

**Thinking God in Contemporary Theology:
The Trinity and Christian Life Through the Lens of a Theology of Interruption**

Teresa Grace Brown

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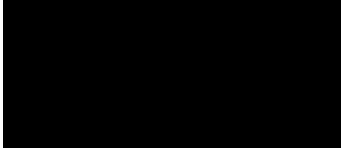
28 January 2020

Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

Signed

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

Teresa Grace Brown

28 January 2020

Dedication

In loving memory of my father, David Joseph Engebretson (22 June 1950 – 28 October 2019).

Statement of Appreciation

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I consider the question: How does a theology of interruption help us to understand the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today? Flemish theologian Lieven Boeve has developed a contextual-theological-hermeneutical approach to theology—a “theology of interruption”—that brings a postmodern critical consciousness into dialogue with the Christian narrative tradition. He argues that such an approach can be supported not only on contextual grounds, but also on theological grounds. For Boeve, the recognition of the cultural interruption of the Christian tradition by means of an increasing diversity in the religious and cultural landscape leads to a rediscovery of the interruptive nature of the Christian narrative, and it is this insight that I take up in this work. By considering a theology of interruption as a lens through which to think about the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity, I explore the implications of Boeve’s approach for contemporary theology.

The dissertation begins with an exegesis of Boeve’s work. I examine his philosophical and theological influences, and I discuss critically his contention that a theology of interruption is narratively signified in the Christian tradition. As Boeve is not explicit about the ways in which he engages a theology of interruption as a hermeneutical approach to theology, I examine case studies within his corpus to distil its philosophical-conceptual elements. Turning to the question of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, I examine modern and postmodern trinitarian approaches and engage these critically through the lens of postmodern philosophical and contextual concerns. I then consider this theme through the lens of a theology of interruption and offer a critical evaluation of Boeve’s approach.

This work contributes to theological discourse in a number of ways. It supports the use of a theology of interruption as a means by which theology might proceed today. It presents a way of thinking about the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life that takes seriously the particularity of the Christian tradition and other faith traditions and worldviews in the contemporary context. It recognises the importance of engaging reflexively with diverse particular discourses within the context and affirms the fruits of such an engagement for Christian self-understanding. Finally, it provides theological support for a recontextualisation of sacramentality in relation to Christian life.

Abbreviations

Works by Lieven Boeve

Books

- GIH *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval.*
- LT *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love.*
- IT *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context.*
- TC *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity.*

Articles and chapters

- BCS "Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a Detraditionalised and Pluralised Context."
- BHL "Believing That There Is Hope for Love: The Promise of Christian Faith in the Resurrection of the Body."
- BMADGS "Beyond the Modern Anti-Modern Dilemma: *Gaudium et spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern Context."
- BMADTM "Beyond the Modern and Anti-Modern Dilemma: Theological Method in a Postmodern European Context."
- BRD "Between Relativizing and Dogmatizing: A Plea for an Open Concept of Tradition."
- BW "Bearing Witness to the Differend: A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context."
- CA "Cultural Apophaticism: A Challenge for Contemporary Theology."
- CCPC "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: New Opportunities for Theology?"
- CF "Creation and Flood. A Contest between Science and Christian Faith?"
- CP "Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology."
- EAES "Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology."
- ECT "The End of Conversation in Theology. Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion."
- ESES "The Enduring Significance and Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx? Introducing the State of the Question in *Medias Res*."
- GPH "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics: A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion."
- GSCM "*Gaudium et spes* and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of the Dialogue with the World?"
- IPT "The Interruption of Political Theology."
- LAT "Linguistica Ancilla Theologiae: The Interest of Fundamental Theology in Cognitive Semantics."
- LCMN "J.-F. Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives: Towards a Postmodern Political Theology?"
- MPT "Method in Postmodern Theology: A Case Study."
- MR "Market and Religion in Postmodern Culture."
- NCF "Narratives of Creation and Flood: A Contest between Science and Christian Faith?"

NGON	"Naming God in Open Narratives: Theology between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics."
NGT	"Naming God Today and the Theological Project of Prof. Dr. Benjamin Willaert."
NTTH	"Negative Theology and Theological Hermeneutics: The Particularity of Naming God."
OHT	"Orthodoxy, History and Theology: Recontextualisation and Its Descriptive and Programmatic Features."
OPC	"Orthodoxy in the Postmodern Context."
PMTT	"(Post)Modern Theology on Trial? Towards a Radical Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Particularity. Response to Anthony Godzieba and Laurence Hemming."
PNT	"Postmodernism and Negative Theology: The a/Theology of the 'Open Narrative'."
PRT	"The Particularity of Religious Truth Claims: How to Deal with It in a So-Called Postmodern Context."
PST	"Postmodern Sacramento-Theology: Retelling the Christian Story."
RD	"Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe."
RKM	"Richard Kearney's Messianism: Between the Narrative Theology of Hermeneutics and the Negative Theology of Deconstructionism."
RNT	"The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today: The Narrow Gulf between Theology and Philosophy."
RST	"Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution <i>Dei verbum</i> for Contemporary Theology."
RTPI	"Religious Truth, Particularity, and Incarnation a Theological Proposal for a Philosophical Hermeneutics of Religion."
SDDD	"The Swan or the Dove? On the Difficult Dialogue between Theology and Philosophy."
SDP	"When Secularisation Turns into Detraditionalisation and Pluralisation. Faith in Search of Understanding."
SDTK	"The Swan or the Dove? Two Keys for Reading <i>Fides et ratio</i> ."
SIRL	"The Sacramental Interruption of Rituals of Life."
STTH	"Systematic Theology, Truth and History: Recontextualisation."
TDCP	"Tradition, (De)Canonization, and the Challenge of Plurality."
TDP	"Theological Truth, Difference and Plurality: Towards a Contextual European Theology of Interruption."
TIE	"Theology and the Interruption of Experience."
TPI	"Theological Truth, Particularity and Incarnation: Engaging Religious Plurality and Radical Hermeneutics."
TRCCC	"Theology, Recontextualisation and Contemporary Critical Consciousness. Lessons from Richard Schaeffler for a Postmodern Theological Epistemology."
TSP	"Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal."
TT	"Theological Truth in the Context of Contemporary Continental Thought: The Turn to Religion and the Contamination of Language."

Co-authored works by Lieven Boeve

- DE with Laurence Paul Hemming, eds. *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricœur.*
- LPT with Christophe Brabant, "Lessons from Philosophy for Theology, and Vice Versa."
- RIT with Anthony J. Godzieba, and Michele Saracino. "Resurrection—Interruption—Transformation: Incarnation as Hermeneutical Strategy, A Symposium."
- RM with Kurt Feyearts, "Religious Metaphors in a Postmodern Culture. Transverse Links between Apophatical Theology and Cognitive Semantics."

Works by other authors

- BT Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time.*
- CG Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God.*
- FH Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society.*
- GSS Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self.*
- HTG Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God.*
- ID Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference.*
- IR Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ.*
- JHT Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity.*
- OM Merold Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith."
- OO Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology.*
- PC Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.*
- PE Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained.*
- TBP Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation.*
- TK Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom.*
- WM Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?"

Vatican documents

- DI *Dominus Iesus*
- DV *Dei verbum*
- FR *Fides et ratio*
- GS *Gaudium et spes*
- LG *Lumen gentium*
- SC *Sacrosanctum concilium*

Chapter 1. Introduction: Theology in Context

Christian Identity and Context

The documents of the Second Vatican Council affirm an inextricable connection between Christian faith and Christian life. In *Sacrosanctum concilium*, we read that by virtue of baptism, Christians are “plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ” and the ordinary acts of their lives become oriented towards the divine life of love.¹ In *Lumen gentium*, the laity are exhorted to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God,” and we are told that the transformation that takes place in baptism carries with it the responsibility to witness to Christ in word and deed: to “make Christ known to others [through] a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.”² Together with *Gaudium et spes*, these documents testify to the Church’s teaching that baptism is connected with notions of orientation towards God, personal transformation, engagement with the world and a responsibility for the vulnerable “other.”³

Christian beliefs are, indeed, *lived* beliefs. They reflect a particular recognition of the relationship between God and the world and a particular understanding of humankind in relation to God. This is especially true of the Christian belief that God is Trinity. For Christians, to think *God* is to think God as both personal and relational—as *Trinity*. It is the doctrine that sets Christians apart from other monotheistic traditions; yet, as Karl Rahner pointed out in 1967, in their practical life, Christians are “almost mere ‘monotheists.’”⁴ While for many Christians it may make little practical difference to think God as Trinity, Christian life takes on new meaning when considered in relation to a trinitarian God.

The resurgence of theological discussion since the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity attests to a growing awareness that the culture in which Christians live their faith has theological import. In modern approaches to this theme, a recognition of the growing gap between faith and culture has led to a strategy of correlation: belief in God as a unity of persons has become paradigmatic for the construction of human communities. In these

¹ Vatican II Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), 6. Throughout the present work, translations of the documents of Vatican II and papal encyclicals are drawn from the website of The Holy See, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>.

² *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), 31.

³ “This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. *This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.*” *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 43, emphasis mine.

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Josef Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10.

approaches, the best image of a human community in a world that is becoming increasingly diverse is considered to be a community where human relations image the unified trinity of persons in God. However, the postmodern interruption of modern correlation theologies, together with a recognition of the changing religious and cultural landscape (particularly since the late-twentieth century) calls for new theological thinking patterns and idioms to be developed. In a philosophical and cultural context where correlation strategies are no longer considered to be contextually plausible, the question of how Christians might live in relation to God *today* is of increasing theological significance.

It is no secret that in the Western context, the religious landscape is becoming increasingly diverse. In the period between 1966 and 2016, the percentage of Christians in the Australian population decreased from 88 percent to 52 percent, and during this time, the number of adherents to other religious traditions increased by 8 percent.⁵ At the same time, there has been a 30 percent rise in the number of Australians who profess to have no religious affiliation.⁶ In a 2019 study of young people in Australia, aged 13-18—the Australian Generation Z Study (AGZ Study)—researchers found that while 52 percent of young people “do not identify with a religion,” the data does not suggest a reduction in belief, as such; instead, it suggests a move away from organised religion.⁷ According to the AGZ study, 24 percent of young people have “no belief at all in a transcendent being or God”; the rest affirm either belief in God (37 percent), belief in a “higher being” (30 percent) or are unsure (9 percent).⁸ The Australian Catholic population is also in a state of change. The Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference reports a steady decline in Mass attendance since the 1950s.⁹ In 2011 the number of Catholics who typically attended Mass on a weekend amounted to approximately 12 percent of the overall Australian Catholic population (down from between 65 and 75 percent in the 1950s).¹⁰ While the number of Catholic baptisms has also

⁵ Figures reflected the latest census data; the next census will be in 2021. Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Census Population and Housing, 1966, 1991, 2016,” Retrieved Jan 2020, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Snapshot%20of%20Australia,%202016~2>.

⁶ The number of religious ‘nones’ has increased from less than one percent of the population in 1966 to 30 percent in 2016. “Census Population and Housing, 1966, 1991, 2016”.

⁷ Mary Lou Rasmussen et al., *Australia's Generation Z Study: Project Report*, Report on Australian Young People's Perspectives on Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews (Australia: Australian National University, Deakin and Monash Universities, 2019), 5-6. [Hereafter *AGZ Study*].

⁸ *AGZ Study*, 6. “The AGZ Study comprises 11 focus groups in three states with students in Years 9 and 10 (ages 15-16), a nationally representative telephone survey of 1200 people aged 13-18, and 30 in-depth, follow-up interviews with survey participants” (*AGZ Study*, 2).

⁹ Pastoral Research Office, *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, A Report Based on the National Count of Attendance, the National Church Life Survey and the Australian Census (Victoria: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2013), 4.

¹⁰ And of those Catholics who attended Mass in 2011, 85 percent attended weekly, while the other 15 percent attended once or twice a month, or less frequently. *Mass Attendance*, 1.

declined by 15 percent in the last 20 years, the numbers have fluctuated (the Pastoral Research Office reports an *increase* of 6 percent between 2003 and 2012).¹¹

An equally pronounced diversification has occurred in Western Europe. According to Jens Schlamelcher, in West Germany, the population of Protestants and Catholics decreased from approximately 98 percent in 1900 to 70 percent in 2012, and worship attendance for Catholics has reduced by nearly 40 percent since 1950.¹² Concurrently, Anna Körs reports that in Hamburg there has been a substantial increase in the number of Muslim and Buddhist congregations, and an increased diversity of Christian congregations.¹³ In Switzerland, there has been a 30 percent decrease in the number of adherents to Reformed or Roman Catholic Churches since 1970, a 5 percent increase in the population of Jews, Muslims and Hindus, and a 20 percent increase in the number of religious ‘nones’, according to Jörg Stolz and Christophe Monnot.¹⁴ In Italy, Enzo Pace reports an “unprecedented and unexpected religious pluralism,” which has changed “the country’s socio-religious geography” to the extent that “Italian people are no longer born inherently Catholic.”¹⁵ On declining Catholic practice in Belgium, Lieven Boeve reports a reduction in the number of weekly Mass attendees, from around 50 percent in 1967 to just under 9 percent in 2009, a 7 percent decrease in the number of Christians marrying in the Church in the decade leading up to 2010, and a steady decline in the number of Catholics choosing to have their children baptised (from 96 percent in 1967 to 61 percent in 2009).¹⁶ Moreover, he notes that “approximately one-third of the Belgian population describes itself as not belonging to a religious denomination, without considering itself atheistic.”¹⁷

Sociologists in the past have argued that the place of religion in society is in decline, that in a world concerned with progress and development, religion has become outdated, something for the

¹¹ “Sacraments in Australia,” *Pastoral Research Online* 33 (2016), <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Pastoral-Research-Online-Edition-33-September-2016.pdf>.

¹² Jens Schlamelcher, “Mainline Congregations in West Germany: Quantitative and Qualitative Forms of Decline,” in *Congregations in Europe*, ed. Christophe Monnot and Jörg Stolz (Cham: Springer, 2018), 11.1.

¹³ Between 1990 and 2012, increases of 60 and 64 percent, respectively, for Muslim and Buddhist congregations, and 44 percent for Christian congregations other than Protestant or Catholic. Anna Körs, “Congregations in Germany: Mapping of Organizations, Beliefs, Activities, and Relations: The Case Study of Hamburg,” in *Congregations in Europe*, 7.5.1.

¹⁴ Numbers in Reformed or Catholic churches reduced from 96 percent in 1970 to around 66 percent in 2010. The number of Jews, Muslims and Hindus increased by 5 percent from 1970 to 2010. ‘Nones’ increased from one percent in 1970 to 20 percent of the Swiss population in 2010. Jörg Stolz and Christophe Monnot, “The Established and the Newcomers. A Weberian-Bourdieuian View of Congregations in the Swiss Religious Field,” in *Congregations in Europe*, 6.5.

¹⁵ Enzo Pace, “Religious Congregations in Italy: Mapping the New Pluralism,” in *Congregations in Europe*, 8.3.

¹⁶ Catholic sacramental marriages dropped from approximately 68 percent of marriages between Catholics in 1999 to just over 61 percent in 2009. Lieven Boeve, *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2016), 36. Boeve cites the report of the European Values Study: K. Abts, K. Dobbelaere and L. Voyé (eds), *Nieuwe tijden, nieuwe mensen. Belgen over arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2011). See <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

¹⁷ TC, 4.

“irrational” among us, or simply superfluous to modern society.¹⁸ However, Charles Taylor argues that these theories do not present a plausible account of the sociological change that is taking place in the West (he cites the United States as one example of an exception to such narratives).¹⁹ His contemporary, José Casanova, argues that the Western context is undergoing a process of secularisation in the sense of a “differentiation of the secular spheres (states, economy, science) ... from religious institutions and norms.”²⁰ Taylor suggests that as a result of this process, the *conditions of belief* have changed. “Belief in God is no longer axiomatic,” he writes, we have moved “from a society where belief in God [was] unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”²¹

Lieven Boeve argues that the changes reflected in the Western context can be understood as processes of *pluralisation*, *individualisation* and *detraditionalisation*. Pluralisation refers to a *process* of diversification between and within religious traditions and worldviews in the Western cultural and religious context.²² As Boeve notes, this diversification does not simply refer to a diversification of “classical” religious traditions within a particular context, but to the recognition that there is “a plural field of interacting religious positions, among which diversity of individual religious constructs, the more vague religiosity, but also nihilism and religious indifference, are distinct positions to be distinguished in their own right.”²³ One of the results of this process, Boeve contends, is that identity construction becomes situated within a virtual “market place,” where people become conscious of their ability to choose (and potentially not choose) from a diversity of faith options.²⁴ Peter Berger argues that the recognition of choice is intrinsically connected with the process of “modernisation.”²⁵ The range of choices for individuals “increases through history and has increased exponentially since the Industrial Revolution,” he writes, and this has led to a “transformation in the human condition,”

¹⁸ Charles Taylor refers to these as “subtraction,” or “maturation” theories of secularisation: the more modern society becomes, the less religious. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 589, 2.

¹⁹ *Secular Age*, 2. See also, Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1-2 (2006): 8-9.

²⁰ “Rethinking Secularization,” 7. See also, José Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig J Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54-55, 60-66.

²¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

²² It is to be contrasted with the more static notion of “pluralism,” which Peter Berger defines as “a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.” For Berger, the result of pluralism is—ultimately—a relativisation of worldviews. Invariably, he argues, in such a situation “cognitive contamination” occurs: “if people keep on talking to each other ... they end up influencing each other; they come to a cognitive compromise.” Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston, US: De Gruyter, 2014), 1, 3.

²³ Lieven Boeve, “Religion After Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2005): 107. This increased diversity is evident in the findings of “Australia’s Generation Z Study,” a landmark study of young people in Australia, aged 13-18. See Rasmussen et al., *AGZ Study*.

