation that the action of God will be mysteriously incoherent. Barth might claim that the gospel accounts require a confession of faith in the Christ; Wiles might respond that such an appeal to mystery is a cover for nonsense, allowing the author to say anything at all.

At times Wiles is guilty of using the first type of nonsense as exclamation, calling for 'reasoned discourse' but failing to outline what this means. At other points, Wiles demonstrates positivist inclinations by using Wittgensteinian nonsense that refuses the possibility of theology outright. *Prima facie* this line of argumentation cannot allow the incarnation, spirit cannot become flesh. Barth may respond, within our understanding God

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<sup>541</sup> Barth, *CD 1.1*, p. 180.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

should not become flesh and yet in Christ, God *did* become man. Humans cannot understand this fundamental mystery, instead, the fact of the incarnational act of God in Christ confronts us.

### **3.3 *Concursus*: Divine human interaction and the secularity of revelation.**

The primary difference between Barth and Wiles view of providence is found within the *concursus*. Wiles can be summarised briefly: following the initial moment of creation, God does not act in creation.<sup>543</sup> The notion is ethically impossible, damaging to human freedom and most significantly, cannot be expressed in a conceptually clear manner. These problems are resolved at a stroke by abandoning a 'childish' view of God intervening in human activities; consequently, we ought to reject traditional notions of providence and accept a much less problematic deistic position.<sup>544</sup> This position is theologically hygienic but to achieve this conceptual cleanliness, Wiles has to reject the whole of salvation history as the action of God. One has to question whether deism has tipped into practical atheism. 'Theological economy' has slipped into near silence; one can claim this position is 'simpler' one cannot claim that this is not problematic. Barth's position is more complex, but his opening points are strikingly similar. 'How' God and humans interact is not possible to express in language. As we phrased it in the chapter on Barthian mystery:

'Negatively, the *concursus* must not rely on creature to creature analogy for the relationship, avoid notions of a mechanical relation or rely on principle or emanationism. The positive elements require speech about the *genuine* quality of the creator-creature dynamic and give voice to the richness of the being of God and his manifold work.'<sup>545</sup>

It is not possible to avoid the negative images or to do justice to the positive elements of God and his work. We are left with a true epistemological mystery in which we can confess the work of God, constantly viewed through Christocentric lenses, but cannot translate these words into non-theological expression.

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<sup>543</sup> There is a hint of eschatological engagement in Wiles, albeit expressed in his usual cautious manner. It is unfortunate that Wiles does not develop any sense of divine/human interaction

<sup>544</sup> Earlier Wiles described an 'unacceptable deism' (p. 133.) but I cannot discover any examples of Wiles using this term to self-identify. Terrance Tiessen uses the term 'semi-deist' (without defining how one might be 'half a deist') to describe Maurice Wiles' position. Tiessen, *Providence*, pp. 31-51.

<sup>545</sup> See p. 150. of this dissertation.

### 3.4. The use of 'Mystery' in the *Concursus*

Both Barth and Wiles accept that the technical question of the *conkursus* is not an issue that will be resolved. At this point our interlocutors divide: Barth confesses the *conkursus* as an epistemological mystery; Wiles considers this arrangement to be simply false. How can unanimity result in such opposing stances? Part of the answer to this question is an understanding of what theological 'success' might be. For Wiles, we might return to the guiding principles of theology as 'economic' and 'coherent'. The latter is most significant here; coherence requires ideas that do not self-contradict but can be stated clearly and communicated to others, especially to those who do not already hold Christian beliefs. Traditional formulations of *conkursus* cannot be stated precisely; what cannot be stated, cannot be communicated clearly and so is 'bad', irrational theology.

Judging what constitutes 'success' within Barth is a more intimidating task. However, at a minimum, theology ought to be Christocentric - that is, faithful to, and shaped by, the person of Christ and to take constant account of the related dictum 'God is God'.<sup>546</sup>

Although some allege that the dialectical quality fades within the later Barth, he remains consistent that we cannot expect our language and conceptual frameworks to define or capture God in a clear and coherent manner that is manageable for human minds.

Inscrutable mystery is an inevitable part of theology, if theology is talking about God, for God is not another object in the world to be described. Subsequently when discussing how God *acts* in/on creation we must not expect a coherent description but confess a mystery. The creature/creator dialectic means that this is a consistent theme within Barthian theology, yet it is keenly felt in the *conkursus* when the God-world relation is explicitly discussed. For Barth, success is faithful confession of Christ's work.

A further reason for division on this issue stems from their relative understandings of analogy. For Wiles, the analogy of divine/human interaction simply does not make logical sense. The inability to articulate a cogent traditional notion of providence amongst theologians and the subsequent impossibility of communicating this to non-Christians,

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<sup>546</sup> See for example, Eberhard Busch, 'God is God: The meaning of a Controversial Formula and the Fundamental Problem of Speaking about God', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1986



means that the form must be rejected.<sup>547</sup> For Barth, all theological analogies are inevitably inadequate for the task of divine description. This inadequacy does not reside in the weakness of theological minds or necessarily in language, but in the dialectical truth that God is God. Subsequently, Wiles preference to find a more suitable analogy that can be communicated outside Christian-theological dialogue is doomed from the start. A theological analogy has no less descriptive power than a psychological or a biological image. One does not need to seek linguistic legitimacy within another discipline, especially not from another discipline that consciously excludes divine workings from the outset. As a scientist designs experiments suited to the subject matter, so theology has terms appropriate to its unique subject, God.

We are edging towards a position that resembles fideism. Classically, Tertullian is considered the archetypal fideist with his infamous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”<sup>548</sup> Similarly, Luther is castigated for comments such as:

‘But since the devil’s bride, Reason, that pretty whore, comes in and thinks she’s wise...’<sup>549</sup>

Plantinga offers a careful definition of fideism as someone who “urges reliance on faith rather than reason, in matters philosophical and religious” and who “may go on to disparage and denigrate reason”.<sup>550</sup> The rejection of ‘reason’ means that the term is used as an insult and consequently there are few who would self-identify as fideists. An insult is not equivalent to argument, and such invective can mask any diversity with the term. For example, the mystery religions that developed around the first and second centuries

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<sup>547</sup> Recall Wiles description at the embarrassment of ‘thoughtful Christians’ who are asked to pray for troops. *God’s action...*, p. 1.

<sup>548</sup> Tertullian, ‘Prescription Against Heretics’, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0311.htm> [accessed 20/6/2017]

Although quotations from the same document include ‘believe what is absurd’, recent research has cast doubt on the truth of Tertullian’s reputation as one who despises rationality. See Eric Osborne, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

<sup>549</sup> Martin Luther’s Last Sermon in Wittenberg (Second Sunday in Epiphany, 17 January 1546). *Dr. Martin Luther’s Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, (Weimar: Herman Bochlaus Nachfolger, 1914), Vol 51:126, line 7ff. Decontextualised quotations like these have become some of Richard Dawkins favoured knock down arguments for the irrationality of religion, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) p. 190.

<sup>550</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God”, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 87.

practised a rather extreme form of fideism that barred discussion of, knowledge of the secret rites to the uninitiated.<sup>551</sup> A sharp line of epistemic demarcation is drawn between those inside and outside the group. Crucially, these mysteries are private and only belong to those within the elect group. You know the mystery, or you do not know; there is no attenuation between knowledge and ignorance. It should be clear that the mystery described in the *conkursus* cannot be described in this radically fideistic fashion. On the contrary, the key points of Christian doctrine, for Barth, are not private forms of revelation but public acts. The Exodus is not limited only to the private world of Moses nor is the ministry of Jesus only for the apostles. Christian scripture and acts of worship are not at all privatised but are publicly available and open to scrutiny.

‘There remains indeed one profound mystery, why this suasion in one man is effective, in another not. If I am pressed to attempt its fathoming. I can think of only two answers that I should like to give: ‘O the depths of the riches...’ (Rom11.33) and ‘Is there any unrighteousness with God?’ (Rom.9.14)’<sup>552</sup>

Scrutiny of the ordinary events of life and even special moments in salvation history results in divided interpretation. The question is how one thief at the cross confesses Christ whilst the other mocks him? We should not underestimate the significance of the fact that at one of the most significant points in Christian history, Luke records division in the interpretation of the event with which they are confronted. This does not mean that the gospel writer is confused about the meaning and significance of the cross. For Luke, one thief is certainly wrong, yet we remain free to doubt and to hold different interpretations. Search for a definitive causal joint that can generate ‘objective’ certainty in order to standardise interpretation is fruitless. There is no causal joint to discover.<sup>553</sup>

The stakes for this question could not be higher; lack of causal clarity tempts Wiles to bet away the entire foundations of theism, gambling on a reconstruction effort that, by his own

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<sup>551</sup> See the seminal text from S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions* (New York: Dover Publications, 1928)

<sup>552</sup> Augustine, *De spiritu et Litera XXXIV*, p. 60. cited in Wiles, *Faith...*, p. 129.

<sup>553</sup> I believe the term ‘causal joint’, was coined by Austin Farrer. It is suggestive of an isolable particular movement that God exacts upon the universe, rather like an elbow joint that can be shown to move the forearm. Farrer’s own use of the term is not so crude: ‘The causal joint between infinite and finite actions, plays and in the nature of the case can play no part in our concern with God and his will. We can do nothing about not does it bear on anything we can do. On empirical grounds, the question is no question at all.’ *Faith and Speculation*, p. 65.

admission, offers more of an unmaking rather than a remaking. This gamble was lost; his rejection of mystery meant that the power of a narrative that has sustained billions of people for centuries was lost. The way in which the creator relates to the creation is an epistemological mystery. So, I propose that there is no causal joint to find, not because God does not *do* anything but, with Barth, the language of causality, casually applied to God, is problematic. The chief difficulty of causal language is that the term conjures a mechanistic analogy which does not fit the uncreated creator. When the divine does not fit into a scheme of intricate cogs and wheels, the problem is with the image not the *concursum*. Barth reconstitutes causal language into personalist language:

‘The operation of God is His utterance to all creatures of the Word of God which has all the force and wisdom and goodness of the Holy spirit. Or, to put it another way, the operation of God is his moving of all creatures by the force and wisdom and goodness which are His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of his Word. The divine operation is therefore a Fatherly operation.’<sup>554</sup>

Confession of faith in the *concursum* moves away from metaphysics towards faith in the Trinitarian action witnessed in scripture.<sup>555</sup> This witness spills over into a model for confessing the action of God across history.

Even from this one corner of the doctrine of providence we have demonstrated that mystery is fundamental to any construction of providence. Returning to the question of analogy, we must question whether theological language is functionally different from other forms of speech. Recall that Barth unapologetically prefers a theological analogy to other explanatory forms, so what type of fideism is appropriate? Let us imagine a radically fideistic scheme in which those with special ‘insider’ knowledge cannot discuss the internal matters with an outsider, even if one were willing to engage in discussion. Those on the inside would be unable to communicate at all with those outside, they could not make any sense even if

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<sup>554</sup> Karl Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 105.