²⁴ Lieven Boeve, “Market and Religion in Postmodern Culture,” *Theology: Journal of History of Christianity* 102, no. 805 (1999): 28.

²⁵ Berger, *Many Altars*, 5.

from fate—or contingency—to choice.²⁶ Moreover, he continues, the “endless array of choices is reinforced by structures of capitalist systems, with their enormous market for services, products, and even identities, all protected by a democratic state which legitimises these choices, not least the choice of religion.”²⁷ A further result of this process, according to Boeve, is that no one individual or community “can claim the observer’s position.”²⁸ In this context, he argues, “[e]ach identity is structurally challenged to conceive of itself in relation to difference and otherness—especially to the effect the other truth claims have on its own claim.”²⁹ Boeve contends that the recognition of this process of pluralisation is characteristic of a *postmodern* critical consciousness, that is, a consciousness of the loss of credibility of all-encompassing narratives and a recognition that identity construction and meaning-making is increasingly becoming the task of the individual (it is in this sense that he defines *individualisation*).³⁰

The process of *detraditionalisation* refers to what Boeve calls “a socio-cultural interruption of traditions (religious as well as class, gender ... traditions)” whereby they become increasingly difficult to hand down from one generation to the next.³¹ This results in changes to the ways in which Christian identity is developed and shaped. Christian identity formation, he argues, can no longer be considered as “the growing into pre-given ideological patterns, which condition one’s perspective on meaning and social life”—ideological patterns that are passed on from birth, and supported through familial and communal institutions.³² Instead, Christian identity is *constructed* by way of a freely chosen option for faith, an option that is continually revisited (albeit, for some, unthematically). Boeve points out that the process of detraditionalisation does not necessarily equate to (or lead to) the loss of tradition—traditions continue to provide “horizons of meaning in which identity is devised and found.”³³ Instead, it relates to the process by which a person’s *relation* to tradition becomes “structurally more reflexive” (it is no longer a self-evident given).³⁴ Connected with the process of pluralisation, the detraditionalisation of Christian faith has led to an increased diversity within the Christian tradition, not only in terms of participation in communal practices (for example, attendance at Sunday Mass, or participation in sacraments) but also in terms of the extent to which Christians witness to their faith in everyday life. Boeve writes,

The Christian faith, including its understanding of humanity and the world, its ethical perspectives and attitudes, in short, Christianity’s entire conceptual horizon, serves for fewer and fewer people as the (explicit and even implicit) ultimate point of reference when they

²⁶ *Many Altars*, 5.

²⁷ *Many Altars*, 5.

²⁸ Boeve, *TC*, 44.

²⁹ *TC*, 44.

³⁰ “MR,” 28.

³¹ “RD,” 104. See also *TC*, 44.

³² “RD,” 104.

³³ *TC*, 44.

³⁴ *TC*, 44.

seek to give meaning to their lives and to society as a whole. Those for whom this remains true, frequently no longer understand their Christian identity as something inherited from the past, but rather as an option in faith that calls for continual confirmation in word and deed and in dialogue with society.³⁵

Boeve argues that the “cultural interruption” reflected in the processes of pluralisation and detraditionalisation offers tremendous opportunities for Christians to reformulate, renew and recontextualise their faith, to challenge contemporary culture in light of and by means of their faith, and to find ways of holding in dialogical tension what is particular about the Christian tradition and what it holds in common with the religious other.³⁶ In this diverse contemporary context, Boeve contends that the Christian tradition

is challenged to rediscover what a Christian identity means and how initiation, conversion, confession, church belonging, community formation, etc., are understood in a context where Christian images, practices and thinking patterns are no longer self-evident. Theology must seek ways in which the Christian message may inspire people to construct their own identities as Christians, and so assist the church in its evolution from a church by birth to one by choice. ... The fact that the Christian faith no longer stands at the centre of our society need not inspire grief or nostalgia; rather, it offers an opportunity to rediscover the faith’s newness, strength and inspiration.³⁷

Boeve’s theological response to the changing religious and cultural landscape, an approach to theology he calls a “theology of interruption,” is the central theme and conceptual framework of the present work.

Theology of Interruption: A Theological Response to the Changing Context

Lieven Boeve is the Director-General of Catholic Education in Flanders, and the former Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. His prolific list of publications in systematic theology includes 5 books (the most recent of which was published in 2019, *Het Evangelie Volgens Lieven Boeve: Mijn Ambitie Voor Onderwijs* [The Gospel According to Lieven Boeve: My Ambition for Education]), 32 co-edited books, over 70 contributions to collected volumes and over 60 journal articles (in both English and Dutch).³⁸ He was awarded the biennial prize of the European Society for Catholic Theology in 2015 for *Lyotard and Theology*, and his work is highly regarded internationally.³⁹

³⁵ *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian Doyle (New York/London: Continuum, 2007), 175.

³⁶ For an in-depth discussion on each of these themes, see “The Shortest Definition of Religion: Interruption,” *Communio Viatorum* 46 (2004): 299-300; “RD,” 99-122.

³⁷ *TC*, 74.

³⁸ For an extended biography, see <https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/researchers/00000317>.

³⁹ Boeve’s theological approach underpins a key project in Catholic schools (the Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project), which has seen a focus on the enhancement and enrichment of Catholic identity in primary and secondary Catholic schools in Belgium and Australia, and soon to be in the UK and other parts of Europe.

Following the commission of *Gaudium et spes*—to examine the “signs of the times” and to interpret them “in the light of the gospel” (GS 4)—and taking the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz as his starting point, Boeve has developed the notion of *interruption* as a theological hermeneutical category.⁴⁰ He argues that while there are contextual grounds for the consideration of new ways to think about the relationship between God, Christian faith and the world, there are also *theological* grounds for doing so. Contextually speaking, the recognition that “our Christian tradition is culturally interrupted ... through the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation,” he contends, allows for “a rediscovery of the interruptive nature of Christianity.”⁴¹ Boeve writes,

The category of interruption can demonstrate its first use as an exponent of what can be termed our contemporary contextual critical consciousness. The confrontation with religious otherness alerts the Christian narrative very specifically to the particularity of its own truth claim and interrupts any such pretence towards absoluteness. ... On the other hand, the rediscovery of one’s own particularity is also the manner in which the Christian narrative can be interruptive in the current context. Such interruption not only critically engages with other narratives that shut themselves off or harden themselves in a fundamentalist way. It also warns us of the erosion of the particularity and alterity in many current discourses.⁴²

Theologically speaking, Boeve argues that the narratives of God’s revelation in the Old and New Testaments attest to a recognition that faith’s attempt to understand God has always been interrupted by the God to whom the narratives bear witness (the event of Christ is the paradigmatic example).⁴³ For Boeve, this leads to the recognition that bearing witness to the God of Christian faith, as revealed in history itself, necessitates a praxis of interruption: “God’s interruption constitutes the theological foundation for a continuous and radical hermeneutic of the context and the tradition,” he writes.⁴⁴ In other words, he argues that the Christian narrative is “continually interrupted” by God, and is “assigned by this divine interruption to interrupt on behalf of this same God.”⁴⁵ In this way, according to Boeve, the theological hermeneutical category of interruption “structures the way in

⁴⁰ In his 35 theses on timelessness, Metz concluded that “[t]he shortest definition of religion [is] interruption.” Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* [*Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*], trans. David Smith (London: Burns and Oates, 1980), 171, thesis vi. Boeve cites Metz as one of the first to define religion as interruption, although his use of the term differs from Metz: Metz uses “interruption” in a political (practical) sense, whereas Boeve uses it in an epistemological sense. Boeve, *GIH*, 203. For Boeve’s reading of *Gaudium et spes*, see “*Gaudium et spes* and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of the Dialogue with the World?” in *Vatican II and its Legacy*, ed. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); and “Beyond the Modern Anti-modern Dilemma: *Gaudium et spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern Context,” *Horizons* 34, no. 2 (2007).

⁴¹ “Theological Truth, Difference and Plurality: Towards a Contextual European Theology of Interruption,” in *Word and Spirit: Renewing Christology and Pneumatology in a Globalizing World*, ed. A. Min and C. Schwöbel, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 65.

⁴² “RD,” 119-20.

⁴³ *GIH*, 46. Throughout the present work, I have used “Old and New Testaments” interchangeably with “Hebrew and Christian scriptures,” as there is debate amongst biblical scholars about the best way to refer to the two testaments.

⁴⁴ “TDP,” 70.

⁴⁵ “TDP,” 65-66.

which we reflect upon the relationship in which God is engaged with God's creation"; it structures a Christian consideration of the relationship between faith (theology) and context.⁴⁶

Boeve's theological approach brings a postmodern critical consciousness into dialogue with the Christian tradition. He contends that a theology of interruption is both "contextually plausible and theologically legitimate": it reflects the encounter with "diversity and otherness" in the contemporary pluralising context, while at the same time drawing systematically on the rich Christian tradition.⁴⁷ As a theological hermeneutical category, it allows for continuity and discontinuity to be held in tension. The contextual interruption of the Christian tradition does not "rupture" Christian faith to the extent that it ceases to exist, Boeve argues; instead, it compels a process of recontextualisation so that "what is interrupted does not simply continue as though nothing had happened."⁴⁸ In this way, a theology of interruption does not amount to a theological "method," as such, but supports the recontextualisation of Christian faith in terms of its relationship with the Western cultural context.⁴⁹

The Aims and Contributions of this Dissertation

In the present work, I consider the question: How does a theology of interruption help us to understand the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today? As we will see, the postmodern interruption to modern reflections on this relationship has led to the need for new approaches to trinitarian theology that recognise contextual shifts between religious and secular spheres of interest, and that take seriously the processes of pluralisation and detraditionalisation in the contemporary Western world. It is my conviction that in today's context, a theological approach that fails to take into account the critical impulses and ideas of contemporary philosophy and culture will cease to speak to the context in any meaningful way. It is within this postmodern, pluralising and detraditionalising context that Christians are called to *live* trinitarian faith. Should this lived faith present itself as a counter-cultural voice, rather than a voice "in the midst of culture" (to borrow a phrase from Boeve), the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the Church's intimate relationship with the world is potentially reduced to rhetoric.⁵⁰

Boeve considers a theology of interruption to be an "endpoint of a theological recontextualisation" (the result of a recognition that the contemporary context has interrupted the

⁴⁶ "RD," 120-121.

⁴⁷ *GIH*, 58, 205.

⁴⁸ "TDP," 68. Boeve defines "recontextualisation as "restructure and reformulat[ion of] the reference to the truth according to the reflective patterns and models of the changed context." "Bearing Witness to the Differend: A Model for Theologizing in the Postmodern Context," *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995): 364. In other words, it is "faith seeking understanding" in the context of today. I explicate this in detail in Ch. 2.

⁴⁹ *GIH*, 68.

⁵⁰ Recall the well-known opening paragraph of *Gaudium et spes*, ("The joys and the hopes, ..."), which culminates in the follow: "[T]his community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds." *GS* 1. For Boeve's phrase in context, see *GIH*, 58, and my extended discussion in Ch. 3.

Christian tradition); however, in my reading of his work, it is clear that a theology of interruption also constitutes the *means* by which a process of recontextualisation takes place.⁵¹ Boeve utilises the approach as an exegetical and conceptual tool in the recontextualisation of key Christian doctrines and themes, such as the incarnation, resurrection and love; however, he is not explicit about the moves he makes when doing so. Moreover, as his theology of interruption has been developed on Christological grounds, Boeve does not consider explicitly the implications of his approach from a trinitarian perspective.⁵² To this end, in the present work, I aim to explicate the philosophical-conceptual approaches that Boeve uses when he engages a theology of interruption and to determine the extent to which the use of these approaches assists us to consider the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life today. It is important to note that I do not aim to offer a trinitarian theology, as such; instead, I bring Boeve's theology of interruption into dialogue with the question of how we might think about the relationship between God and Christian life, with the recognition that to think God, as Christians, is to think in trinitarian terms. In doing so, I evaluate critically the implications of Boeve's work for contemporary theological method.

While a number of scholars have reviewed and critiqued Boeve's work, and some have appropriated it for different ends, to date, there are no publications on the explicit application of Boeve's theology of interruption to Christian doctrines or themes (apart from, of course, those written by Boeve himself).⁵³ To this end, the present work potentially contributes to contemporary theological discussion in a number of ways. First, it provides support for the use of a theology of interruption as a means by which theology might proceed today (this is crucial, as Boeve's approach underpins an important project in Catholic schools in Belgium and Australia, and soon to be in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe).⁵⁴

Second, the present work presents a way of thinking about the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life that does not subsume other faith traditions and worldviews into the Christian narrative (the implicit aim of some modern correlation theologies). Through the application of a theology of interruption to this central Christian theme, I highlight a recognition of God as both difference and unity. In doing so, I note that a theology of interruption assists theology to come to an understanding of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life that is

⁵¹ "TDP," 72.

⁵² This is largely the result of the fact that Boeve is heavily influenced by Schillebeeckx. I note the Christocentric nature of Boeve's approach in Chs. 2 and 3, and in Ch. 8 I extend his approach to consider its implications from a trinitarian perspective.

⁵³ I consider Boeve's critics as the opportunities arise in the present work. On those who have engaged Boeve's work for different ends, see, for example: Niek Brunsvel, who critiques Boeve's theology of interruption and argues instead for a *hermeneutics* of interruption; and Philip Sutherland, who uses Boeve's theology of interruption as a lens by which to think about Girard's notion of mimetic desire. Niek Brunsvel, "Particularity and Contextuality Interrupting the Public/Private Debate Concerning Religion," in *Religion Beyond Its Private Role in Modern Society*, ed. Wim Hofstee and A. van der Kooij (Lieden: Brill, 2014), 55-70; Philip Sutherland, "Girard and the Millennials: New Perspectives on Evangelization," *Lumen et Vita* 4, no. 1 (2014).

⁵⁴ See n. 39, above.

both continuous and discontinuous with modern notions of human communities as *imago Trinitas*. My discussion aims to interrupt approaches that reduce differences in communities (for example, modern approaches that favour harmony, based on an overemphasis on unity within God), and I do so in order not to posit “difference” in the place where unity once reigned, but to recognise—on theological grounds—the difference that the recognition of particularity makes to the constitution of human communities. In an increasingly pluralising context, this has important implications for interreligious dialogue.

Third, the present work provides a way of thinking about the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life that does not ignore the potential interruption of other faith traditions and worldviews for Christian self-understanding. It takes seriously the recognition that God can never be contained within the bounds of the Christian narrative, and that in the context in which Christian faith is lived today (a context that reflects increasing diversity), Christians might come to understand God more deeply.

Finally, the present work potentially expands the notion of sacramentality in Christian life. I argue that when Christians live in such a way that the otherness of the “other” is respected, the sacramental nature of Christian life in relation to God (as Trinity) is brought to the fore.

The Frame of the Argument

The present work unfolds in two parts. In part I, I conduct an exegesis of Lieven Boeve’s work. Beginning with chapter 2, I detail the philosophical basis of his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an *open* narrative, a recontextualisation that both preconditions and follows a *theology of interruption*. I explore his articulation of postmodern philosophy, at which he arrives with recourse to Jürgen Habermas, Wolfgang Iser, Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard, and I examine the influence of Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion on the development of his philosophical apophatics. In chapter 3, I examine the *theological* basis for Boeve’s recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an open narrative. I utilise Stephen B. Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology* to situate Boeve as a postmodern contextual theologian, and I discuss his recontextualisation of the work of Johann Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx in this regard. Of most significance for the present work are the ways in which Boeve develops Metz’s notion of interruption to become a substantial *contextual* hermeneutical category. I summarise the implications of such an approach for the postmodern interruption of modern contextual theologies. In Chapter 4, I explore the ways in which Boeve develops and articulates a theology of interruption as a *theological* hermeneutical category. In short, I explicate his contention that “God interrupts history.”⁵⁵ I again examine his use of philosophical and theological apophatics, this time considering the implications this has for his

⁵⁵ The title of one of Boeve’s most well-known books (New York/London: Continuum, 2007).

hermeneutical engagement with the Christian narrative, and I discuss some of the contextual-political implications of the recognition of God as interruptive. In Chapter 5, I engage critically three of Boeve's publications, in which he utilises a theology of interruption as a theological hermeneutical category, and I draw from this engagement the key philosophical-conceptual elements of his approach. Each case study I have chosen illustrates different aspects of a theology of interruption when engaged as a lens through which Christian doctrines, texts and themes are considered. The elements I distil form the basis of my consideration of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity through the lens of a theology of interruption in chapter 8.

In part II, I move towards a consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life *through the lens of a theology of interruption*. In chapter 6, I examine this central Christian theme in the work of two modern theologians, Karl Rahner and Jürgen Moltmann, and I consider some of the limitations of their approaches from the perspective of a postmodern critical consciousness. In chapter 7, I engage critically three postmodern approaches to the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. I explore Maarten Wisse's criticism of trinitarian approaches grounded in an ontology of participation, and his contention that a postmodern understanding of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life be considered in line with a notion of communion with God, rather than participation in God. I examine Kathryn Tanner's "constructive" trinitarian theology and Sarah Coakley's contemplative approach to the Trinity, and I consider these approaches in light of Wisse's concerns. Moreover, I discuss critically the extent to which Tanner's and Coakley's approaches offer ways of thinking about trinitarian faith and Christian life in the postmodern, pluralising and detraditionalising context.

The present work culminates in chapter 8. In this chapter, I consider the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption. I take, in turn, each philosophical-conceptual element of a theology of interruption and I explore its implications for understanding this central Christian theme. In doing so, I evaluate Boeve's approach in light of postmodern philosophical and contextual concerns, and I consider the theological and contextual potential of his theology of interruption. In the concluding chapter I discuss the methodological implications of a theology of interruption, and in noting a potential limitation, I propose a means by which this limitation might be mitigated.