<sup>555</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer employs Barth’s model of Christ at the word of God for the foundation of his ‘re-mythologizing theology’ project that is then applied to the doctrine of providence. Vanhoozer claims that a dialogical model of divine speech acts in which the Trinitarian activity of the Father, Son and Spirit ‘speaks’ a word-act in order to affect the divine will reduces the difficulties that commonly arise in a mechanistic-causal framework. Vanhoozer’s account is an attractive analogy for an information age, I remain unconvinced that ‘information input’ is necessarily less coercive (one of his main concerns) than an imagined ‘physical coercion’. See *Remythologizing Theology*, p. 368.

the finest minds attempted translation between insider and outsider groups. Firstly, we must question whether the radical fideism our imagination has conjured is strictly possible. One person may find it difficult to communicate with another, but difficulty is not identical to impossibility. Even without shared language, humans manage to communicate with people who are deaf and mute and even with animals. A pure fideism is not possible. Secondly, the use of shared language and profound contributions to public life that Christian groups have made demonstrates that theological analogies are not hermetically sealed systems of speech and life that cannot be passed on. The scriptures lay claim to publicly observable events that occurred in history, which are schematised into literary form. These literary forms use existing languages which have been translated and these have been retold in oral and written form throughout the centuries. By stating these obvious facts of the existence of Christianity, it is clear that appeal to theological analogy is not using some alien language totally inaccessible to those outside of the church.

The concern of the theological community to isolate particular 'acts of God' has been outworked through a fascination with the miraculous events of scripture. Intense analysis of the miracle narratives in the gospels is rooted in an effort to identify particular moments of history in which God, not another actor, *must* have acted, for the events somehow defy 'normality'. Other studies seek to place the action of God within experimental conditions, testing the power of prayer through large-scale experiments, using scientific methodology including double-blind tests.<sup>556</sup> I am rather sceptical of these studies for two reasons. Firstly, the results of these efforts have not been conclusive; the results vary wildly. Secondly, one must ask how convincing these studies are likely to be; one tends to finish reading such research with a conclusion founded on the presuppositions one initially brought. For example, Richard Dawkins might insist that the action of God should be testable using scientific conditions, yet this is deliberately facetious mockery. The impetus to isolate the effect of divinity in the same manner as one isolates velocity or gravity is founded on a theology in which God is domesticated to the status of creature.<sup>557</sup> How could a creature

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<sup>556</sup> Contrast RC Byrd, "Positive therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer in a coronary care unit population". *Southern Medical Journal*. 81.7(July 1988) pp. 826–9. Also, Benson H, Dusek JA, Sherwood JB, et al. "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: a multicentre randomized trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer". *American Heart Journal*. (April 2006) 151.4 pp. 934-42.

<sup>557</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, pp. 61-66.

within a framework created by that creator reach outside the universe to measure the creator? My contention is that this type of research is fundamentally flawed; seeking to occupy a 'neutral position' of open-minded criticality that it is impossible to achieve practically or hypothetically. There is no philosophical or religiously neutral position from which one can authoritatively pontificate on whether God is acting. Desire for absolute perceptual objectivity is the desire for divine sight. I am reminded of Kerr's comment that 'the modern man has taken on the attributes previously held only by the God of classical theism'.<sup>558</sup> Classically, it is only God who sees truly. Rejection of such narcissistic idolatry is an acceptance of creatureliness that acknowledges epistemological limitations. This mildly fideistic position is Barthian. As Ward phrases it 'the basis of Barth's non-foundationalism is the mystery of the triune God'.<sup>559</sup> The triune God is not known remotely but only through providential revelation. In the action of God, we find God revealed as mystery. So, affirmation of the *concursum* is a perception of faith; faith that God is working in and through creation. This is a mild form of fideism that grows out of Christian faith, yet I contest that it is not more fideistic than the fantasy of neutrality that rejects a priori the possibility of the work of God. The question remaining for systematicians is whether the edifice of systematic theology has any room for faith or whether it must seek to be a closed coherent system. As Barth phrases it, 'belief in providence is faith itself'; the mystery of the *concursum* requires faith.<sup>560</sup>

### **3.5 Gubernatio**

There is fundamental disagreement between our interlocutors on this final point. So far, this discussion has been abstract; a concrete example will clearly draw forth the differences; we will take Wiles' example of the Shi'ite terrorists who hijacked an aeroplane. Wiles' response is very clear: God is not to be praised for the lives saved or cursed for the lives lost; no divine

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<sup>558</sup> Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 17. Kerr bases his comments on a critique of Cartesian epistemology which takes the Cogito as the basis for all reality; meaning that 'I think' becomes the basis for even the existence of God.

<sup>559</sup> Even de-contextualised this succinctly summarises much of Barth's theology. In context this comment on 'nonfoundationalism' comes as Ward is pushing for a postmodern interpretation of Barth that I cannot accept. It strikes me as an academic distraction to consider whether this rejection of neutrality is considered postmodern or modern. I concur with Ward that Barth's Christocentrism results in a type of nonfoundationalism; whether this is given a further label as 'postmodern or modern' – whatever these terms might mean – is irrelevant to our study and academic discourse. Barth did not use these terms to self-describe and I see no advantage in foisting them upon his corpus. Graham Ward, *Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 281.

<sup>560</sup> Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 15.

agent had anything to do with the event. God does not cause things to occur in space time. This position is intended to reach a point at which one can never say, 'God did this'. Wilesian deism seems to offer a clear and theologically hygienic analysis of the situation that has no need for mystery. Theologically, this is the easiest move to make, bleaching out the horror by removing any possible divine complications and instead blaming the mental health of the attackers. In this sense, Wiles seems successful on his own terms; God is extricated from responsibility and the logical difficulties of causality are resolved. I propose that there are two inherent problems with Wiles' position. Firstly, by maintaining the divine actor as the initial cause, Wiles concedes that God may bear a measure of responsibility for the actions of an autonomous set of creatures. A point that is lightly dismissed as an unknowable question.<sup>561</sup> This use of mystery is weak and does not solve the problem Wiles is trying to address; for God is not really extricated from responsibility for the evil perpetrated. Instead the entirety of salvation history is traded to ensure that God is slightly less responsible for atrocities. One mystery, how God governs the world, is traded for the question of why God would make such a world. This is not a fair trade, for in the process the grounds of hope for salvation from such evil is lost. Within the outlined scheme, the soteriological events of Exodus, the Cross and Resurrection can no longer serve as the means of salvation. Nowhere in Wiles' work can I find a full reconstruction of how salvation might now be reimagined.<sup>562</sup> There is a serious problem to reject these events and then not even consider a salvific construction to replace their function. Within modern theology, Moltmann has demonstrated the necessity of an eschatological foundation to Christian doctrine that provides the ground for present and future eschatological hope.<sup>563</sup> Following the turbulence of the blood stained Twentieth Century it is deeply problematic for Wiles to discard these narratives of Christian hope in such a casual fashion.

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<sup>561</sup> See Wiles *God's action...*, p. 45.

<sup>562</sup> There are allusions to reconstructions of salvation but as is common in Wiles there is more critical than constructive material. In *Remaking...* Wiles discusses his dissatisfaction with objective theories of atonement at length and much shorter alternatives of how subjective theories of atonement might be imagined. For Wiles, subjective theories of atonement are self-evidently effective demonstrated by the historical impact of Christianity. Whether this historical impact would have been quite so significant if the exodus, incarnation and resurrection were widely understood as the symbolic narratives Wiles propounds is a question that he does not countenance. Similarly, the appendix contains a discussion of the resurrection of the dead and the eternal soul before concluding that there is not a great distinction between the two and the Christian 'should not be ashamed to express...agnosticism'. In brief, although Wiles does touch on soteriology, I cannot locate a substantial reconstruction of the doctrine anywhere in his writings. See *Remaking*, pp. 61-83 and 125-147

<sup>563</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Trans. J Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967)

The second internal issue concerns the location of causality. God is removed from the causal equation to ensure logical simplicity, but this has not resolved the mysteries of human behaviour. Removing unnecessary ontological entities follows Ockham's razor. The situation is simpler, but it would be a step too far to suggest that the mysteries of causality are now resolved. To be more precise, they are shifted away from God to the human. Whenever these types of incidents occur, it is common to appeal to divine providence as working out some unseen purpose. But Wiles cannot appeal to a broader framework of divine purpose and the important and abiding hope, so often whispered among ourselves, that these events are happening for 'some reason' is lost and the problem is found in the intricacies and mysteries of the human heart. Wiles' intention is to remove mystery from the scenario by removing divine action; it is clear that this effort has not been successful. Instead, mystery has been shifted around and the corresponding pastoral response impoverished as a result.

On finishing *CD III.3* one can be left with the impression that the challenges of providence have been resolved. Yet the ensuing section on *das Nichtige*, in which even Barth concedes that the whole doctrine of providence must be 'investigated afresh', casts a shadow across the comprehensive 300 pages of exposition that have just been completed.<sup>564</sup> This process of 'rethinking' is not done by Barth. Instead a doctrine of providence and then nothingness are laid out, almost as though they do not relate. Imagining Barth's response to the plane hijacking is more complex. Whilst God is omni-causal, the form of God's providence is hidden. God is not absent from any scenario, yet neither does Barth casually employ language such as 'God caused this or that'.<sup>565</sup> We cannot neatly summarise Barth's musings on the *gubernatio*; his position is conceptually complex and emotionally difficult. At times the Christian is as bewildered by these events as any other observer and at other points the divine governance is clearly observable. We might suppose that Barth would have affirmed both praise and lament while wrestling with the nihilism that permitted the murder of strangers. This long quotation summarises the difficulties poetically:

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<sup>564</sup> Barth notes the need to 'rethink' on in *CD III.3*, p289. I owe this reference to Langdon Gilkey, 'The concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology' pp. 171-190.

<sup>565</sup> A vital difference between Calvin and Barth is found here. At times, Calvin seemed to delight in ascribing awful occurrences to the divine hand: 'The one who is supremely good wisely uses evil for the damnation of those he justly predestines to punishment and for salvation of those he predestines to grace...when they acting contrary to his will they were accomplishing his will, in a wonderful way and ineffable way nothing happens contrary to his will even that which is contrary to his will'. *The Secret*, p. 66

‘It is not at all self-evident that Jesus Christ is this, that no other lords can dispute His title, that no fate or chance or laws or principles can vie with Him or permit the Christian to turn to anyone else or to meet any other commands but His. To say this, we have continually to utter that Nevertheless, not merely with heart and mouth, but also in deed. To say this, we have always to venture that run and make that leap in a sphere where everything seems to be obscure and where – apart from what the Christian brings with him from this school – it remains always equivocal and uncertain. In this sphere, the Christian finds himself in the light of the hidden God.’<sup>566</sup>

In Wiles’ scheme, the intention of removing God from the scenario is to reduce conceptual difficulties, yet the unintended consequence is to shrink the narratives of pastoral hope. By contrast, Barth’s position of faith, offering a ‘nevertheless’ creates a far richer resource for coping with tragedy. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Jürgen Moltmann’s early career to develop a theology of hope are an extension of Barthian Christocentric theology into historical reality.<sup>567</sup>

However, the need for Moltmann’s extension does indicate the problems of Barth’s *gubernatio*. Gilkey’s critique is most pertinent:

‘Barth’s formulation of Providence, which omitted the factor of "*das Nichtige*," seems, in other words, to have suddenly become merely an idyllic picture of Providence in Eden; or, to put it another way, to be a purely abstract, theoretical exercise, like some economic analysis in which self-interest has casually been omitted, and so to imply a view of Providence irrelevant to the question of actual historical occurrence.’<sup>568</sup>

Despite Kennedy’s plea that Barth’s doctrine should be read in a personalist fashion, I concur with Gilkey that Barth’s *gubernatio* pictures an idealised account of history that does

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<sup>566</sup> Barth, *CD III.3*, p. 263.