Part I. Framing a Theology of Interruption: An Exegesis of Lieven Boeve's Work

Chapter 2. Towards a Recontextualisation of the Christian Narrative: Boeve's Influential Partners

It is fitting to begin where Lieven Boeve begins, with the Anselmian definition of the task of theology: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).¹ Writing in the 11th century, St. Anselm of Canterbury used this maxim to elucidate the relationship between faith and reason. As John Paul II explains in *Fides et ratio*, with this maxim Anselm “underscores the fact that the intellect must seek that which it loves: the more it loves, the more it desires to know.”² This maxim reminds us that theology is an inherently participatory task as it stems from within the horizon of faith and seeks to make sense of this faith in the light of human reason. Moreover, it is an ongoing task as the theologian uses the faculties of human reason to come to an ever-deepening understanding of faith in new and ever-changing contexts while remaining acutely aware that the truth of faith will always remain beyond his or her grasp.

As a contemporary fundamental theologian, Boeve recognises the important place of both tradition and context in the task of theology, explicitly framing his work with Anselm's maxim. In *Interrupting Tradition*, he defines theology as “the reflexive (i.e., at the conceptual level) expression of the sense of faith as it is lived in the faith community of which the theologian is a part.”³ As they reflect upon and from within faith, Boeve contends, theologians must draw from their contexts “traces, patterns, images and models in order to clarify the faith shared in [their] communit[ies].”⁴ In doing so, they necessarily place particular importance on contemporary philosophical thought, because it provides the means by which the reflexive qualification and clarification of the context can proceed.⁵ For Boeve, the theologian's reflection on faith must be “nourished by an existential praxis, rooted in a tradition, embedded in a community and performed in actual historical, cultural, sociopolitical contexts, on a scale that ranges from the particularly local to the global.”⁶ To this effect, his work promises to be a helpful partner in my consideration of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today.

In this chapter, I explore the notions of recontextualisation and critical consciousness through an engagement with Boeve's philosophical dialogue partners. Boeve defines the term “recontextualisation” as the “restructure and reformulat[ion of] the reference to the Truth according

¹ Boeve mentions this maxim explicitly in no less than 22 articles and in the first page of two of his books: Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs (Louvain/ Dudley, MA: Peeters Press, 2003), Preface, 24; and *TC*, 1.

² John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 14 September, 1998), Encyclical Letter, 42.

³ Boeve, *IT*, 24.

⁴ *TC*, 1; “Postmodernism and Negative Theology: The A/Theology of the 'Open Narrative',” *Bijdragen* 58, no. 4 (1997): 420.

⁵ “PNT,” 420.

⁶ *TC*, 1.

to the reflective patterns and models of the changed context.”⁷ It is a theological method that Boeve argues is both descriptive and normative; it allows theologians to understand the ways in which the Christian tradition has developed, and it provides a means by which the theologian can engage critically with the contemporary context in coming to articulate a “contextually plausible and theologically legitimate” understanding of the Christian narrative for today.⁸ As we will see, Boeve’s recontextualisation of the Christian narrative to reflect what he discerns to be a postmodern critical consciousness becomes an essential component in the development of his theology of interruption—his philosophical-contextual and theological approach to the task of “faith seeking understanding” today.⁹

After examining Boeve’s argument for a postmodern recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, I will discuss the influential insights Boeve draws from Richard Schaeffler as he comes to understand the relationship between religion and philosophical critical consciousness. I will then explore Boeve’s engagement with philosophers such as Wolfgang Iser, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-François Lyotard as he seeks to articulate a postmodern critical consciousness and moves towards a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an *open* narrative. While my discussion of these philosophical thinkers is necessarily brief in the present chapter, I will return to their work in chapters 4, 5 and 8 as I explicate and apply Boeve’s theology of interruption.

The Development of Tradition as Recontextualisation

In *Interrupting Tradition*, Boeve lays the foundation for his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative in postmodern terms by referring to historical precedence. He engages the work of Old Testament scholar, Jacques Vermeylen, who posits that the influence of Hellenistic culture and the various responses to this influence on the Aramaic tradition can be discerned in the younger books of the Old Testament.¹⁰ There, responses to Hellenistic culture range from condemnation to assimilation, and reflect a plurality of approaches to Jewish life and thought. With Vermeylen, Boeve argues that in the time of the evangelists, Greek philosophical concepts were used fruitfully in

⁷ “BW,” 364; *IT*, 24-32.

⁸ “Theology, Recontextualisation and Contemporary Critical Consciousness. Lessons from Richard Schaeffler for a Postmodern Theological Epistemology,” in *Théologie et Philosophie. Festschrift Emilio Brito*, ed. E. Gaziaux, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (BETL) (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 457. Quoted material, *GIH*, 58. On the development of the Christian tradition as a series of recontextualisations—the result of the dialogue between theology and philosophy—see John Paul II, *FR*, 39-43; and Boeve, *IT*, 24-32.

⁹ Throughout this work, I generally refer to *the* Christian narrative, largely because it reflects the way in which Boeve talks about the narrative tradition of Christian faith. However, in the present context, there are of course *many* narratives to the extent that the term refers to the way in which Christians understand and live their faith.

¹⁰ Boeve, *IT*, 28-9. Boeve cites J. Vermeylen, “Foi traditionnelle et culture nouvelle: un précédent biblique,” *Cultures et théologies en Europe. Jalons pour un dialogue*, Association européenne de théologie catholique, section belge francophone (Paris, 1995), 13-42.

missionary activity, enabling the early Christian community to express their faith in ways that were reflective of and comprehensible to the communities of their time. The result of this engagement is that these philosophical concepts were to become, according to Boeve, “so deeply rooted in the Christian tradition” that it is difficult to separate them from Christian faith.¹¹

Boeve argues that “theology has always stood in relation to the philosophy ... which dominate[s] the context.”¹² This argument is affirmed in John Paul II’s encyclical, *Fides et ratio*. There, John Paul II attests to the critical adoption of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought patterns in the theological writings of the Church Fathers, and he notes that these thought patterns became “Christianised” in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, Denys the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) and St Augustine.¹³ He states that Origen used Platonic philosophy to posit theology as rational discourse about God and that Augustine produced “the first great synthesis of philosophy and theology, embracing currents of thought both Greek and Latin.”¹⁴ The theology that emerged from Augustine’s synthesis, John Paul II writes, “remained for centuries the most exalted form of philosophical and theological speculation known to the West.”¹⁵ Moreover, he contends that the Church Fathers engaged a “critical consciousness” in their dialogue with philosophy: it is “minimalizing and mistaken to restrict their work simply to the transposition of the truths of faith into philosophical categories,” he writes, as the “recognition of the points of convergence did not blind them to the points of divergence.”¹⁶ As we will see, this final point, in particular, provides support for Boeve’s conception of recontextualisation, but just as important for Boeve is the recognition of the interruptive nature of the *religious* critical consciousness on the philosophy of the day.

As the (philosophical) context shifted through the 12th and 13th centuries, the truths to which the early Church Fathers’ theological statements referred lost their familiarity and plausibility, and theology needed new—more contemporary—dialogue partners.¹⁷ Aristotelian thought patterns and questions had pushed aside Platonic approaches. New understandings about the human person arose, and a new focus on dialectics and conceptual analysis led to new questions being brought to the task of theology. In light of this shift, St. Thomas Aquinas undertook a “recontextualisation” of theology in dialogue with these Aristotelian patterns of thought, as well as with what John Paul II

¹¹ *IT*, 27-8.

¹² *IT*, 25.

¹³ John Paul II, *FR*, 40.

¹⁴ *FR*, 39, 40.

¹⁵ *FR*, 40.

¹⁶ *FR*, 41.

¹⁷ Boeve’s explanation of this shift is useful here: “Changes in the context disturb a statement’s mode of referring; the use and meaning of words and sentences shift; what was expressed in ‘statement a’ from the perspective of the former context, can no longer be expressed in the same ‘statement a’ from the perspective of the new, changed context. A new context demands new ways to express the Christian Truth, new ways to name God.” Boeve, “BW,” 364.

refers to as “the Arab and Jewish thought of his time.”¹⁸ According to John Paul II, with Aquinas’ engagement with Aristotelian thought, he gave “pride of place to the harmony which exists between faith and reason,” and with his recognition of the contextual (philosophical) critical consciousness, he developed a deeper and more contextually plausible understanding of faith for the shifting context.¹⁹ In Boeve’s discussion of Thomas’ dialogue with the philosophical thought patterns of the 13th century, he argues that such dialogue did not amount to a mere assimilation of the philosophical thought of the time into theology, but to a “new synthesis” that “differed fundamentally from [theology’s] former incarnation.”²⁰

Boeve explains that with each contextual shift, the Christian tradition undergoes “a process of development.”²¹ Just as this is true for developments that took place up to the time of Thomas, Boeve argues that it is also true for modernity (since the 16th century but especially through the time of the Enlightenment). The work of Friedrich Schleiermacher provides a helpful example in this regard. Schleiermacher’s use of Kantian philosophy, Romanticism and philosophical hermeneutics led him to develop ideas on religious experience that Boeve notes “might very well be called the specific hallmark of ‘modern’ theology.”²² As we will see later, this “hallmark” of modern theology could be conceived as the consideration of the relationship between religious experience, tradition and context. In his essay on Schleiermacher’s seminal work, *On Religion*, Joris Geldhof notes Schleiermacher’s explicit recognition of the contextual nature of religious experience, where it is considered not as an isolated, subjective phenomenon, but “brought into relation with a situation, a community and objective realities.”²³ With Schleiermacher’s recognition that religious experience stands in relation to the past and to the future and shapes reflexively our understanding of the past, modern theologians came to discuss more explicitly the importance of a recognition of religious experience (with its relation to context both past and present) on the development of the tradition.²⁴

¹⁸ John Paul II, *FR*, 43.

¹⁹ *FR*, 43.

²⁰ Boeve, *IT*, 32, 31; 28-32.

²¹ *IT*, 34.

²² Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, “Introduction,” in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricœur*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 3. For a more extensive discussion on Schleiermacher’s contribution to philosophical hermeneutics, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 44-50.

²³ Joris Geldhof, “On the Relative Unimportance of Religious Experience in the Early Schleiermacher,” in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricœur*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 110-111, at 111. Geldhof cites Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter, trans. Richard Crouter, 2nd ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁴ As Schleiermacher writes on religious experience, “this moment is simultaneously a definite point in [a person’s] life, a link in the series of spiritual activities that are wholly characteristic for him [or her], an occurrence that, like any other, stands in a particular relationship with a before, a now, and an afterward.” *On Religion*, 106.

In *Interrupting tradition*, Boeve also notes a number of other developments that take place within the Christian tradition as a result of its dialogue with modernity: the rise of hermeneutics in the study of texts and traditions, the questioning of univocal conceptions of tradition, the recognition of plurality within the tradition itself, and the recognition that the interpreting subject is contextually bound and our understanding of tradition contextually determined.²⁵ He argues that in “modern” approaches to theology, dialogue with culture—or more specifically, with the philosophical critical consciousness of culture—“became a methodological demand.”²⁶ He cites the works of Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz as exemplars in this regard; Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutics of experience was heavily influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Metz drew from neo-Marxist critical theory and Habermas’ model of communicative praxis in his political theology.²⁷ The results of such work led to new understandings of sacramental experience and Christian praxis, respectively, and as we will see in chapter 3, both Schillebeeckx and Metz in their own ways heavily influenced Boeve’s work.

Boeve argues that dialogue between theology and the philosophical critical consciousness of modernity no longer functions to elucidate the faith for Christians today. He notes that modernity, and thus modern theology, has come under “virulent criticism.”²⁸ The processes of globalisation, secularisation, and the rise of the consumer market have led to an increasing detraditionalisation, pluralisation and individualisation within the religious landscape.²⁹ The attempt to live harmoniously in such a climate has led to the sublation of differences and the assertion of hegemonic narratives that in many cases aimed to legitimise oppression. In post-modernity a heightened sensibility for the value of difference in the development of individual and communal identity has led to an allergy to any discourse that subsumes or reduces the religious or cultural other into a hegemonic narrative, and to a vehement criticism of narratives that make universal claims while excluding or ignoring differences that interrupt such claims.³⁰ A new critical consciousness has taken root, which is based on the recognition of alterity and the recognition, in the words of Jean-François Lyotard, that “there is something unrepresentable” in our discourses.³¹ This recognition has caused a rupture between the

²⁵ Boeve, *IT*, 33-35.

²⁶ “BW,” 362.

²⁷ “BW,” 366. For an extended discussion of Schillebeeckx’s dialogue with Gadamer, see Boeve, “Systematic Theology, Truth and History: Recontextualisation,” in *Orthodoxy, Process and Product*, ed. Mathijs Lamberigts, Lieven Boeve, and Terrence Merrigan, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* (Leuven; Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2009), 29-32.

²⁸ “BW,” 362.

²⁹ See Ch. 1 for a more extensive discussion of these terms.

³⁰ For a more extensive discussion on the postmodern interruption of modern theology, see Ch. 6.

³¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, trans. Don Barry, et al. (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992), 15. “The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something

context and the faith tradition, particularly as the tradition has moved to align itself with modernity since the mid-late 20th century.³²

With a new shift in context comes a new call for recontextualisation. The understanding of tradition development that Boeve espouses does not refer to a “cumulative” development (each new context adding more and better insights) but to a development that recognises both continuity and discontinuity. The following passage illustrates Boeve’s point:

Once a believing community has cast the dynamic relationship between tradition and context in a new form, it continues to narrate the Christian narrative which, paradoxically enough, is to be considered both the same as before and no longer the same. Identity and rupture go hand in hand at this juncture. On the one hand, the community remains faithful to its original inspiration and continues with the same narrative precisely by giving new expression to the same inspiration in a changed context. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the same community to live their faith within the parameters of the older form of the tradition, even although (sic) many elements thereof—images, symbols, rites, narratives, terminology, concepts—have been taken up in its new expression and in spite of the fact that the older form of the tradition continues to be maintained by some members of the community.³³

As this passage illustrates, a recontextualised theology must hold in tension both the continuity and discontinuity of the tradition; it must “continue[-] the theology of the former context, but at the same time become[-] radically other.”³⁴ Boeve contends that recontextualisation is not simply a re-packaging of theology so that it is more palatable, understandable or accessible to the contemporary community (this would aim at continuity only, and risks relativisation—a criticism directed at some of the correlation theologies of modernity, for example). Instead, it demands a re-thinking of the theological tradition so that it takes into account the knowledge gained over time while at the same time recognising and being interrupted by a new philosophical critical consciousness.³⁵

Recontextualisation brings together faith and context in such a way that each is renewed. It is essentially a hermeneutical task and, as we have seen, one that relies methodologically on the dialogue between theology and philosophy.³⁶

unpresentable ... [I]t is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable.” I take up this notion later in the present chapter, when I consider Lyotard’s *le différend*.

³² As we will see later, Lyotard contends that the Christian narrative, especially in its 19th and 20th century forms, is a master narrative of love: “... the grand narratives that attempt to organize this mass of events: the Christian narrative of the redemption of original sin through love ... [wherein] givens arising from events are situated in the course of a history whose end, even if it remains beyond reach, is called universal freedom, the fulfillment of all humanity.” *PE*, 25.

³³ Boeve, *IT*, 34.

³⁴ “BW,” 364.

³⁵ On Boeve’s dialogue with correlation theology and its role in the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, see *GIH*, chap. 2.

³⁶ “Method in Postmodern Theology: A Case Study,” in *The Presence of Transcendence: Thinking 'Sacrament' in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Lieven Boeve and John C. Ries, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 24.

In the next section, we will further explore the relationship between a religious critical consciousness and a philosophical critical consciousness, and the ways in which each can be employed in the process of recontextualisation.

Philosophical Critical Consciousness and Religious Critical Consciousness: Richard Schaeffler

In an interview conducted by Gregory Hoskins in 2006, Boeve notes that it was German philosopher of religion, Richard Schaeffler, who brought to his attention the “intrinsic link between the critical consciousness of religion (therefore, of Christian theology as a reflection on Christian faith) and the contemporary *philosophical* critical consciousness.”³⁷ While Boeve explicitly discusses Schaeffler’s contribution to his work in only one of his publications, the lessons he drew from him arguably provided the means by which Boeve came to understand the relationship between religion and the philosophical critical consciousness of the context in which religion functions.³⁸ It also enabled Boeve to recognise the mutual and reflexive value of dialogue between theology and philosophy for the recontextualisation of the critical consciousness that belongs to each discipline. In his 2007 article on Schaeffler, Boeve engages the 1973 work, *Religion und kritisches Bewußtsein*, and argues that Schaeffler achieves “a theological legitimisation for recontextualisation as a theological method,” providing the insights that could allow the notion of recontextualisation to function both as a descriptive and a normative category for theology.³⁹

According to Boeve, Schaeffler defines the notion of critical consciousness as “the consciousness of the ambiguity of the phenomena... [and] the ability to evaluate these phenomena according to specific criteria that are to be further determined.”⁴⁰ For example, as the critical consciousness of a community shapes and (reflexively) is shaped by the context, it takes on different—“contextually appropriate”—forms.⁴¹ In this way, it is both the product of an ongoing development within the community and the means by which such development takes place. Schaeffler argues that in the history of the philosophical tradition, critical consciousness and context are inextricably linked. Shifts in context necessarily cause the self-criticism of philosophy, leading to a crisis (or “rupture”) when theory and context no longer align.⁴² Thinking patterns, ideas and

³⁷ Gregory Hoskins, “An Interview with Lieven Boeve: ‘Recontextualizing the Christian Narrative in a Postmodern Context’,” *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 3, no. 2 (2006): 31.