<sup>567</sup> I am thinking primarily of Moltmann’s famous recount from ‘The Crucified God’ in which Christ is pictured hanging alongside the innocent at Auschwitz. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, Trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 273-74. Also, Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>568</sup> Langdon Gilkey, ‘The Concept of Providence’, p. 171-192.



struggle to engage with the lived experience of suffering. This was the tipping point that led Gilkey to describe Barth's whole doctrine of providence as an 'utter failure'.<sup>569</sup> This denunciation is hyperbolic and ignores Barth's own explanation of his attempt to think through the doctrine as a Christian person involved in the struggle of faith rather than undertaking a type of neutral philosophical analysis.<sup>570</sup> There are moments when Barth does express the struggle of faith in the face of the 'riddles of human existence', but the tone of the work is often strident and could have been tempered by a greater use of the concept of undisclosed mystery to complement the extant uses of epistemological mystery that encompass the human-divine relationship. To conclude, Barth's *gubernatio* requires an enormous quantity of faith in God as Lord over all creation, amid all circumstances. If we attempt a summary of the *gubernatio* in one phrase it may be 'Nevertheless, Jesus is Lord'.

#### **4. Some programmatic suggestions for the use of mystery in theology**

From the outset this has been an ambitious project. The primary subject, 'mystery', is necessarily difficult to discuss. The conceptual frameworks we have developed to speak about mystery should not confuse the fact that the term refers to things which remain unknown. The issue is complicated by the lens through which we have attempted to examine the subject; providence is notoriously challenging, perhaps even an 'impossible' doctrine. I do not pretend that this study has made these difficulties disappear. Indeed, one of the main contentions of this research is that mystery is not a part of theology to be eliminated, but an intrinsic feature of creatures talking about the creator. In this vein, I echo Karl Rahner's musing that to do theology is to deal with mystery;

'There is and there can be, only one single absolute mystery in the strictest sense of the term, namely God himself...'<sup>571</sup>

Part of the difficulty in testing this thesis has been the breadth of the topics that relate to mystery and providence. These include the meaning of life, the identity of Christ and the problem of evil. We must admit that for many academic disciplines, these questions are

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<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> *CD III.3*, p. 366. See also Darren Kennedy, *Personalism*, p. 171.

<sup>571</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations xi*, Trans. D. Bourne (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1974), p. 106.

simply too broad for consideration.<sup>572</sup> The constraints of space have prevented exploration of these areas in as much depth as might be desired. Within a dogmatic system that attempts to speak about God, I propose that this is unfortunate but necessary. With Webster:

‘Theology is a comprehensive science, a science of everything. But it is not a science of everything about everything but rather a science of God and all other things under the aspect of createdness.’<sup>573</sup>

Similarly, Pannenberg begins his *‘Systematic Theology’* with the question – what is theology? He summarises ‘The truth of Christian discourse about God’. The question of the truth about God has largely been abandoned by the exegetical disciplines with their use of historical-critical tools. Similarly, historical theology focuses on the historical accuracy of interpretation. We might add that pastoral theology is primarily focused on the praxis of belief rather than the belief itself.<sup>574</sup> With Pannenberg, this leaves dogmatics bearing the responsibility for speaking about God. In this research, ‘talk about God’ has meant working with multiple and diverse subjects. Rather than a being weakness, I contend that such breadth is appropriate for a theological study of mystery.

Our discussion of mystery has been within the broad and variegated doctrine of providence; the intention has not been to dispel or explain unknown things about God. Instead we have tried to do justice to the manners in which mystery is used; pre-eminently within the sphere of divine action. Necessarily, one cannot claim comprehensiveness in a study of mystery, yet I do contend that the mapping of mystery demonstrates the cogency of the theme and that

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<sup>572</sup> Barth summarises well; ...‘this assumption of theology cannot be exhibited as the natural scientist exhibits his phenomena, nor as the historian does his facts, nor as the philosopher, or the mathematician, does his axioms, nor as the lawyer or sociologist, does his sociological possibilities and necessities, upon which all of these build their research and teaching. Theology cannot even mark the boundary of its problem, nor mark the bounds of its research and its teaching in a general, or exact, way so that it might make certain its province among the other sciences....’ *God in Action*, trans. E.G. Homrighausen, Karl J. Ernst (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), p. 41.

<sup>573</sup> John Webster, ‘What makes Theology Theological?’ *Journal of Analytic Theology*, Vol. 3. May 2015, p. 19.

<sup>574</sup> *Systematic Theology Vol 1*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: WMB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) pp. 1-8. However, this is a weighty task for dogmatics and does not frequently occur, for example in chapter 1.2, we witnessed Kathryn Tanner’s preference for the rules for ‘theological dialogue’ rather than attempting to speak of God. For such an eminent theologian, it is profoundly disappointing to appear to avoid the task of theology. I make this point to suggest that although the ambition of this paper is grand, this is in part due to a culture of theological cowardice in contemporary academia rather than hubris.

the dialogue between Barth and Wiles demonstrated the inevitability of an appeal to mystery within the doctrine of providence.

This last section will venture three implications for the practice of systematic theology; one theological, one methodological and one stylistic point. Finally, this section will suggest two further areas for development in the study of theological mystery.

#### **4.1 An implication for the content of systematic theology**

Within our discussion of mystery, one of the most striking features has been the way in which mystery has been encountered, pre-eminently in relation to divine action, but also in other doctrines. We noted above, Kirkpatrick's unsubstantiated accusation that mystery is invented to satisfy a human love of the unknown. This accusation has been found wanting by this research. Within both epistemological and ontological senses of mystery, theologians have encountered unknown things that are resistant to explanation. One cannot generate or invent such encounters; the mystery came to them. This sense of sudden, urgent directed experience is more obviously pressing within ontological mystery but remains present within our epistemological scheme. For example, if we return to Barth's *conservatio*; it is the assertion (ultimately a Christological assertion) that God has chosen to elect, and not to abandon, that cannot be 'got behind'. The election of God is primal or properly basic. Despite this primacy, election is easily overlooked and so when we turn again to the simplest question of our existence we are confronted by the mystery of divine choice. Even Barth and Wiles agree on this point; neither imagines any compulsive force acting on the creator to create; rather, both ground this mystery in the will of God; God chose to create. As we have already hinted in earlier discussion, the existentialist movement offers an extended meditation on the reflective movement that recognises the strangeness of being 'something', not nothing. Whereas Kierkegaard petitions the 'manager' to complain of this fact, for Barth the realisation caused joy; for Wiles anxiety. None of these scholars had to generate the mystery of existence; it is something they encountered as part of their reflections. They were confronted by mystery. Without wishing to revisit each of our doctrinal examples in detail, this pattern is exemplified in the Barthian interpretation of the incarnation. It is not human reflection that decides Christ is an enigmatic historical character worth listening to; in the incarnation, God confronts us as mystery.

Moreover, amidst the diversity of doctrines, one consistent feature is the sense that mysteries are located in areas where it would be apologetically, pastorally and systematically beneficial for the situation to be clearer. Despite two millennia of efforts by the finest of minds to clarify the causal relation of the creator to the creation and the ensuing questions that this relationship raises, the mystery remains stubbornly present. This is not due to a lack of effort or intellectual acumen but is related to the subject itself. If we talk about God, we are talking about a mystery that exceeds the rational and mental capacity of human beings. With Augustine's famous '*si comprehendis, non est Deus*' if our theological talk excludes mystery, we are no longer talking about God. This thesis has argued consistently against a concept of God domesticated by human reason and intellect.

One implication of this irreducible sense of encountered mystery is the potential for defence against Feuerbachian accusations of religion as psychological projection. Feuerbach's famous thesis is simple to explain but rather more difficult for theists to defend against: religion is the psychological creation of humans wishing to objectify their idealised morals, hopes and fears. God is not objectively 'out there'. Rather, 'god' is the collected projection of human feeling.<sup>575</sup> Humans worship themselves; reifying their own ideals. Like Feuerbach's admirer and critic, Karl Marx, the starting point for this analysis is materialist; the word 'god' has no external referent.<sup>576</sup> Humans are limited to purely naturalistic horizons because there are no other spiritual or divine figures or landscapes to discover. Taken in one direction, this naturalism evokes a similar sense to the linguistic cage that we encountered within Wittgenstein that a priori precludes talk of a 'wholly other'. The legacy of this atheistic theology can be sensed in many contextual theologians that now attack the 'God of classical theism' as coldly distant and sexist or racist.<sup>577</sup> For example, see how James Cone openly embraces Feuerbach:

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<sup>575</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989)

<sup>576</sup> Marx wrote to Feuerbach to praise him for giving a 'philosophical foundation' to socialism. L, Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. W. Schuffenhauer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag) p. 18. Cited in Todd Gooch, 'Ludwig Feuerbach', <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach> [accessed 18/8/17] Within Marx, these collective reifications of idealised humanity become the means to maintain the unjust structures of capitalism.

<sup>577</sup> Placher, *Domestication*, pp. 1-17.

'Theology is *subjective* speech about God, a speech that tells us far more about the hopes and dreams of certain God-talkers than about the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth.'<sup>578</sup>

To be fair, Cone's theology is not atheistic, 'the Maker and Creator' still exists, yet the implication is clear, we cannot but be subjective, so the ensuing theology will be consciously subjective in order to fulfil a particular political purpose. This account is an unfairly brief representation of an important theologian, yet I contest that this example is fundamentally mistaken in developing theology with an inappropriate overemphasis on their own experience as a theological source. Consciously or unconsciously, in bowing to Feuerbach's projection thesis, the weakness of these positions is exposed.<sup>579</sup> Feuerbach's fundamental presupposition is that God does not exist in any literal or metaphoric manner; he/she/it is a figment of the collective imagination reflecting only our own interests. In accepting Feuerbach's thesis, Cone is forced to give an ethnic identity to an uncreated creator, so the tacit acceptance of Feuerbach's atheistic premise means that Cone consciously shapes the divine into an image he finds acceptable for a political purpose. The term reserved for making a deity in one's own image is idolatry. What I now propose is that acceptance of mystery protects against idolatry and the accusation of idolatry by acknowledging that the God known in Christ as mystery is not black or white, male or female and certainly does not bow to human rationality. The implications of this question are not limited to academic theologians or ecclesiastical leaders. When one offers a theological statement, one is partly visualising perfection; a statement of the ideal or 'good' that shapes human activity. Clearly, this is one of the reasons why liberation theologians wish to recast god into an image more