³⁸ See Boeve, “TRCCC.” While this article is the only in-depth discussion of Schaeffler’s work published by Boeve, he does cite Schaeffler briefly in a number of his publications, going back to as early as 2000. Of Schaeffler’s 14 published books, it is only his 1973 work that Boeve mentions explicitly: Richard Schaeffler, *Religion und kritisches Bewußtsein* [Religion and Critical Consciousness] (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1973).

³⁹ Boeve, “TRCCC,” 459.

⁴⁰ “TRCCC,” 461. Boeve cites Schaeffler, *Religion*, 38ff.

⁴¹ Boeve, “TRCCC,” 460, 461.

⁴² See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 45-82; Boeve, “TRCCC,” 458.

categories of philosophical discourse are critiqued in line with new knowledge about the context, and a paradigm shift ensues, which in turn becomes open to criticism.⁴³

Boeve notes that Schaeffler understands religious critical consciousness to be marked characteristically by the inherent tension between revelation and concealment; the consciousness that knowledge of God as God becomes known in phenomena but at the same time the phenomena, as such, are not to be identified with God.⁴⁴ This leads to the recognition that religious language is itself a phenomenon, always “provisional and inadequate” and reliant upon an ongoing hermeneutical process.⁴⁵ Religious critical consciousness recognises that in coming to understand phenomena in the world (the context), religions necessarily interpret phenomena through a religious lens. The insights gained from such an interpretation lead to new understandings about God and God’s relationship with the world, and these understandings are brought back into the hermeneutical process as new questions inevitably arise. In this process, new understandings must remain open to criticism, as the nature of religious critical consciousness is that it must be “critical of [both] the world and itself.”⁴⁶ As Boeve explains, Schaeffler argues that religious critical consciousness “lives from the difference between the holy and the appearing of the holy, but keeps this fundamental difference open.”⁴⁷ When religious language (which reflects this critical consciousness) forgets its inadequacy as witness to God, it closes the discourse and leaves itself vulnerable to rupture.

Schaeffler argues that philosophical critical consciousness originated in *religious* critical consciousness, but became distinct when early philosophers, Xenophanes and Heraclitus (c.6th century BC), criticised Greek mythological and cultic religions for their tendencies towards anthropomorphism, and for features they deemed to be inauthentic and even immoral.⁴⁸ Xenophanes and Heraclitus contended that mythological and cultic religion had begun to serve human purposes and that such a criticism could only be made by means of an observer’s perspective.⁴⁹ In its myths and narratives, the religions of ancient times had forgotten to hold the

⁴³ Schaeffler, *Religion*, 83-93; Boeve, “TRCCC,” 456.

⁴⁴ In Boeve’s words, “There is no truth without phenomena; truth is only accessible through phenomena, but phenomena can never be identified with the truth as such.” “TRCCC,” 461, 462.

⁴⁵ “TRCCC,” 461. See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 154-160.

⁴⁶ Boeve, “TRCCC,” 463. See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 207-10.

⁴⁷ Boeve, “TRCCC,” 463. Schaeffler uses *Das Heilige*, here, to refer to the transcendent. While *Das Heilige* is often translated as ‘sacred,’ there is an important difference between the two English terms. Horner’s clarification is helpful in this regard. She writes, “[w]hatever else can be called sacred, it is used only ‘rarely of a deity’. God is not sacred, but instead holy. Holy is used, we are told, ‘of things: pertaining to God or the Divine Persons; having their origin or sanction from God, or partaking of a Divine quality or character.’ The sacred refers to what we dedicate to God; the holy is of God, and as such reflects the purity of the transcendent.” Robyn Horner, “À Saint Jacques,” in *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring ‘The Holy’ in Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. Colby Dickinson (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 97, citing the OED.

⁴⁸ Schaeffler, *Religion*, 363-87; Boeve, “TRCCC,” 463-4.

⁴⁹ Boeve’s explanation is helpful here: “Whereas a religious interpretation of [the differences between humans and their gods] would distinguish between these representations as phenomena and the ‘holy’ to which they

tension between revelation and concealment: they had failed to live up to their own particularly religious critical consciousness. As a result of this criticism, a “rupture” ensued, philosophical critical consciousness was born, and religion became its first (and primary) object of criticism.⁵⁰

This rupture between religious critical consciousness and philosophical critical consciousness proved to be mutually beneficial. In dialogue with Schaeffler, Boeve explains that religious critical consciousness now reflected an awareness that religion existed in a permanent state of “crisis,” which stemmed from within its own structure.⁵¹ The structure of religion, he writes, is such that “both the consciousness of the inadequacy of religious speech and the truth of it spring from the same source.”⁵² This recognition led to an explicit understanding of the paradoxical nature of faith, an insight that later contributed to the development of theological hermeneutics.⁵³ Moreover, the recognition of the “tension between the truth and the phenomena,” as it is found in religious critical consciousness, assisted philosophical critical consciousness to move (as Boeve suggests) between the binaries of “absolutist claims and general scepticism” and to develop its own hermeneutical character.⁵⁴

In *Religion und kritisches Bewußtsein*, Schaeffler outlines four distinct phases in the development of philosophical critical consciousness—a development that has gained momentum in modernity—and he explains that each phase contributes a particular characteristic.⁵⁵ From this

refer, the philosophical interpretation starts when, from an extra-religious observer’s position, it is concluded that all religious representations are made by human beings. From this point on, religion is no longer viewed as an autonomous given, to which one belongs and comes from and within which one speaks. From an observer’s perspective, on the contrary, religion is rather conceived of as functional to human beings.” (“TRCCC,” 464). In a later text, Schaeffler includes Aristophanes (c.460-c.380 BCE) in this list, noting that “Aristophanes’ ridicule of mythological explanations of events in the star-studded heavens, or in the atmosphere, attests a consciousness and conviction on the part of persons who had learned to investigate, interpret, and render intelligible these occurrences in scientific fashion.” Richard Schaeffler, *Reason and the Question of God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Robert R. Barr and Marlies Parent (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 1.

⁵⁰ See *Religion*, 369-71. Schaeffler argues that this rupture is well-illustrated in Plato’s *Politeia*: “Wenn Platon von den „Mythenmachern“ spricht, denen er Gesetze geben will (*Politeia* 377 b). Die religiöse Verkündigung wird hier nicht länger auf eine Selbstdarstellung der Gottheit zurückgeführt, sondern auf menschliche Erfindung. ... Wenn aber der Seher und Prophet zum „Poeten“ (Macher) geworden ist, dann ist der Mythos zur Fiktion (*fabula ficta*) geworden.” [When Plato speaks of the ‘myth-makers’ to whom he wants to give laws. The religious proclamation is no longer attributed to a self-representation of the deity, but to human invention. ... When the seer and prophet become ‘poets’ (‘makers’), then the myth has become fiction.] (*Religion*, 367, my translation). In *Reason*, Schaeffler explains this further, noting that “philosophy becomes the interpreter of religious tradition, and at the same time legislator for those ‘mythmakers’ who can enjoin upon the philosopher the task of producing new religious discourse in the light of the textbook of philosophical insight.” *Reason*, 7. See also Boeve, “TRCCC,” 463, 464.

⁵¹ “TRCCC,” 463, 473-4.

⁵² “TRCCC,” 463.

⁵³ “TRCCC,” 473-4. In the early Church, the relationship between philosophical critical consciousness and religious critical consciousness became particularly important for the evangelists, who, when seeking to pen the religious self-understanding of their respective communities, sought to reconcile religious belief with the philosophical (Platonic, Hellenistic) criticism of religion. See, “TRCCC,” 465.

⁵⁴ “TRCCC,” 467, 473. See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 265-308.

⁵⁵ See Boeve, “TRCCC,” 465-73; Schaeffler, *Religion*, 38-91.

discussion, Boeve extracts four lessons from 'modern' philosophical critical consciousness for its religious counterpart and he outlines a way forward for a collaboration between philosophical and religious critical consciousnesses in the postmodern context.

According to Boeve, the first phase in the development of critical consciousness articulated by Schaeffler refers to a growing awareness of the ambiguity of phenomena and, thus, an awareness of the difficulties that arise when world and God are conflated. Early philosophers recognised the need to "hold[-] open the tension between the truth and the phenomena" in the institutions of religion and law, Boeve explains.⁵⁶ Much later, in the period of the Enlightenment, institutions (particularly religious institutions) became the object of criticism because they had again forgotten this tension in their own critical consciousnesses. In this phase, institutions (such as religion and law) had come to control the consciousness of the people. Their claims to absolute knowledge of truth had led to unquestioned "conformity and obedience."⁵⁷ In this climate, philosophical critical consciousness came to reflect an understanding of the tensive and dialectical relationship between historical circumstances and rationality. Boeve notes that in this climate of obedience, religious and legal institutions were criticised for "too easily tak[ing] themselves to be the criteria of criticism and thereby consider[ing] themselves as exempt from this same criticism."⁵⁸ Philosophical critical consciousness came to reflect an awareness that rationality is always situated in historical circumstances and must be critiqued and qualified in light of the historical development of reason itself. In essence, according to Boeve's reading of Schaeffler, in this phase philosophical critical consciousness took on a *hermeneutical* character "making *operative* the tension between truth and phenomena."⁵⁹

Through the 19th century, the philosophical recognition that a dialectical relationship exists between reason and historical conditions leads to the criticism of reason itself. Boeve explains that as a result of the previous phase in the development of critical consciousness, reason had become exalted as the path to knowledge, independent of experience.⁶⁰ In this light, philosophical critical consciousness came to reflect an awareness of the reciprocity between experience and rationality, and an awareness that reason itself develops as a result of its criticism in history. As Boeve explains, Schaeffler contends that in this phase, philosophical critical consciousness took on the understanding that "experience leads to thinking, and thinking sets the conditions for (new) experiences."⁶¹ In

⁵⁶ Boeve, "TRCCC," 467.

⁵⁷ "TRCCC," 468.

⁵⁸ "TRCCC," 467-68.

⁵⁹ "TRCCC," 468, 473, my emphasis.

⁶⁰ "TRCCC," 466 (table). Boeve notes, "The all-knowing reason makes historical experience superfluous. When the historical conditions are purified, reason begins its reign. Religion, then, becomes the religion of reason, and the state becomes the state of reason. The historical-contingent is replaced by the eternal-rational" (469).

⁶¹ "TRCCC," 469. Boeve cites Schaeffler: "*Man muß Erfahrung machen, um 'zur Vernunft zu kommen'; aber man muß Vernunft gebrauchen, um Erfahrungen zu machen.*" [One must experience in order 'to come to his senses'; but one must use reason to make experiences.] Schaeffler, *Religion*, 60, my translation.

addition—and as a result—philosophical critical consciousness enabled the critique of tendencies towards the polarisation of dogmatism and scepticism in “political-practical reason,” and recognised that the dialectical relationship between the historical and the rational necessarily leads to the use of dialectics to overcome oppositional binaries.⁶² In other words, in the philosophical critical consciousness of the 19th century, reason comes to be understood as developing through a process of synthesis, moving between thesis and antithesis in order to overcome oppositions.⁶³ Philosophical critical consciousness took on a *dialectical* character during the second phase in its development, and it came to reflect the recognition that it is conditioned by its criticism of history.⁶⁴

In the 20th century, ‘modern’ rationality reached a crisis with the rise of idealism, which Schaeffler contends was manifest in both the “privileg[ing] of the ruling class” and the revolutionising of social relationships in support of the class struggle.⁶⁵ The effort to synthesise thesis and antithesis had led to opposing ideologies and, thus, to the (binary) responses of regression versus progress.⁶⁶ Confronted with this crisis, philosophical critical consciousness became subject to its own criticism and came to reflect the recognition of its naiveté in each of the previous stages of development. Boeve explains that this led to a concomitant critique of its own notions that “reason [could be] the sole ruler, that there is a continuous progression in history, and that eras in the historical process can be assessed univocally.”⁶⁷ In each of the previous phases, philosophical critical consciousness had forgotten the “fundamental openness” necessitated in its discourse by the recognition of historicity.⁶⁸ In essence, it now reflected the recognition that it, too, is essentially *historical*; as Boeve explains, philosophy was reminded “of its [own] historical character, embedded as it is in a continuous interplay between experience and thinking.”⁶⁹

In each phase of the development of philosophical critical consciousness, the subject of one phase becomes the object of the next. Boeve suggests that this process leads in each case to the “radicalisation” of the former phase.⁷⁰ He writes, “this radicalisation would seem to be the common

⁶² Boeve, “TRCCC,” 470. On this point, Boeve critiques Kant, noting. “Although Kant succeeded on the level of the theoretical and individual-practical reason, he failed as concerns the political-practical reason. On that field, the opposition between dogmatism and scepticism still stands. Protagonists either affirm their own position as the only rational one and discredit the others as ideologies; or just about every position is judged to be ideology. It is either despotism or anarchy.”

⁶³ “TRCCC,” 470.

⁶⁴ “TRCCC,” 470, 473.

⁶⁵ “TRCCC,” 471. Boeve cites Schaeffler, *Religion*, 74-5.

⁶⁶ Boeve, “TRCCC,” 471. This binary is well-evidenced in theology, too, and can be seen particularly in the opposing sides of the reception of Vatican II.

⁶⁷ “TRCCC,” 472.

⁶⁸ “TRCCC,” 472.

⁶⁹ “TRCCC,” 473.

⁷⁰ “TRCCC,” 473. Boeve sets out the subject-object relationship in this way: In phase 1, the subject of criticism is religion, which, in phase 2, becomes the object. In phase 2, the subject is “supra-historical reason,” which, in turn becomes the object in phase 3. In phase 3, “theory of history” is the subject of criticism, which becomes the object in phase 4. Each time, the criticism of the subject leads to new “fundamental experiences” which provide new insights and criteria for criticism in the new context. See table, “TRCCC,” 466-67.

thread throughout these shifts from subject to object. Each time, it concerns a radicalisation of the historicity of the critical instance—finally leading philosophical critical consciousness into a crisis, because it inevitably found its former criterion of criticism in its own instance.”⁷¹ Just as philosophy’s criticism of religion in ancient times caused a rupture when religion failed to live up to its own critical consciousness, philosophical critical consciousness also faced a crisis when it became the subject of its own criticism. Schaeffler argues that while the crisis faced by philosophical critical consciousness is a direct result of its historical development—unlike that of religion, whose crisis stems from its very structure—philosophical critical consciousness can take important inspiration from its religious counterpart. Faced with its “permanent crisis,” religious critical consciousness is compelled to evolve continuously, always seeking to hold in tension the paradox of faith and phenomena. In the same way, not only is philosophical critical consciousness called to critique phenomena in the world, but in doing so it must also critique itself. It must remember its fundamental openness towards *both* the world and itself, and only in this way will the critical consciousness of philosophy continue to develop.⁷² In the final phase in the development of a ‘modern’ critical consciousness, philosophy’s necessarily *reflexive* engagement with the “crisis of rationality” is brought to the fore.⁷³

While philosophy and theology have developed as autonomous disciplines, the dialogue between them at various stages throughout history has proven to be mutually beneficial. These benefits have extended beyond the merely academic—beyond the borrowing of language patterns, categories of discourse and abstract concepts—to the very heart of the discourse within each discipline. Indeed, the critical consciousness that emerged for philosophy as a result of each contextual shift in history reflects not only the historical shift in context that has taken place, but also the self-criticism prompted by such shifts. Philosophical critical consciousness has emerged as both critical of and reflective of the context. With each of these contextual shifts, the newly contextual (or “recontextualised”) philosophical critical consciousness has turned its criticism to religion, and Boeve argues that this has proved fruitful for theology: “The major merit of philosophical criticism of religion,” he says, “consists in the fact that it presses religion to rediscover its own nature and to reactualise its critical consciousness.”⁷⁴

In dialogue with philosophical critical consciousness, religion is reminded that it, too, has an irreducibly *hermeneutical, historical and dialectical* character, tasked with an ongoing and *reflexive* engagement with its contemporary context.⁷⁵ Understood as irreducibly hermeneutical, religious critical consciousness stems from the understanding that God reveals Godself in history, but cannot

⁷¹ “TRCCC,” 473.

⁷² “TRCCC,” 474-75.

⁷³ “TRCCC,” 481.

⁷⁴ “TRCCC,” 475.

⁷⁵ “TRCCC,” 481.

be identified with history itself.⁷⁶ As we will see in chapter 4, the religious critical consciousness reflects the recognition that God is both in history and radically *other than* history. Thus, a religious critical consciousness holds the tension between the absolutisation of history as the condition of possibility for God's self-revelation, and the relativisation of history because of its all-too-human character.⁷⁷ Boeve contends that in recognising its irreducibly "dialectical and historical character," religious critical consciousness reflects the recognition that "each theophany is in principle temporary; each religious discourse or act is fundamentally historical."⁷⁸ Religion can therefore "never foreclose its openness to newness, to renewal," Boeve writes, as "even to its deepest self, religion is never independent from history and what happens in it."⁷⁹

In light of this discussion, Boeve proposes that the task of religion "is both to transmit what it received and to be open to what comes from the holy, even when this implies changing its old shape."⁸⁰ He argues that when confronted with criticism, the Christian tradition has historically tended to retreat: "ced[ing] the criticised untenable positions to withdraw to positions it considers [to be] essential."⁸¹ Such a reaction seeks the continuity of the tradition over and against the context, he suggests, but results in the tradition forgetting the "permanent crisis" or paradox it faces by means of its structure as a religious institution—that "both the consciousness of the inadequacy of religious speech and the truth of it spring from the same source."⁸² In short, this reaction reflects the abandonment of the hermeneutical, historical and dialectical features of the religious critical consciousness.⁸³ Writing in late-modernity, Schaeffler contends that religion should take seriously the philosophical criticism of its critical consciousness because, as Boeve explains, this "leads religion to a renewed hermeneutical-critical self-understanding."⁸⁴ As historical dialogue partners, the critical consciousnesses of religion and philosophy are indissolubly linked. Each of them in dialogue with the other has taken "contextually appropriate forms" and each of them has shed light for the other on the challenges (or crisis) it has faced when its ideas and patterns of thought have no longer aligned with the context.⁸⁵ Historically, while the distinction between each discipline (and thus, its critical consciousness) has been maintained in such dialogue, each has also assisted the other to critique and develop further its self-understanding. Such critique has necessitated a response in light of the

⁷⁶ "TRCCC," 474.