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<sup>578</sup> James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>579</sup> It is rare for a theologian to be quite so explicit in their acceptance of Feuerbach's datum. However, the impact is not limited to Black liberation theologians. Examples such as Rosemary Radford-Ruether's theological reimagining of the creation narrative that contrasts the foolish divine Father with the wise Sophia who must correct the original creation. Outside of liberation theology the tendency to deliberately confine God to human rational limits is exemplified by science theologian John Polkinghorne. In a similar but less politicised vein, we find John Polkinghorne's rejection of what he terms 'classical theism' for a version of process theology that imagines a di-polar reality between the personal and eternal notions of God. For Polkinghorne, these two cannot be reconciled within the one God and so uses an analogy normally suited to describe some type of multiple personality disorders for the divine. Different examples of those who embrace, consciously or not, Feuerbach's thesis could fill many books and these are just two examples. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: toward a feminist theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983). Polkinghorne's understanding of God as a di-polar being is reflected in multiple works but especially in *Providence and Science*. See also p. 51 of this thesis.

amenable to their interest group.<sup>580</sup> The motivations of these theologians for liberation of the oppressed or apologetic defence may be laudable;<sup>581</sup> yet intentions that are laudable at the outset can so quickly become oppressive once a new order is constructed. Let us take a thought experiment; if God, as Cone would have us affirm, 'really is black' what are the implications for non-black people groups? If we imagine that the implications are not wholly positive and black groups became an oppressor for other ethnic groups, would the 'God of the oppressed' switch to another ethnic representation? This rather absurdist line of argument is difficult to maintain.

This short excursus demonstrates the significance of the incarnational pattern of God coming to us as mystery. Mystery can provide a conceptual safeguard against Feuerbach's projection thesis and subsequently against those who would use the divine in the service of political manipulation or goals. The radical transcendence aptly described by Placher admits the brokenness of human speech, yet broken speech is not totally useless language. Returning to our earlier discussion of analogy, our theological language stemming from revelation is not a perfect pictorial representation of the divine. Yet, in wonder at the revelatory events of salvation history we can affirm that nevertheless it faithfully points towards the creator. This humble 'nevertheless' is not built on sophistry but on the acceptance that the mystery of God has providentially come to us.

## **4.2 An implication for style in systematic theology**

We return to William Alston;

'Contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy of religion exhibits a considerable degree of confidence in its ability to determine what God is like how to construe his basic attributes...no one thinks we can attain a comprehensive knowledge of God's nature and doings. But on many crucial points there seems to be

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<sup>580</sup> Each liberationist group tends to cast themselves as the unique recipient of divine favour or knowledge. A classic example of this is found in Boff and Gutierrez emphasis on the preference of 'God of the (economic) poor'. See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 2001)

<sup>581</sup> The passionate rhetoric defending the oppressed and destitute can be so emotively expressed that anything but silence can seem insensitive. Again, Boff and Boff's, *Introducing Liberation Theology* includes heartrending tales of mothers breastfeeding 'like pelicans' using their own blood to satisfy the child. p. 2.

a widespread confidence in our ability to determine exactly how things are with God.<sup>582</sup>

The key term is 'confidence'. I propose that the implication of this study for the style of systematic theology is that such confidence is misplaced. To speak of God is to speak, as the Psalmist phrases it, 'of things too wonderful to understand'. In being and action, God is a mystery. The very least conclusion we may offer from this study is the weight of responsibility upon theologians to treat their language about God and descriptions of those colleague with whom they disagree with the utmost epistemic humility in the face of the holy mystery of God. This humility must go beyond beginning with a cursory genuflection and work through the whole of language used to speak of God and to one another; we need slower and kinder theologians.

### **4.3 An implication for method in Systematic Theology**

Alister McGrath's broad textbook '*Introduction to Christian Theology*' provides very little on apophatic theology, it is briefly defined before this statement is given:

'The apophatic approach preserves the mystery of God through its emphasis on the limitations on language. However, many find its principled refusal to make positive statements frustrating because it implies that we are doomed to remain ignorant of even the most basic knowledge of what God is like.'<sup>583</sup>

Note here, the frustration with the 'principled refusal' that must be overcome in order to progress with theology.<sup>584</sup> So the statement 'God is mysterious' is not contentious. The danger is that one assents to this statement at the beginning of a work only to disregard the mystery as the work progresses. As a British politician is required by etiquette to use the phrase 'my right honourable friend' before unleashing invective, so mystery can easily slip into a cursory nod to mystery in prolegomena which does not affect the ensuing content. A major contention of this thesis has been that mystery is not a regrettable part of theology to

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<sup>582</sup> Alston, *Two Cheers...*, p. 99.

<sup>583</sup> Alister McGrath, *Introduction...*, p. 189. This work surveys such a vast quantity of material, that the brief exposure of apophaticism surveyed in the 'Introduction' is hardly grounds for complaint. Additionally, in fairness to McGrath there are more references to mystery throughout his work than in many contemporary works of theology.

<sup>584</sup> This thesis has touched on the apophatic method multiple times. I am not advocating for all theology to reject cataphatic statements, rather I use this quotation to give an example of a cursory nod to mystery.

be avoided. Instead the mysterious action of God coming to us should penetrate, from the beginning to the end of the theological task. Mystery is an uneliminable part of theological speech; without consistent recognition of this fact, systematic theology risks establishing an intellectual system that, in a desire to be comprehensive, excludes the subject it intended to describe. This failure reaches an apotheosis in Wiles' effort to remake theology in a rationalist framework. The disappointment of Wiles' project is the number of rules he composed excluded the possibility of God transcending these human constructions. As Placher intones, when one ignores the inherent mystery of theological language, God becomes domesticated by contrastive analogies that presume the creator to be an enhanced version of the creation.<sup>585</sup> In Wiles' case, mystery remained, but only a small, cold mystery of human existence. God was no longer God, but a god squeezed out of creation by the demands of human rationality. In a sense, Wiles' effort replicates Laplace's description of the cosmos; Wiles theology had no need of the hypothesis of God. Theology that does not attempt to speak about God is no longer theology. One may call it religious studies or even anthropology but the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer must remain the subject of theology.