⁷⁷ "TRCCC," 474.

⁷⁸ "TRCCC," 474. Boeve cites Schaeffler, *Religion*, 296.

⁷⁹ Boeve, "TRCCC," 475. Boeve cites Schaeffler, *Religion*, 296.

⁸⁰ "In such cases the old shape of religion is transmitted in the event of opening itself to what is revealed as new." Boeve, "TRCCC," 475.

⁸¹ "TRCCC," 475.

⁸² "TRCCC," 463.

⁸³ "TRCCC," 475.

⁸⁴ "TRCCC," 475. See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 352-62.

⁸⁵ Boeve, "TRCCC," 461.

renewed (recontextualised) critical consciousness that has emerged.⁸⁶ In the postmodern context, Boeve posits that Schaeffler's call for the philosophical criticism of religion to be taken seriously continues to sound; religious (Christian) critical consciousness is called to draw again on the lessons of philosophy and, more particularly, on the criticism of religion that arises from a *postmodern* philosophical critical consciousness in order to come to a more accessible and plausible articulation of the Christian narrative today.

Articulating a Postmodern Philosophical Critical Consciousness

Reflecting on his dialogue with Schaeffler, Boeve argues that the philosophical critical consciousness of postmodernity necessarily interrupts the religious critical consciousness of modernity and propels its recontextualisation. He writes, "once a proper philosophical critical consciousness has taken shape, religion should deal with it in order to understand itself correctly and to determine anew its own (religious) critical consciousness."⁸⁷ In his 1997 article, "Critical Consciousness and the Postmodern Condition," he evaluates and compares the work of Jürgen Habermas with postmodern philosophers Richard Rorty, Wolfgang Iser and, more extensively, Jean-François Lyotard.⁸⁸ In doing so, he aims to articulate the insights and concerns of postmodern philosophy and to consider its implications for the criticism and subsequent recontextualisation of the modern religious critical consciousness as it is manifest in the Christian tradition. Ultimately, he seeks to articulate an approach to theology that "benefits from the postmodern critical consciousness," and yet does not become subject to the criticisms directed at radical postmodernism, namely, that it can lead to "indifferentism," the "elitist exaltation of heterogeneity" and "relativism."⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Schaeffler himself writes: "*Das zwei Formen des kritischen Bewußtseins aneinander nehmen, weil sie geeignet erscheinen, sich angesichts je spezifischer Gefahren des Selbstmißverständnisses gegenseitig an ihre spezifischen Aufgaben zu erinnern. In solcher Geneseitigkeit des kritischen Verhältnisses werden die religiöse und die philosophische Gestalt des kritischen Bewußtsein ... gemeinsame gegenwärtige Krisis auf ihre je besondere Weise zu verstehen und zu bestehen.*" [The two forms of critical consciousness taken together remind each other of their specific tasks, given the specific dangers of self-misunderstanding. In a critical relationship, the religious and philosophical forms of critical consciousness ... mutually enable one another to understand their common present crisis in their own particular way]. Schaeffler, *Religion*, 425, my translation.

⁸⁷ Boeve, "TRCCC," 461.

⁸⁸ Boeve surveys the work of these thinkers in four key articles: see "Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition: New Opportunities for Theology?" *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997): 449-468, republished in 2003 in *Roczniki Teologiczne* 50, no. 2 (2003): 81-99, with minor differences in the text; "The End of Conversation in Theology. Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion," in *Theology and Conversation. Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. J. Haers and P. De Mey, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Peeters: Peeters, 2003); "The Particularity of Religious Truth Claims: How to Deal with It in a So-called Postmodern Context," in *Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues for a Pluralist Age*, ed. C. Helmer and K. De Troyer, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven: Peeters, 2003); and "PNT." He later elaborates the work of Lyotard more extensively in *Lyotard and Theology: Beyond the Christian Master Narrative of Love*, Philosophy and Theology Series (London, UK: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014). Note: I refer to the 1997 publication of CCPC only.

⁸⁹ Boeve contends that these criticisms are directed at the work of Iser, Lyotard and Rorty respectively. "CCPC," 461.

As I noted above, in the discussion of Schaeffler's work, the crisis of modernity is such that theory and context no longer align; the postmodern interruption of modernity as an attempt to redress this misalignment can indeed offer insights for the contemporary religious critical consciousness. While Habermas, Welsch, Rorty and Lyotard consider the contemporary context quite differently, each thinker offers something towards Boeve's task of recontextualisation: Habermas affirms the criticism of context but claims universal rationality, Welsch affirms "radical plurality," Rorty affirms "radical particularity," and Lyotard, "radical heterogeneity."⁹⁰ As Kevin Hart writes, "to be postmodern, you must mark a tension, if not a rupture, between the modern and your own thought."⁹¹ To this effect, while Boeve draws valuable insights from the work of Welsch, Rorty and Lyotard, he distances himself from Habermas, noting that the critical consciousness for which Habermas argues is closer to that of modernity than postmodernity.⁹²

Habermas

Habermas considers the modern project to be incomplete. He defines the modern project as the efforts of the Enlightenment philosophers "to utilize [the] accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life."⁹³ He argues that the goal of modernity was to further the "understanding of the world and of the self, ... promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings" through the arts and sciences.⁹⁴ The notions of individual and intellectual autonomy in the modern critical consciousness were juxtaposed with concerns for social justice and emancipation and, for Habermas, these came to be wrongly identified with modern *development*, which in turn was defined by the rise of power, production and capitalism in the 20th century.⁹⁵ The criticism directed at the modern project, Habermas contends, is not a criticism of the project as such, but of the institutionalisation and commodification of the material aspects of culture—art, morality and science—and the breaking away of these systems of rationality from the "hermeneutics of everyday communication."⁹⁶ As Boeve explains, Habermas contends that the unfinished project of modernity—the "rationalization of the life-world"—will only be realised through a "differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism."⁹⁷ He argues that such a task will only be achieved

⁹⁰ "CCPC," 450, 51, 54, 52.

⁹¹ Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 165.

⁹² Boeve, "CCPC," 450.

⁹³ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity Versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 22, Special Issue (1981): 9.

⁹⁴ "Modernity," 9.

⁹⁵ "Modernity," 13. See also Boeve, "CCPC," 456-59; Hart, *Postmodernism*, 165.

⁹⁶ Habermas, "Modernity," 8-9, 9.

⁹⁷ Boeve, "CCPC," 457; Habermas, "Modernity," 13. See also *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 3rd ed., 2 vols., vol. 2, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985), esp. Chap VI.

through the discovery, according to Boeve, of “universal validity claims linguistically articulated in concrete dialogue ... that aim at intersubjective recognition.”⁹⁸

In his two-volume work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas proposes a model of communicative action to re-orient the modern project.⁹⁹ In this model, each communication partner has a responsibility to accede to the other in conversation, seeking moments of solidarity, harmony and universality while striving for an autonomy that consists in “reflective self-understanding” and that is anchored in “communicative rationality.”¹⁰⁰ Habermas’ approach rests on what he refers to as “three structural components of speech acts: the propositional, the illocutionary, and the expressive.”¹⁰¹ He argues that when communicative acts that refer to cognition, obligation and expression (notions he borrows from behavioural science) take the form of grammatical speech, “all components of the interaction are restructured” and the communication “take[s] on new functions”: “reaching understanding[,] ... coordinating action and socializing actors.”¹⁰² Respectively, these functions lead to “the transmission of culturally stored knowledge” and the reproduction of “cultural tradition,” the “fulfillment of norms appropriate to a given context,” as well as “social integration,” and “the construction of internal controls on behavior, ... the formation of personality structures.”¹⁰³ Boeve explains that Habermas’ model relies on “intersubjective interaction,” which aims at consensus and “mutual understanding” by aligning the notion of rationality with “the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic truth claims” that emerge.¹⁰⁴ On this point, Habermas writes, “Because communicative action demands an orientation to validity claims, it points from the start to the possibility that participants will distinguish more or less sharply between having an influence *upon* one another and reaching an understanding *with* one another.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, it demands a reflective form of action on the part of each communication partner, a form of action that Habermas refers to as “the reflective relation to self.”¹⁰⁶ This reflective component of communicative

⁹⁸ Boeve, “ECT,” 191.

⁹⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols., vol. 1, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984); *Lifeworld*, 2, esp. Chap 5; also *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* [Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln], trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Oxford, UK: Polity, 1990).

¹⁰⁰ *Lifeworld*, 2, 84, 40.

¹⁰¹ *Lifeworld*, 2, 62. He draws from the work of J.L. Austin, here, to discuss the propositional and illocutionary components of speech. See *Lifeworld*, 2, 67-8. As we will see in Ch. 5 (see esp. n. 81) Austin’s notion of a performative sentence becomes important for the consideration of the philosophical-conceptual approaches of a theology of interruption.

¹⁰² *Lifeworld*, 2, 63.

¹⁰³ *Lifeworld*, 2, 63, emphasis original. He continues, “In the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld, speech acts can *simultaneously* take on the functions of cultural transmission, social integration, and the socialization of individuals only if the propositional, illocutionary, and expressive components are integrated into a *grammatical unity* in each and every speech act, such that semantic content does not break up into segments but can be freely converted from component to component” (64, emphasis original).

¹⁰⁴ Boeve, “ECT,” 190-91.

¹⁰⁵ Habermas, *Lifeworld*, 2, 74.

¹⁰⁶ *Lifeworld*, 2, 75.

action stems from the autonomy of the actors in the communication and their ability to engage critically and objectively with the validity claims made by their communication partner. For Habermas, “the reflective relation to self is the ground of the actor's accountability. A responsible actor behaves self-critically not only in his directly moralizable actions but also in his cognitive and expressive utterances.”¹⁰⁷

Boeve opposes Habermas’ model of communicative action on the grounds that it leads to the generalisation of the particular and, therefore, to the reduction of the specificity of religious truth claims.¹⁰⁸ Habermas’ model rests on the definition of “conversation as communication,” that is, conversation aimed at the communication of ideas so that consensus can be reached.¹⁰⁹ Boeve argues that this is problematic in the context of plurality: “the logic of communicative action,” he says, “de-particularises the layers of truth, normativity and authenticity embedded in the traditions of our life-worlds and transforms them in argumentatively legitimate claims to universal validity.”¹¹⁰ He notes in this regard that Habermas is “resolutely against views which advocate radical plurality; instead, the unity of reason speaks in its many voices.”¹¹¹ In this light, Boeve takes up and affirms Lyotard’s criticism of Habermas, noting that the underlying assumptions contained in Habermas’ model—that there is an agreement on “the meta-linguistic rules for all discourses” and that dialogue necessarily leads to consensus—is reflective of a metanarrative aimed at emancipation.¹¹² In such a metanarrative, “a universal subject moves to freedom via a universally shared consensual knowledge,” an ideal that Boeve argues fails to recognise the diversity of life-worlds reflected in the contemporary context.¹¹³ For Boeve, who draws predominantly on the work of Lyotard, recognition of this diversity must begin not from consensus but from *dissensus*.¹¹⁴

Welsch

Searching for thinkers who reflect more postmodern sensibilities, Boeve critically engages Welsch’s 1987 book, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*.¹¹⁵ In Boeve’s reading of Welsch, the postmodern is identified with “coming to consciousness of radicalized plurality.”¹¹⁶ It is “the completion of the process of differentiation” begun in modernity but unable to be realised due to the modern concern to integrate difference into a metanarrative of unity.¹¹⁷ As Boeve explains, for Welsch,

¹⁰⁷ *Lifeworld*, 2, 76.

¹⁰⁸ Boeve, “CCPC,” 458.

¹⁰⁹ “ECT,” 206.

¹¹⁰ “ECT,” 206.

¹¹¹ “CCPC,” 460.

¹¹² See below (p. 37ff) for a detailed discussion of Lyotard’s definition and criticism of the “metanarrative.”

¹¹³ Boeve, “ECT,” 200.

¹¹⁴ “ECT,” 200. Boeve cites Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

¹¹⁵ Weinheim: VCM, Acta Humaniora, 1987.

¹¹⁶ Boeve, “CCPC,” 451.

¹¹⁷ “CCPC,” 451.

One becomes postmodern when one realizes the futility of attempts at unification: the postmodern person consciously describes his/her world as plural; he/she does not mourn the lost unifying view but joyfully sees broadened opportunities for freedom and humanity in the multiplicity of rationality types, patterns of action and lifestyles.¹¹⁸

On Welsch's reading, the postmodern is marked by a recognition of plurality and a concurrent awareness of the freedom of choice that this entails.¹¹⁹ He argues that such a climate presents us with opportunities for the development of identity and a renewed self-understanding, or, as Boeve suggests, "the possibility of orienting oneself in the midst of multiplicity by laying out transverse connections between the diverse strands."¹²⁰ The result is an "inter-rational"—as opposed to a "meta-rational"—development of tradition.¹²¹ Welsch's definition of postmodernity reflects a critical awareness of pretensions towards unity and an allergy towards the universalisation of truth claims. It calls for the acknowledgment of the radical plurality that exists in the contemporary context and recognises the "strands of rationality" that exist in diverse discourses.¹²²

While Boeve is sympathetic to Welsch's concern for the recognition of plurality in the postmodern context, he asserts that Welsch's approach by way of differentiation leads to "indifferentism."¹²³ Indeed, one is reminded of a consumer, selecting from a smorgasbord of options: the consumer is compelled to choose, but in the absence of compelling reasons to make one choice over another, the decision matters little. Moreover, the concern to draw together the "strands of rationality" in the context of plurality perhaps leads to a metanarrative, the very thing that Welsch himself aims to avoid.¹²⁴ In this regard, Boeve highlights an ambiguity in Welsch's approach. He notes that while Welsch criticises unifying discourses in the elaboration of his theory, he implies "that a

¹¹⁸ "CCPC," 451.

¹¹⁹ Welsch writes: "*Während diese alle auf postmoderne Verhältnisse reagieren, ist ein Postmodernist im strikten Sinn derjenige, der solche Pluralität vorbehaltlos in ihrer grundlegenden Positivität erkennt, ganz von ihr ausgehend denkt und sie konsequent verteidigt - gegen innere Gefährdungen ebenso wie gegen äußere Attacken. Das ist Programm und Aufgabe des philosophischen Postmodernismus. ... (Postmodernismus ist) diejenige Haltung, wo die Reibungen heterogener Wissens- und Lebensformen nicht mehr gefürchtet und ignoriert oder unterbunden, sondern zugelassen und ausgetragen werden, weil man realisiert, daß menschliche Sprache und humanes Leben nur im Plural möglich sind.*" [While these are all postmodern reactions, a postmodernist is in the strict sense the one who unconditionally recognises such plurality in its basic positivity, who thinks entirely from it and defends it consistently against internal threats as well as against external attacks. That is the program and task of philosophical postmodernism. ... (Postmodernism is) the attitude where the friction of heterogeneous forms of knowledge and life are no longer feared and ignored or prevented, but permitted and being carried out because one realises that human language and human life are possible only in the plural]. Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne moderne* [Our Postmodern Modernity], 7th ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 30-31; 40-41, translation mine.

¹²⁰ Boeve, "CCPC," 452.

¹²¹ "CCPC," 452.

¹²² "CCPC," 452. See also Best and Kellner's brief assessment of Welsch's work, in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Communications and Culture (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 273.

¹²³ Boeve, "CCPC," 461.

¹²⁴ Later in the present chapter, I will draw on the work of Lyotard to define the meta- (or master) narrative.

transcultural unity will result from 'reasonably' coping with plurality."¹²⁵ In Boeve's assessment, this places Welsch closer to the position of Habermas than Welsch would perhaps prefer to acknowledge.¹²⁶

Rorty

Seeking a thinker whose work reflects a clearer tension with modernity, Boeve turns to Rorty. While Boeve disagrees with what Rorty presents as the end point of his reflections on the current context, Rorty's criticism of Habermas' approach makes him a helpful dialogue partner.¹²⁷ According to Boeve, Rorty identifies the postmodern with a recognition of "the radical particularity and contextuality of every narrative."¹²⁸ In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty seeks to "dissolve" attempts at universalism in modern philosophical approaches (vis-à-vis Habermas) and replace them with a recognition of, and an appreciation for, "radical diversity."¹²⁹ He argues that the recognition of the "contingency of [the] language of moral deliberation" leads to the concomitant recognition of the contingency of conscience and of community.¹³⁰ Against the desire for universal claims to truth, Rorty contends that particular narratives are bound up in contextual experience; they are *made* in diverse ways by diverse communities and, therefore, cannot be generalised or ranked according to arbitrary criteria.¹³¹ He argues that narratives function as tools or basic vocabularies for "self-creation" in the context of particular communities.¹³² According to Boeve, while Rorty utilises the category of conversation in his approach, he differentiates this from Habermas' work by inverting Habermas' definition. For Habermas, conversation as communication seeks a universal truth in the context of plurality; however, Rorty defines communication as "conversation between those who belong to a community," with the goal of finding "what the community holds as true, good and

¹²⁵ Boeve, "CCPC," 461.

¹²⁶ "CCPC," 461.

¹²⁷ For Rorty's main criticisms of Habermas (as well as Foucault), see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 61-9.

¹²⁸ Boeve, "CCPC," 450. Boeve cites Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); *Objectivism, Relativism and Truth*, vol. 1, Philosophical Papers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹²⁹ *Contingency*, 67.

¹³⁰ *Contingency*, 61.

¹³¹ Rorty writes, "Each new language creates or modifies a genre—that is, a sequence of texts, the later members of which take earlier members into account. These sequences may intertwine ... [b]ut there are no rules for whether they should or shouldn't intertwine. ... There is nothing general and epistemological to be said about how the contributors to the various genres should conduct themselves. Nor is there any ranking of these disciplines according to degrees or kinds of truth. There is, in short, nothing to be said about the relation of these genres to 'the world,' only things to be said about their relations to each other." *Objectivism*, 1, 91-2.

¹³² *Contingency*, 96.

authentic.”¹³³ In other words, Rorty argues that there can be no claim to “universal validity,” as the contingency of language, conscience and community make such a claim “implausible.”¹³⁴

In the context of plurality, Rorty argues that the confrontation with the new leads to a re-description of the existing narrative frame.¹³⁵ The new, or novel, interrupts the narrative and is either absorbed or integrated into the narrative framework or breaks it open. Either way, this leads to an irreversible and fundamental change. Boeve explains that according to Rorty, “novelty ... can only be woven into a learning process where the current context shifts accordingly” and the new (recontextualised) articulation becomes newly particular and contextual.¹³⁶ The “end-vocabulary”—the result of the contextual shift—leads to a redescription of the self, both individually and collectively, and to the legitimisation of truth through solidarity and intersubjectivity.¹³⁷

While Boeve affirms Rorty’s concern for the particular, he criticises Rorty’s approach for failing to attend to the reflexive nature of conversation. He notes that while Rorty seeks to include different narratives, the conversation between the existing narrative and the novel is guided by the particular existing narrative itself and by the “reigning context” within which it occurs.¹³⁸ The particular (reigning) context therefore becomes the “criteri[on] for judgment” of the new and novel.¹³⁹ Boeve argues that Rorty’s understanding of the role of the new (or other) in either breaking open or being integrated into the existing narrative leads to “a factual situation where the strongest wins.”¹⁴⁰ He contends that while Rorty defines communication as conversation, he fails to recognise that conversation is merely one genre of communication among many and—problematically—it is a “genre that provides the procedural rules that condition the consent of the addressee with regard to what is said by the addressor.”¹⁴¹ Boeve contends, therefore, that Rorty’s approach results in “an unquestioned ethnocentric position,” where “the lack of openness for the radical otherness of the other” precludes the criticism of one’s own context (in Rorty’s case, the context of liberal Western society).¹⁴² While on the surface, it seems that Rorty aims at an articulation of inclusivity within a plural—albeit particular—context, he fails to remember the reflexivity necessary in such a discourse.

¹³³ Boeve, “ECT,” 195. See Rorty, *Contingency*, 67-9.

¹³⁴ *Contingency*, 69; see also 22, 67. Habermas both agrees and disagrees with Rorty. For his extended critique of Rorty (as well as Hegel), see Jürgen Habermas, “Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter,” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Oxford, UK: Polity, 1990), 1-20.

¹³⁵ Rorty, *Objectivism*, 1, 93-110.

¹³⁶ Boeve, “CCPC,” 456.

¹³⁷ “PRT,” 186-87. Rorty argues that this approach would replace “the idea of truth as correspondence to reality” (espoused by those who argue for universalism and rationalism) with “the idea of truth as what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters.” Rorty, *Contingency*, 68.

¹³⁸ Boeve, “CCPC,” 454.

¹³⁹ “CCPC,” 454, 460.

¹⁴⁰ “CCPC,” 463.

¹⁴¹ “ECT,” 203.

¹⁴² “CCPC,” 460.

The result of Rorty's approach, in Boeve's estimation, is a multiplicity of "diverse irreducible particularisms" and, in the end, the relativisation of the particular.¹⁴³

It would seem that Rorty's approach marks the end of Christianity. He seeks to replace a religious understanding of the realisation of the person in God with a creative self-realisation that occurs in communities.¹⁴⁴ However, Boeve critically engages his view that a radical understanding of the contingency of "language, consciousness, truth, community and culture" has devastating consequences for the Christian tradition and that religious truth has "no special status" in the constitution of the self within particular and contingent vocabularies.¹⁴⁵ Boeve questions whether "tak[ing] seriously the irreducible particularity and contingency of a religious tradition and its truth claim ... automatically and immediately preclude[s] any possible reference to transcendence."¹⁴⁶ Indeed, it would seem that Rorty's approach undervalues the need for a hermeneutical engagement with the context, and particularly the *religious* critical consciousness within that context, which seeks to hold the tension between revelation and concealment, between faith and phenomena and between self and other. We will return to this notion below in the discussion of Boeve's synthesis of Schaeffler, Rorty and Lyotard.

Lyotard

Turning to Lyotard, Boeve finds the antithesis of Rorty's approach. While Rorty is concerned with the legitimisation of truth through solidarity and intersubjectivity, Lyotard contends that truth can only ever be referred to—it can never be obtained, contained, or defined. Through his use of language pragmatics, Lyotard argues that while modern thinkers seek to "present the existence of something unrepresentable" (in art or narrative, for example), and therefore to capture the unrepresentable in presentation, postmodern thinkers seek to "*invoke* the unrepresentable in presentation," that is, to *witness* to the unrepresentable without seeking to reduce it to correct forms, "the consensus of taste," or common experiences.¹⁴⁷ In other words, Lyotard identifies the postmodern with attention to the event, where heterogeneity (or radical diversity) is *witnessed* in a context of plurality.¹⁴⁸ According to Boeve, Lyotard "radically thinks heterogeneity (up to heteronomy)."¹⁴⁹ For Lyotard, as plurality implies conflict and irreconcilability, the governing principle in a postmodern approach to discourse

¹⁴³ "CCPC," 461. See n. 131, on Rorty's definition of truth.

¹⁴⁴ Rorty, *Contingency*, 68. "I should like to replace both religious and philosophical accounts of a suprahistorical ground or an end-of-history convergence with a historical narrative about the rise of liberal institutions and customs—the institutions and customs which were designed to diminish cruelty, make possible government by the consent of the governed, and permit as much domination-free communication as possible to take place."

¹⁴⁵ Boeve, "ECT," 196.

¹⁴⁶ "PRT," 187.

¹⁴⁷ Lyotard, *PE*, 11, 15, emphasis mine.

¹⁴⁸ Boeve, "CCPC," 450.

¹⁴⁹ "CCPC," 460.

cannot be “preestablished rules,” but the event of heterogeneity itself.¹⁵⁰ In Lyotard’s approach, the fact of plurality leads not only to the recognition of heterogeneity amongst and between discourse-types, but also *within* discourses.¹⁵¹ Unlike Rorty, Lyotard holds that no single discourse or discourse-type can be afforded a privileged place in the consideration of truth. “It is not up to us to *provide reality*, but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable,” he writes.¹⁵² To this effect, he declares a “war on totality.”¹⁵³ The modern attempt to reconcile, unify and rationalise differences has only led to terror, he argues, and what is needed is the activation of “*les différends*.”¹⁵⁴

In *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Lyotard defines the term *le différend* as “the unstable state and instance of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.”¹⁵⁵ The term refers to the plurality (or heterogeneity) that accompanies all decisions made and all linking of phrase-events in a discourse and is signalled by the feeling of being unable to find the words, concepts or rules of language to express something inexpressible. As Lyotard explains, the speaker is “summoned by language ... to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what [he or she] can presently phrase.”¹⁵⁶ Boeve observes that *le différend* is a moment of “relative nothingness” but at the same time “absolute fullness”; an “unutterable, inexpressible, irreducible” event of heterogeneity that *interrupts* the discourse.¹⁵⁷

Moreover, *le différend* refers to the state of irreconcilable conflict that arises as a result of the reality of plurality, when one phrase-event is linked to the next. When a new phrase-event comes along, it is “put into play within a conflict between genres of discourses ... where the success (or the validation) proper to one genre is not the one proper to others,” Lyotard writes, and every linkage therefore becomes “a kind of ‘victory’ of one [genre] over the others.”¹⁵⁸ Each link resolves a conflict, but the resolution unjustly closes the phrase-event, prevents further linking and silences other possibilities.¹⁵⁹ *Le différend* is the moment of indecision, or indeterminacy that occurs in a discourse

¹⁵⁰ Lyotard, *PE*, 15.

¹⁵¹ *PE*, 15.

¹⁵² *PE*, 15.

¹⁵³ *PE*, 16.

¹⁵⁴ *PE*, 16. While this term has been loosely translated as “differences,” as we will see, it requires much more by way of definition. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; repr., 1999), 80. As *le différend* is an important feature in Boeve’s work, I return to it in Chs. 4, 5, 7 and 8.

¹⁵⁵ *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.

¹⁵⁶ *Differend*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ Boeve, “CCPC,” 453, 454.

¹⁵⁸ Lyotard, *Differend*, 136.

¹⁵⁹ Boeve, “CCPC,” 453.

as a phrase-event is followed by another. It is an elusive moment that ends as soon as the decision is made to add the next phrase.¹⁶⁰

Attention to *le différend* is a movement of philosophical apophysis. It cannot be stated; it can only be witnessed. For Lyotard, the event of heterogeneity and plurality leads to the recognition that complete communicability is precluded in any discourse, as no linking phrase can ever succeed in expressing all of the possibilities referred to by *le différend*.¹⁶¹ Thus, *le différend* points to the suppressed other, unheard within or silenced by a discourse each time a phrase is linked to one that has gone before. In this way, *le différend* mobilises action (through witness) to open the discourse and to prevent a particular genre of discourse from claiming victory.

Underpinning his notion of *le différend* is Lyotard's critique of the metanarrative. Lyotard begins his book, *The Postmodern Condition*, with definitions of the modern and the *postmodern*.¹⁶² He writes,

Science ... is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. ... I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Boeve explains: "After a certain sentence ... already belonging to a specific order of sentences (descriptive, imperative, interrogative, exclamatory) ... a number of sentences can, in principle, follow, and all according to the nature of the discourse-type which regulates the "linking" of the sentences. ... What is specific to plurality ... is the fact that the many discourse-types are fundamentally heterogeneous and incommensurable among themselves, and that no single discourse-type is privileged. In other words, all discourse-types equally possess the right to provide something in the linking. The only thing assured is *that* a sentence (only one sentence) always follows—even silence being a sentence—not *which* sentence follows." "CCPC," 452-453.

¹⁶¹ Lyotard, *Differend*, 136.

¹⁶² See Ch. 6 for more a more detailed discussion.

¹⁶³ Lyotard, *PC*, xxiii. We engage in a more extensive discussion on Lyotard's definition of the postmodern in Ch. 6. Fredric Jameson offers a more general definition, which is useful here. He writes, "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. ... [I]t either 'expresses' some deeper irrepressible historical impulse ... or effectively 'represses' and diverts it, depending on the side of the ambiguity you happen to favour. Postmodernism ... may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications. Modernism also thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being ... but the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the tell-tale instant after which it is no longer the same, ... [or] for shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change." Jameson argues that those thinkers who could be considered "postmodern" generally take one of two possible approaches: a) an antimodernist/pro-postmodernist standpoint, such as in the work of Tom Wolfe; and b) a pro-modernist/pro-postmodernist standpoint, such as in the work of Lyotard. In the first view, postmodernism is offered as "a whole new way of thinking and being in the world," and where "a reasoned and contemporary theoretical repudiation of the modern ... [is] reappropriated and pressed into the service of an explicitly reactionary cultural politics." In the second view, which Jameson seems to favour, postmodernism does not follow modernism, but "*precedes* and prepares it ... [for] the return and the reinvention, the triumphant reappearance, of some new high modernism endowed with all its older power and with fresh life, ... a regenerated modernism ... inseparable from a certain prophetic faith in the possibilities and promise of the new society itself in full emergence." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), ix, 56, 57, 60; 55-66.

In short, a meta- (or grand) narrative is a narrative that aims to provide a comprehensive account of history, experiences and phenomena on the basis of an appeal to universality. In Lyotard's words, metanarratives "have the goal of legitimating social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking. ... They look for legitimacy, not in an original founding act, but in a future to be accomplished, that is, an Idea to be realized. This Idea ... has legitimating value because it is universal. It guides every human reality."¹⁶⁴ Lyotard contends that the metanarrative (Boeve: *master* narrative) aims at mastery, or supremacy, by disregarding heterogeneity and difference, regulating its own discourse and ignoring, excluding or silencing any narrative or discourse that does not conform to its aims. With reference to Lyotard, Boeve defines such narratives as "hegemonic discourses which immediately transform *les différends* into litigations by regulating every concatenation of phrases on the basis of its own logic."¹⁶⁵ Examples of metanarratives critiqued by Lyotard include those of knowledge and emancipation. Boeve defines these as "hegemonic narratives of absolute knowledge, claiming to depict accurately (and master efficiently) the world as it really is, and hegemonic narratives of emancipation, convinced in their leading humanity to its fulfillment."¹⁶⁶ Lyotard's assessment of such narratives is scathing: "only a transcendental illusion (Hegel's) can hope to totalize [the diverse language games] into a real unity. But ... the price of this illusion is terror."¹⁶⁷ Boeve explains that the problem with grand narratives today is that they do not allow for the interruption of heterogeneity; thus, they "bec[o]me counterproductive and [are] reduced to their antithesis"—knowledge to "irrationality" and emancipation to "oppressive alienation."¹⁶⁸

In his list of metanarratives that have "marked modernity," Lyotard includes "the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love."¹⁶⁹ In *The Differend*, Lyotard's criticism of Christianity as a metanarrative is clear:

The Christian narrative vanquished the other narratives in Rome because by introducing the love of occurrence into narratives and narrations of narratives, it designated what is at stake in the genre itself. To love what happens as if it were a gift, to love even the *Is it happening?* as the promise of good news, allows for linking onto whatever happens, including other narratives (and, subsequently, even other genres).¹⁷⁰

In Lyotard's assessment, the Idea of love is universalised in the Christian narrative: it determines its beginning and end, transforms (universalises and subsumes) particular communities and contexts,

¹⁶⁴ Lyotard, *PE*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ Boeve, "ECT," 198. See also "CCPC," 453.

¹⁶⁶ "J.-F. Lyotard's Critique of Master Narratives: Towards a Postmodern Political Theology?" in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds. A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. De Schrijver, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 303. Examples of such narratives include communism, liberalism, and economic capitalism.

¹⁶⁷ Lyotard, *PE*, 15-16.

¹⁶⁸ Boeve, "CCPC," 454.

¹⁶⁹ Lyotard, *PE*, 17, 18.

¹⁷⁰ *Differend*, 159, n. 232.

makes a cognitive claim to love as the basis of all reality, and subordinates other discourses, closing itself from difference and claiming authority precisely from within the narrative itself.¹⁷¹ In Lyotard's reading of the Christian narrative, the commandment of love is formulated in a circular manner: "The obligation to love is decreed by the divine Absolute, it is addressed to all creatures (who are none other than His addressees), and it becomes transitive (in an interested sense, because it is conditional): if you are loved, you ought to love; and you shall be loved only if you love."¹⁷² According to Lyotard, the gift of love defines and regulates the discourse, legitimises the narrative as the ruling narrative and ignores or subsumes *le différénd*. As Boeve explains, in Lyotard's assessment, the Christian (meta)narrative strips the phrase-event of its "interruptive otherness" by "too quickly identifying *le différénd* as a gift, to be situated within the dynamic of love."¹⁷³ Lyotard argues that in its particularity, the Christian narrative fails to witness to heterogeneity. Using Schaeffler's frame, we might say that in failing to witness to *le différénd*, the Christian (meta)narrative fails to live up to its religious critical consciousness.

Boeve finds many points of agreement with Lyotard's approach. He finds congruence with Lyotard's language pragmatics and his attention to heterogeneity in witness and praxis and, importantly, he appreciates Lyotard's criticism of all-encompassing metanarratives which, Lyotard contends, have lost their plausibility in the postmodern context. However, Boeve criticises Lyotard's approach for exalting heterogeneity and otherness to the extent that he "does not pay sufficient attention to *the radically particular character of this witnessing*" to the event.¹⁷⁴ Even bearing witness to the event implies a recognition of the structure of language, Boeve argues, and this is a phenomenon that can only be understood contextually. He writes: "In so far as the inexpressible that accompanies speaking is truly inexpressible, attempts to bear witness to it will never evoke it completely, but only contextually."¹⁷⁵ Bringing the insights from his reading of Rorty to bear on his dialogue with Lyotard, Boeve reprehends Lyotard for failing to recognise explicitly that even his own philosophical discourse, which seeks to witness to the event, is bound up in the contextual synchronicity and diachronicity of language.¹⁷⁶ Boeve explains, "Every witnessing [to the event] thus receives the character of an essentially particular recontextualization whereby the event as 'novelty' breaks open the established narrative, compelling it to bear witness to this 'novelty'."¹⁷⁷

It is this very insight, along with Lyotard's criticism of the Christian narrative, which leads Boeve to develop what he determines to be a postmodern recontextualisation of the Christian narrative. Indeed, as we will see, Boeve engages directly with Lyotard's contention that the Christian

¹⁷¹ See *Differend*, 159, n. 232.

¹⁷² *Differend*, 160, n. 232.

¹⁷³ Boeve, "ECT," 207; *LT*, 56.

¹⁷⁴ "CCPC," 462, emphasis original.

¹⁷⁵ "CCPC," 462.

¹⁷⁶ "CCPC," 462.

¹⁷⁷ "CCPC," 462.

narrative is a metanarrative “par excellence.”¹⁷⁸ Boeve argues to the contrary that the Christian narrative is not a master narrative of the Idea of love, but an *open* narrative, open to the interruption of the O/other and open to recontextualisation as a result of this interruption.