A further conclusion would address the frustration that McGrath describes with apophatic theology. A totally mysterious God, as described in Wiles, is ultimately unknowable and so leaves the theologian in silence. This may be Wittgenstenian orthodoxy, yet it is not Christian orthodoxy. With Barth, the Christian is tasked with the impossible task of speaking about God.<sup>586</sup> If God has come to us, this is a task that must not be avoided. One might suppose that those who emphasise the mystery and otherness of God would be those with the least to say. On the contrary, writers emphasising apophasis, or the otherness of God have often been the most voluminous writers.<sup>587</sup> Even Wiles' concludes that mystery does not close down the concept of the divine but insists that one has never fully captured the fullness of God. The mystery of God is not a lack, but the superabundance of material that cannot be fully captured in human speech, and so requires an overflowing prolixity of words. The boldness of Barth is to insist that the God revealed in revelation is *really* the uncreated creator and not some proxy for a higher conceptual being. Those who would

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<sup>585</sup> Placher, *Domestication*, p. 181.

<sup>586</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 90.

<sup>587</sup> We might include Augustine, Aquinas and Barth himself within this list.



insist that our language is a closed nexus, unable to refer beyond an infinite series of self-reference should be resisted.<sup>588</sup> Language may be pictorial, but it should not be forgotten that it pictures *something*, not just a linguistic hall of mirrors. Theological language is not a faultless description of the divine; analogies are broken and misleading. Yet, if in faith, it is understood that God has come to us and is not simply projected by us, we must attempt to render this account in speech. The God who comes to us remains a mystery; yet this is a feature of the one who comes, rather than a reason to abandon the task.

#### **4.4 A projection of future work on mystery.**

This thesis has been set within the field of systematic theology, but mystery cannot be so contained, spilling out beyond systematics towards the field of Christian Spirituality. Within academia the gulf between spirituality and systematics is wide. This divide is evidenced by the development of academic study of 'spirituality' as a separate sphere of activity from other theological work.<sup>589</sup> This move may give the subject credibility within the politics of 21<sup>st</sup> century academe but, as Mark McIntosh notes, it is questionable how far those studied as 'spiritual' writers would have considered that they were doing something separate from 'theology'.<sup>590</sup> At times, this gulf is explicitly commended, so Wiles encourages first-year undergraduates to be 'detached' in their theology.<sup>591</sup> At other points, the divide is implicit; McGrath recounts undergraduate theology students discussing the problem of evil as though they were 'shadow boxing', that is, untouched by the problem themselves.<sup>592</sup> However, it is my final proposal that this division is false for, as McIntosh summarises:

'Put as bluntly as possible, theology without spirituality becomes ever more methodologically refined but unable to know or speak of the very mysteries at the

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<sup>588</sup> I refer here to the influence of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model echoed throughout much post-liberal theology. As White phrases it 'We cannot distinguish easily what is within us and beyond us. Yet the fact that it is hard to disentangle subject and object should not lead us to suppose there is no reality external to us. It is pure obfuscation to refuse to imagine any reality external to us simply on the grounds that our grasp of it is always a subjective act. External reality is too basic to our common sense to deny outright.' *Providence*, p. 40.

<sup>589</sup> If we consider the rapid rise of the study of mysticism, it is questionable whether the classic mystics of Meister Eckhart or Julian of Norwich consider themselves doing something separate from 'theology'. The evidence for this claim seems slim.

<sup>590</sup> See Mark McIntosh, 'Theology and Spirituality', *The Modern Theologians*, ed. D. Ford and R. Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 192.

<sup>591</sup> Maurice Wiles, *What is Theology?* p. 9.

<sup>592</sup> McGrath, *The Great Mystery*, p. 102.

heart of Christianity, and spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individualistic consumerism.<sup>593</sup>

Splitting Christian theology from Christian spirituality is a false dichotomy. The topics belong together. I propose that the concept of inscrutable mystery that we have developed can bridge the two fields; the ontological mystery encountered in Christian spirituality leads to the epistemological mystery of the encounter rendered in speech. This pattern may be reversed, epistemological mystery may lead to the surrender of prayer and perhaps the encounter of an ontological mystery.<sup>594</sup> Doxology should lead to theology and theology to doxology. I am proposing the reunification of faith and theology and the dismissal of neutral, secular or detached theology.

Throughout this thesis we have developed and refined a sense of mystery that is defensible within the interweaving web of systematic theology, but it would be a mistake for this development of mystery to become another 'object' of theology to be dissected and owned by theologians. As Rahner phrases it, there is only one mystery, God himself. The doctrinal mysteries that flow from this central point, whether revelatory or natural are ultimately echoes of this primary figure. As we have observed, giving an intellectually satisfactory account of mystery does not provide ownership of the subject, instead the pattern is reversed. So Christian theology is not a field to be exhausted, not like a coal mine that is gradually depleted, so theologians should not be seeking ever tightening circles of accurate description of the divine. For God, who is mystery, could never be owned by his creatures. Even as he reveals himself in providential action, we find a mystery too wonderful for comprehension, simultaneously giving us more knowledge and showing how much we do not understand. Alternatively, in the apostles' words:

‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the  
wisdom and knowledge of God!

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<sup>593</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>594</sup> Famously Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* was never finished. Thomas' confessor Reginald asked him why not; 'Reginald, I cannot, because all I have written seems like straw to me'. At the risk of taking medieval hagiography too seriously, Aquinas seems to have had a vision which fundamentally changed the way he saw his own life work. The origins of the story are difficult to trace but is discussed in multiple biographies of Aquinas. Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) p.37 and Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas; a portrait* (London: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 40.

How unsearchable his judgements,

And his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the

Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?

Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay him?

For from him and through him and to

Him are all things.

To him, be the glory for ever! Amen.

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