Towards a Recontextualised Christian Narrative

In light of Boeve’s critical analysis (and criticism) of Habermas, Welsch, Rorty and Lyotard, and in light of his understanding of the tasks of theology, he calls the tradition to engage with a contextual—*postmodern*—critical consciousness and to search for “a contextually anchored understanding of Christian faith”: a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative for today.¹⁷⁹ The articulation of such an understanding, for Boeve, must witness to *heterogeneity* (with Lyotard) and at the same time safeguard the *particularity* of the diverse discourses in the context of plurality, both within and outside the Christian tradition (with Rorty). Moreover, it must avoid any appeal to “formal” universality (against Habermas).¹⁸⁰ As we will see, through his engagement with each of these thinkers and, most particularly, with the work of Lyotard, Boeve articulates a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative which aims not to universalise the Christian truth-claim, but to witness to heterogeneity in the contemporary context and to do so in such a way that it respects and reflects the particularity of the Christian narrative in its many diverse (and particular) forms. In short, Boeve’s recontextualisation of the Christian narrative aims to take seriously Lyotard’s criticism that the narrative “risks encapsulating *le différend*,” while at the same time recognising that Christian truth and particularity can be conceived in a new way.¹⁸¹

Earlier, I noted Boeve’s contention that the category of recontextualisation functions “both descriptively and normatively.”¹⁸² *Descriptively*, it assists theology to analyse the tradition’s historical approach to the shifting context, serving “as a reading key to understand the way in which theological truth has been established,” while *normatively*, “it calls for a theological programme wherein the insight into the intrinsic link between faith and context inspires theologians to take the contextual challenges seriously in order to come to a contemporary theological discourse which at the same time can claim theological validity and contextual plausibility.”¹⁸³ Therefore, Boeve contends that the task of theology in the ever-shifting context—and, thus, the task of recontextualisation—is twofold: Theologians must “seek in our present context elements that will allow for a more contextually understandable expression of ... standing in relationship with God”;

¹⁷⁸ “ECT,” 198.

¹⁷⁹ “When Secularisation Turns into Detraditionalisation and Pluralisation. Faith in Search of Understanding,” *ET Bulletin* 12 (2001): 268.

¹⁸⁰ “CCPC,” 464.

¹⁸¹ “ECT,” 208.

¹⁸² “STTH,” 36.

¹⁸³ “STTH,” 28, 36.

and they must “read in a recontextualising way the texts and stories that have been handed down to us.”¹⁸⁴

Lyotard’s criticism of the Christian narrative—that it is a master narrative centred on the Idea of love—provides the impetus for Boeve’s recontextualisation. Influenced as he is by modern political theologies with their recognition of victims of oppression, Boeve poses the question that drives his theological approach: “Can God escape the clutches of the Christian master narrative?”; that is, can the Christian narrative be conceived (recontextualised) in such a way that it reflects the postmodern sensibility for difference, thus *opening* the narrative that has so often closed in on itself?¹⁸⁵ For Boeve, the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative so that it bears witness to heterogeneity while safeguarding its particularity may enable the Christian tradition to rediscover the “liberative power” of its critical consciousness.¹⁸⁶ In this way, he posits, “Christian faith, with its reflexive theological dimension, can regain its identity and relevance for human life, community, society and history.”¹⁸⁷

Apophatics in a Postmodern Critical Consciousness: Lyotard, Derrida, Marion

Within Lyotard’s language pragmatics, Boeve finds the key for his recontextualisation, recognising that witnessing to *le différend* with a critical, postmodern, reflective (and reflexive) consciousness can provide the means by which would-be hegemonic discourses are broken open. For Boeve, the central insight lies in Lyotard’s critique of the Christian narrative as the too rapid identification of *le différend* as gift of divine love (grace).¹⁸⁸ Engaging the work of Schaeffler, and remembering that Lyotard’s philosophical critical consciousness is reflected in the apophatic movement of attention to *le différend*, Boeve counters Lyotard’s criticism of the ‘Idea’ of grace by bringing it into dialogue with the tradition of apophatic theology.

In a 1999 paper co-authored with Kurt Feytaerts, Boeve explicates the development of theological apophatics in the history of the Christian tradition, drawing on the work of Denys the Areopagite (5th and 6th centuries), Aquinas (13th century) and the scholastics.¹⁸⁹ In Denys’ work, Boeve notes that all (positive) affirmations of God—at the level of *kataphasis*—are considered strictly symbolic (even for theological names, such as “Trinity” and “the One”): “they stand for what

¹⁸⁴ “Between Relativizing and Dogmatizing: A Plea for an Open Concept of Tradition,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 32 (1995): 5.

¹⁸⁵ *LT*, 59. As a Postdoctoral Fellow, Boeve was a research associate for the Centre for Liberation Theology, KU Leuven. His work clearly reflects the influence of political and liberation theologies, particularly the work of Schillebeeckx, Metz and Moltmann. I will take up this discussion in Ch. 3.

¹⁸⁶ “LCMN,” 309.

¹⁸⁷ “LCMN,” 309-10.

¹⁸⁸ *LT*, 56.

¹⁸⁹ Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feytaerts, “Religious Metaphors in a Postmodern Culture: Transverse Links Between Apophatical Theology and Cognitive Semantics,” in *Metaphor and God-talk*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feytaerts, Religions and Discourse (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999). Originally given in 1997, at the Symposium of the Linguistic Agency University Duisburg (LAUD) in Germany.

we predicate of God, but they do not touch God.”¹⁹⁰ Moreover, Denys argues that only by negating these names for God can one “create a space for God.”¹⁹¹ In this apophatic process, expressed as a kind of infinite process of negation, Boeve contends that Denys affirms the “impossibility of naming and conceiving God” and provides a theological method for seeking and evoking “what does not permit evocation through language.”¹⁹² Apophatic theology, for Denys, reflects both the immanence and transcendence of God, reminding us that God is always beyond human language.¹⁹³

In the work of Aquinas and the scholastics, Boeve notes that apophasis functions as a “methodical presupposition for all naming and knowing of God.”¹⁹⁴ Aquinas modifies Denys’ process of negation to express the relationship between *kataphasis* (affirmation) and *apophasis* (negation). In Aquinas’ methodology, the analogy is negated and then re-affirmed as beyond ontological categories (for example, “God is good; God is not good in the way we humans are good; God is the excellence of goodness”).¹⁹⁵ In the scholastics, this process came to be called *tres viae*: “through affirmation something is predicated of God [*via affirmativa*] which afterwards ... is negated [*via negativa*], and finally again is affirmed, but this time in an eminent way, by excellence [*via eminentiae*].”¹⁹⁶ Boeve notes that in the history of the tradition this process was reduced to a mere qualification and supplement to speech about God; however, he contends that its retrieval for postmodern theology can indeed prove fruitful for the recontextualisation of the tradition, as it can provide the means by which the Christian narrative can reflect a postmodern critical consciousness, marked by an openness towards, and witness to, the unnamed other.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁰ “RM,” 156.

¹⁹¹ “RM,” 156.

¹⁹² “RM,” 156.

¹⁹³ An excerpt from Denys the Areopagite’s *The Divine Names* illustrates this point: “Realizing all this, the theologians praise it by every name—and as the Nameless One. For they call it nameless when they speak of how the supreme Deity, during a mysterious revelation of the symbolical appearance of God, rebuked the man who asked, ‘What is your name?’ and led him away from any knowledge of the divine name by countering, ‘Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?’ This surely is the wonderful ‘name which is above every name’ and is therefore without a name. It is surely the name established ‘above every name that is named either in this age or in that which is to come.’ And yet on the other hand they give it many names, such as ‘I am being,’ ‘life,’ ‘light,’ ‘God,’ the ‘truth.’ These same wise writers when praising the Cause of everything that is, use names drawn from all the things caused: good, beautiful, wise, beloved, God of gods, Lord of Lords, Holy of Holies, eternal, existent, Cause of the ages. They call him course of life, wisdom, mind, word, knower, possessor beforehand of all the treasures of knowledge, power, powerful, and King of Kings, ancient of days, the unaging and unchanging, salvation, righteousness and sanctification, redemption, greatest of all and yet the one in the still breeze. They say he is in our minds, in our souls, and in our bodies, in heaven and on earth, that while remaining ever within himself he is also in and around and above the world, that he is above heaven and above all being, that he is sun, star, and fire, water, wind, and dew, cloud, archetypal stone, and rock, that he is all, that he is no thing. 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.” Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, ed. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, trans. Colm Luibheid, Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987), I, 6-7, 596A-596C.

¹⁹⁴ Boeve and Feysaerts, “RM,” 157.

¹⁹⁵ “RM,” 158.

¹⁹⁶ “RM,” 158.

¹⁹⁷ “RM,” 158. In Chs. 4 and 5, I explore in more detail the notion of apophatics, as it is central to Boeve’s articulation of a theology of interruption.

Reminded of Schaeffler's contention that philosophical critical consciousness "presses religion to rediscover its own nature and to reactualise its critical consciousness," Boeve seeks further evidence of apophatic tendencies in postmodern philosophy.¹⁹⁸ He argues that in the contemporary context of pluralisation and detraditionalisation, a renewed (but vague) religiosity has become evident, whereby concrete descriptions of belief are replaced by expressions of an unfathomable or inexpressible 'something,' and that this apophatic turn—away from concrete expressions of the divine—reflects a criticism of both religion and modernity and a "consciousness of the limits of human knowing and power."¹⁹⁹ Contemporary philosophy, too, according to Boeve, reflects a renewed interest in "religious apophatic thinking patterns"; a result of both the post-secular religious revival and the development of cultural apophatics, as well as the desire to unsettle the metaphysical basis upon which arguments for the existence of the God are mounted.²⁰⁰ Indeed, Boeve contends that particularly in the work of 'Continental' philosophers, this philosophical apophatic trend has become somewhat of an expectation.²⁰¹ With this in mind, we turn to a consideration of Boeve's engagement with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, two thinkers whose work in philosophical apophatics have proved invaluable for Boeve's recontextualisation of the Christian narrative.

Derrida

Derrida is perhaps best known for what is sometimes described as an interpretive textual practice or manner of reading, *deconstruction*.²⁰² We have seen that in seeking to forge a way forward for the Christian tradition, Boeve sees his task as the positing of a theology that safeguards the particularity of the tradition while allowing for the recognition and welcoming of difference within the narrative itself. He argues that just as deconstruction relies on metaphysics but pushes at its limits, decentring and destabilising it, so too must Christian theology draw on its ontological roots in order to challenge, critique, destabilise and overturn the hegemonic tendencies of its narrative. Moreover, he suggests that just as deconstruction gives voice to the suppressed other in discourse, so too can the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative serve as witness to the "the subordinated or excluded particular other," as the Christian narrative itself is, "theologically speaking, the instantiation of the

¹⁹⁸ Boeve, "TRCCC," 475.

¹⁹⁹ "Cultural Apophaticism: A Challenge for Contemporary Theology," in *Rethinking Ecumenism: Strategies for the 21st Century. A Tribute to Anton Houtepen of the Faculty of Theology, Utrecht University*, ed. F Bakker, IIMO Research Publication (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 80-81, 87.

²⁰⁰ "Negative Theology and Theological Hermeneutics: The Particularity of Naming God," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 3, no. 2 (2006): 4.

²⁰¹ "NTTH," 4; "The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today: The Narrow Gulf Between Theology and Philosophy," in *Théologie négative*, ed. M. Olivetti, Bibliotheca dell' "Archivio di Filosofia" (Padova: CEDAM, 2002), 443. For my discussion on the criticism of metaphysics in postmodern philosophy, see Ch. 6.

²⁰² For a cogent discussion on 'deconstruction' and the problems of definition, see Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 107-17.

Other.”²⁰³ In this light, Boeve contends that deconstruction can assist theology to “awaken and reformulate (its own) critical consciousness,” allowing for the opening of the Christian narrative in order to accommodate, welcome and witness to difference.²⁰⁴

Perhaps the clearest expression of the fruits of Boeve’s engagement with Derrida can be found in his 2013 article with Christophe Brabant, “Lessons from Philosophy for Theology, and vice-versa.”²⁰⁵ Here, Boeve and Brabant outline four key learnings from the philosophical critical consciousness that Derrida espouses. Christian theology must: a) critique and be aware of its own ontotheological schemes; b) be aware of “the possibly oppressive nature” of the language that it uses; c) “retrieve, through dialogue with deconstructionism, the critical impulses ... of negative or apophatic theology”; and d) “plea for a more appropriate hermeneutics of religion,”—a hermeneutic that is “more radical” than that put forward by other “thinkers of difference.”²⁰⁶ While a thorough discussion of these insights will take place in chapters 4 and 5, when I articulate Boeve’s theology of interruption, I will briefly outline here the specifically apophatic insights that Boeve gleans from Derrida’s work and the ways in which these insights assist Boeve in his recontextualisation.

With recourse to Denys the Areopagite, Aquinas and the scholastics, Boeve contends that an apophatic movement must precede and accompany all positive naming of God because the task of naming must be accompanied by the recognition that we can only ever *refer* to an experience of something ungraspable—something *Other*—by way of human images, models and categories.²⁰⁷ Thus, with its recognition of the (ontological) limits of kataphatic speech about God, Boeve contends that negative theology “functions as the necessary background” for a contemporary consideration and recontextualisation of the Christian narrative.²⁰⁸ As a result of his engagement with Derrida, Boeve posits that the tools of deconstruction can be used to support and underpin theology’s retrieval of apophysis as a methodological move, allowing for the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative in such a way that it reflects a critical awareness of its ontotheological roots.²⁰⁹ While

²⁰³ Boeve, “LCMN,” 314.

²⁰⁴ “RNT,” 458.

²⁰⁵ Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant, “Lessons from Philosophy for Theology, and vice versa,” in *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (London: Ashgate, 2013).

²⁰⁶ “LPT,” 227. On “thinkers of difference,” Boeve here refers explicitly to those he calls “deconstructionist thinkers,” such as John Caputo and Richard Kearney. Elsewhere, he includes Marion, Derrida and Lyotard.

²⁰⁷ Lieven Boeve, “Naming God Today and the Theological Project of Prof. Dr. Benjamin Willaert,” in *Naming God Today*, ed. Herman-Emiel Mertens and Lieven Boeve, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1994), 16.

²⁰⁸ “PNT,” 418.

²⁰⁹ See Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). Derrida writes, “‘negative theology’ seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentially, a being beyond Being” (77). Thus, he argues that it relies on a predication in order to deny such predication (he refers to Denys the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart as cases in point). However, with reference to St. Augustine, and Jean-Luc Marion’s *Dieu sans l’être* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

Derrida criticises negative theology for its inability to avoid ontotheology, Boeve posits that deconstruction can “warn theology against falling too easily” into such a trap and “can help the Christian tradition to rediscover negative theology both as deconstruction of, and precondition to, the possibility of positive theology.”²¹⁰ He finds support in Hart’s work, here, who contends: “negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology. In doing so, negative theology reveals a non-metaphysical theology at work within positive ideology. But it is ... incapable of isolating non-metaphysical from positive theology.”²¹¹

Boeve highlights Derrida’s notion of *différance* and posits that the interruptive nature of *différance* can prove fruitful for postmodern theology. As Hart explains, *différance*, as a form of “pure negative difference,” conditions both identity and difference (the basis of metaphysics and deconstruction respectively) so that in deconstruction the hierarchy is overturned and both are deemed undecidable.²¹² In apophatic theology, Boeve contends that negation functions in the same way. It destabilises ontological terms predicated of God and reflects a critical awareness of the traces of alterity within the discourse. To be sure, Boeve is careful to ensure that *différance* is not equated with God—such a conflation, he says, would lead us back to metaphysics.²¹³ Instead, he argues that this deconstructive neologism can assist theology to “re-elaborate its reflexivity.”²¹⁴ Moreover, the notion of interruption, which is present in *différance* (and deconstruction more generally), is reflected in the apophatic movement when we name God in Christian discourse, he contends. This apophatic movement is not so much a step, or a method in the discourse, but a fundamental position or attitude that “carries within it the insight that every theology must admit its basic incapacity to attain God in words and concepts.”²¹⁵ It leads Christian theology, he says, to a recognition of God as radically other, beyond any categories which aim to contain or encapsulate knowledge of God.

While Boeve affirms the value of dialogue with deconstruction, he cautions that too close a use of this approach when dealing with Christian discourse can lead to the relativisation of the Christian narrative, such that it becomes a “kind of post-Christian non-indifferent agnostic spirituality” (a criticism that Boeve directs at the work of John D. Caputo, for example) or a “messianism without incarnation ... [reducing] religion to a quasi-universal ethicoreligious structure” (a charge he directs at Richard Kearney).²¹⁶ Importantly, however, Boeve argues that the ambiguity in

1991/1982), Derrida proposes that the conception of God *without* Being can “transmute into affirmation its purely phenomenal negativity ... [the term *without*] deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism” (79).

²¹⁰ Boeve, “RNT,” 457.

²¹¹ Hart, *Trespass*, 104.

²¹² *Trespass*, 133.

²¹³ Boeve, “RNT,” 446. See Derrida’s exposition of this question in Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 282.

²¹⁴ Boeve, “RNT,” 458.

²¹⁵ “RNT,” 458.

²¹⁶ “PRT,” 188; “Theological Truth in the Context of Contemporary Continental Thought: The Turn to Religion and the Contamination of Language,” in *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious*

Derrida's work—his use of language to point *beyond* language—points to the irreducible particularity of truth claims and provides an opportunity to recontextualise the Christian narrative in recognition of a “confrontation with the truth of the other.”²¹⁷ Further, it challenges Christian theology to acknowledge and witness to the “other,” who is silenced or ignored within its particular discourse. In sum, what *différance* offers to Christian theology is a critical consciousness of the “other” and a critical awareness of the traces of meaning that remain unrepresentable in its discourse. According to Boeve, with the use of apophatic theology Christian theology is able to “point to the deficit” in its truth claims, assisting it to move beyond truth as “a matter of true content” into a way of relating that “opens up the order of truth.”²¹⁸

Marion

In his retrieval of apophatic theology in dialogue with contemporary philosophy, Boeve also draws on the phenomenology of Marion, noting “apophatic thinking patterns” in Marion’s notion of “saturated phenomena”: those phenomena which, according to Marion, are invisible (according to quantity), unbearable (according to quality), absolute (without relation), and irregardable (without analogy).²¹⁹ In the face of such phenomena, the subject is rendered speechless witness.²²⁰ Any attempt at description must merely point to the “ultimately ineffable givenness” of the phenomena.²²¹ Boeve agrees with Marion that religious language “has to do with ‘hearing,’” rather than saying.²²² It must point beyond affirmation and negation, beyond ontotheological categories that define and confine

Perspectives, ed. Frederiek Depoortere and Magdalen Lambkin, *Currents of Encounter* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 90.

²¹⁷ “PRT,” 192.

²¹⁸ “PRT,” 192.

²¹⁹ “NTTH,” 4; Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 199-221; also “The Saturated Phenomenon,” *Philosophy Today* 40, no. 1-4 (1996): 113-120. Marion here overturns Kant’s categories of understanding: that phenomena be visible, bearable, regard-able and analogical to experience. Later, he posits a phenomenological understanding of divine revelation as the “saturated phenomenon *par excellence*” [See David Tracy, “Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Theology,” in *Counter Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 63]. As Horner notes, while Marion asserts that his turn to revelation is strictly phenomenological, he claims in his later work that “as a saturated phenomenon, revelation has a place within phenomenology as a possibility ... which could only be determined by theology.” Robyn Horner, “Jean-Luc Marion and the Possibility of Something like Theology,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 52, no. 2-3 (2011). Horner here cites Marion, *Being Given*, 236, 367; and Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 52-3.

²²⁰ On the notion of the subject as witness, Marion clarifies that this is by no means passive: “in certain cases of givenness the excess of intuition may no longer satisfy the conditions of ordinary experience; and that the pure event that occurs cannot be constituted as an object and leaves the durable trace of its opening only in the “I/me” that finds itself, almost in spite of itself, constituted by what it receives. *The constituting subject is succeeded by the constituted witness. As a constituted witness, the subject remains the worker of truth, but no longer its producer.*” Marion, “Saturated Phenomenon,” 120, emphasis mine; see also *Being Given*, 216-9.

²²¹ Boeve, “TPI,” 337.

²²² “TPI,” 339.

such a process, and towards a *hyperphasis* which aims “in the direction of,” refers to or relates to that which cannot be described.²²³

As we will see in chapters 4 and 5, this notion of *hyperphasis* becomes central to Boeve’s conception of apophatics in a theology of interruption. Drawing from the work of Denys the Areopagite, Boeve contends that a contemporary conception of apophatic theology must reflect a movement of kataphasis (affirmation), apophasis (negation), and *hyperphasis*. While *hyperphasis* can be defined as pointing *beyond* human categories for naming or describing God (as per Aquinas’s *tres viae*), it also refers to the deconstruction of these categories (vis-à-vis Derrida) so that God escapes these categories altogether. Marion’s *Dieu sans l’être* is important for Boeve in this regard, as he proposes the notion of God *without* Being.²²⁴

Boeve cautions that too close a use of phenomenological apophatics can result in theology taking the apophatic movement too far. In Marion’s phenomenology, Boeve notes tendencies towards absolutes—the “absolutised passivity” of the subject and the “absolute exteriority and/or radical transcendence” of the Other—and he criticises Marion for “giving an account of the subject within a totalising asymmetrical relationship,” which sidelines the particularity of discourse-experience.²²⁵ The result, he contends (much like his criticism of the use of Derrida for theology) is the relativisation of the particular.²²⁶ Boeve holds that in Marion’s approach (and, indeed, in Derrida’s) language loses its “mediating place.”²²⁷ Theology is stripped of its ability to think God *kataphatically*, rendering “futile” the naming of God in particular religious discourse.²²⁸

For the purpose of his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, then, Boeve draws critically on cultural and philosophical apophatics, but cautions that because of their attempts to escape the particular, they cannot, without some qualifications, form “the future of Christian faith.”²²⁹ Apophatic movements can be considered allies or “exponents” of “a post-Christian religiosity,” where the apophatic movement precedes and accompanies kataphatic speech about God within the particularity of the tradition.²³⁰ Boeve writes, “negative theology does not constitute an attempt at escaping from the linguistic character of religion but assists in taking it maximally into account. Its aim then is no longer to take leave from the narrativity of religious discourse but rather

²²³ “TPI,” 338-9. Boeve cites Jean-Luc Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology,’” in *God the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. by J.D. Caputo & M.J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 30. See also “Linguistica ancilla theologiae: The Interest of Fundamental Theology in Cognitive Semantics,” in *The Bible Through Metaphor and Translation: A Cognitive Semantic Perspective*, ed. Kurt Feytaerts, Religions and Discourse (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), n.1.

²²⁴ See n. 209, above. For a more detailed discussion, see Ch. 4.

²²⁵ Lieven Boeve, “Naming God in Open Narratives: Theology Between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics,” in *Paul Ricoeur: Poetics and Religion*, ed. Verheyden J., T. Hetteema, and P. Vandecasteele (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 83. See also “TT,” 83-85.

²²⁶ “NGON,” 84.

²²⁷ “NGON,” 83.

²²⁸ “NGON,” 84.

²²⁹ “NTTH,” 9.

²³⁰ “NTTH,” 9.

to raise one's awareness of this narrativity to the utmost, and to stimulate a critical-constructive hermeneutical dealing with it."²³¹

From within the particularity of the Christian narrative, Boeve contends that a postmodern critical consciousness of witness to heterogeneity can be realised.²³² For Boeve, the dialogue between cultural and philosophical apophaticism, on the one hand, and Christian theology, on the other, causes "Christian theology to rediscover anew the specificity of its own position."²³³ It raises an acute awareness of the relationship between *apophasis* and *kataphasis*, qualifying the way in which the particular history of the tradition is understood and interpreted theologically.²³⁴ As I noted earlier, negative theology functions for Boeve as the "deconstruction of, and precondition to, the possibility of positive theology."²³⁵ Moreover, as a process marked by "contemplative openness" to the inexpressible other, it serves to break open closed God-talk.²³⁶ It challenges notions of "objectivity, universality and cognitivity" when speaking of God, and it serves as a necessary tool for affirming the "ungraspability of the divine self-communication."²³⁷ Importantly, however, Boeve contends that it does so in always "inadequate and provisory, particular ways, which are enclosed in time and context."²³⁸ In dialogue with philosophical apophatics, negative theology thus functions as *interruption*, breaking open the narrative and allowing it "to deal with theological truth without mastering it or dismissing it."²³⁹

The Christian Narrative as an "Open Narrative"

While Boeve affirms Lyotard's contention that "Christianity lives from the experience of grace, or better, of the event of grace, the gift of love," he challenges Lyotard by posing the question: "Is 'grace' not only a naming of the unnameable gift of Love by the Unnameable, the One who is not merely part of the Christian story but transcends it radically by principle (*Deus semper major*)?"²⁴⁰ Boeve posits that in the spirit of apophatic theology, grace refers to "the breaking through of God's love."²⁴¹ It does not affirm and legitimise the narrative, but calls into question "all speech, all linking of phrases."²⁴² In this light, the notion of 'grace' *functions* in the same way as does Lyotard's

²³¹ "TT," 95.

²³² Boeve and Feyaerts, "RM," 159.

²³³ Boeve, "NTTH," 9.

²³⁴ "NTTH," 10.

²³⁵ "RNT," 457.

²³⁶ Boeve and Feyaerts, "RM," 160.

²³⁷ "RM," 160.

²³⁸ "RM," 160.

²³⁹ Lieven Boeve, "Orthodoxy in the Postmodern Context," *Concilium: International Review of Theology - English Edition*, no. 2 (2014): 89-90.

²⁴⁰ "BW," 375. Emphasis original.

²⁴¹ "BW," 376.

²⁴² "BW," 376.

différend: it *names* the critical impulse towards that which cannot be named.²⁴³ We are reminded, here, of Boeve's criticism of Lyotard's approach through radical heterogeneity: that he fails to recognise the "radically particular character" of witness to the event.²⁴⁴ Indeed, Boeve posits that just as Lyotard "needs a vocabulary, needs phrases, needs the linking of phrases, to be able to bear witness... [so, too] does Christianity (Christian theology) in its own discourse, [need] its own vocabulary, its own specific sequences of linked phrases."²⁴⁵ As we have seen, through a retrieval of the kataphatic-apophatic tradition in theological discourse, Boeve reimages (or recontextualises) 'grace,' as a reminder of the radically indescribable gift of divine love, referred to in the particular narrative of the Christian story, but not contained by it. The *kataphatic-apophatic* process, which Boeve retrieves from the Christian tradition, provides the "ultimate limit-affirmation"; God is both revealed and concealed in such a process.²⁴⁶ In this light, apophatic theology (reconceived as a movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*, which I discuss in more detail in chapter 4) provides the "abiding and conditioning background" for Boeve's recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, a recontextualisation that he calls the "*open* Christian narrative."²⁴⁷

In *Interrupting Tradition*, Boeve outlines the three-fold structure of the open narrative: "an open sensitivity towards otherness," a recognition of the boundaries of particular discourses, and a critical praxis which results in self- and world-criticism.²⁴⁸ He contends that this structure is indeed at the heart of the Christian narrative. As an *open* narrative, the Christian narrative is not a master narrative on the Idea of love, but a narrative of the event of grace as gift of love, given in a particular context in a particular way, without being contained by or in the narrative itself. As "the event of the breaking through of God's love," Boeve argues that grace functions not to legitimise the Christian narrative from within, but to challenge the "inheritor and testator" to "question[-] all speech, all linking of phrases" within the narrative.²⁴⁹ In other words, grace challenges the Christian "to retell the narrative of love over and over, and tell it in such a way that it bears witness to the ungraspable,

²⁴³ It is important to note, here, that I am using the term "functions" in a different way from Boeve. He argues, "the *différend*, for Lyotard, is not to be functionalised. Even if one, when using language and linking phrases, cannot but forget the *différend* (by transforming it in litigation), we should learn to do this in a way which does not forget this forgetting. At least this is the task for philosophy: bearing witness to the *différend*, by trying to evoke in its discourse that which both enables and escapes this discourse." "ECT," 208.

²⁴⁴ "CCPC," 462.

²⁴⁵ "BW," 376.

²⁴⁶ "NTTH," 6.

²⁴⁷ "PNT," 418. Importantly, Boeve notes in his 2003 book, *Interrupting Tradition*, that "*the*" open narrative, as such, is a misnomer: "The *model of the open narrative* is a conceptual exercise designed to explicitate what it means for a narrative when it is able to integrate the critical consciousness of our times. There is no such thing as *the* open narrative as such. As a model, rather, it stands for a combination of characteristics and criteria that allow us to clarify, evaluate and perhaps criticise various societal and individual narratives." *IT*, 92.

²⁴⁸ *IT*, 95, 95-6.

²⁴⁹ *LT*, 73. Boeve draws "inheritor and testator" from Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn, 1989), 99, which he cites in "PNT," 421.

unnameable and incomprehensible origin of the event of grace.”²⁵⁰ Moreover, it calls Christian theology to be aware of the narrative structure of the Christian story, allowing the discourse to be interrupted by the event of grace when it closes itself and forgets the inadequacy of its discourse.²⁵¹

To this effect, Boeve contends that the open narrative opposes any demand for “perfect communicability.”²⁵² In the Christian narrative, he says, God is revealed as both “other *for* us” and “other *than* us,” that is, God is radically in the narrative, but this is only possible because “God is “other than us.”²⁵³ As the “other” of the narrative, God therefore “enables and escapes all God-language.”²⁵⁴ The interruptive grace-event of the Christian narrative, as the “other” of the narrative—the very “instantiation of the Other, the Unrepresentable God-with-us”—does not rupture the narrative, but *interrupts* it, compelling the reader to remain open for the event of otherness and to bear witness to such an event in critique and praxis.²⁵⁵ Boeve argues that in this way the Christian narrative tradition itself, in its very particularity, offers “an inexhaustible resource” for witnessing to the event of the other (the new, or novel) and it does so not in such a way as to “tear the narrative as narrative into pieces” (a potential concern of Rorty’s approach), but in such a way as to compel a continual “radical contextualisation” each time it is interrupted by the other.²⁵⁶

The open Christian narrative is, therefore, both continuous and discontinuous with the tradition, Boeve argues.²⁵⁷ It marks both a continuity with the tradition and the religious critical consciousnesses that have gone before, while at the same offering something radically different.²⁵⁸ It holds in tension a recognition of the “radical heterogeneity which is revealed in the midst of plurality,” and the recognition of “the radically particular character” of the many discourses within such a context.²⁵⁹ In the discussion of Boeve’s dialogue with Derrida, above, I noted Boeve’s critical discussion of the apophatic tendencies in contemporary philosophy and his criticism of Caputo and Kearney for their tendencies to take the apophatic movement too far (a move that results in the relativisation of what is particular to the Christian narrative). Boeve contends, however, that the insights of a postmodern critical consciousness need not lead to the relativisation of particularity in order to accommodate the other. Rather, it leads towards a “more radical hermeneutical approach” than what has been offered to date, an approach that reflects the difference *already* at the heart of

²⁵⁰ *LT*, 73.

²⁵¹ *LT*, 74. These insights will come into sharper focus when we discuss Boeve’s theology of interruption in Chs. 4 and 5.

²⁵² “CCPC,” 465.

²⁵³ “ECT,” 208.

²⁵⁴ “ECT,” 208.

²⁵⁵ “LCMN,” 314.

²⁵⁶ “CCPC,” 463.

²⁵⁷ “BW,” 364.

²⁵⁸ “BW,” 364.

²⁵⁹ “CCPC,” 462.

the tradition.²⁶⁰ This “more radical” hermeneutic marks both a congruence with postmodern philosophy (in line with Lyotard) and a clear departure from it, Boeve contends. It recognises the radical alterity of the other, while also finding its place within the particularity of the Christian narrative.

In his dialogue with deconstruction, Boeve points to a heightened awareness of the particular truth claims of the Christian tradition, while at the same time, working to mitigate the tendency of the tradition to “close in on itself,” falling into “the trap of ontotheology.”²⁶¹ From this perspective, the model of the open narrative functions as an “interpretive key.”²⁶² It reflects a hermeneutical way of considering the narrative where the interpreter “analyzes the discourses,” considers the way the discourses “handle the event in linking up the phrases,” and becomes aware of “how specific phrases, paralogies, break open the discourse and succeed in witnessing to the event of grace.”²⁶³ As a “radical hermeneutical approach,” the open narrative underscores Boeve’s intention to find a hermeneutic that radically differs from traditional theological methods (hence his insistence on the “more radical” nature of his model) and yet draws on these methods in order to open them up and destabilise their hegemonic tendencies. Indeed, just as in deconstruction, Derrida demonstrates that we cannot escape the tradition of metaphysics (we can only be aware of it, be open to critique it when it closes in on itself and work towards opening it up when it tends towards oppression) so, too, does Boeve wish to forge a way forward for the Christian tradition that upholds its particularity while allowing for the recognition of difference within the narrative itself.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Boeve and Brabant, “LPT,” 227-8. See also, Boeve’s critical evaluation of Kearney’s approach in Lieven Boeve, “Richard Kearney’s Messianism: Between the Narrative Theology of Hermeneutics and the Negative Theology of Deconstructionism,” in *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 7-17.

²⁶¹ Boeve and Brabant, “LPT,” 228. See Ch. 6 in the present work for a discussion on the problem of ontotheology; see Ch. 8 for a discussion on how Boeve’s theological approach escapes such a charge.

²⁶² Boeve, “BW,” 377.

²⁶³ “BW,” 377.

²⁶⁴ With Boeve’s plea for a hermeneutics of religion, it would seem that this represents a point of departure between Boeve’s work and the movement of deconstruction. According to Hart, the critical object of deconstruction is not only totalisation, but also hermeneutics. As Hart explains, “(Derrida) himself uses the word ‘hermeneutics’ to signify any theory of interpretation which is governed, implicitly or explicitly, by an appeal to presence, be it authorial intention or the reader’s consciousness.” (Hart, *Trespass*, 48). In critiquing hermeneutics, Derrida takes into account the hermeneutics of faith, as well as “the whole of allegorical and philosophical hermeneutics” (48). According to Hart, hermeneutics, in Derrida’s sense, “signifies a method of totalisation,” a method that has at its goal, a “hermeneutic mastery” (48-49). This critique, Hart posits, is best exemplified in Derrida’s deconstruction of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), in which Derrida argues that the narrative itself is “an allegory of deconstruction.” In the narrative, the Shemites seek to master the universe, but “end up scattered across the earth” (110). Their crime, according to Derrida, is that they sought a unifying identity through the bestowal of a proper name. Their claim to totalisation resulted in their downfall. In the same way, Derrida says, “hermeneutical attempts to comprehend a sign system” results in a doubling (110). As Hart explains, “we are left with not one interpretation but two conflicting and irreducible interpretations, that is, not identity but difference” (110). In essence, then, Derrida’s allegorical reading “seeks to demonstrate that any attempt to unify earth by means of the *one* structure ... will inevitably result in structurally undecidable statements which count against the explanatory force of the theory” (110). See Derrida, “*Des tours de Babel*,” in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165-77, cited in

The model of the open Christian narrative thus reflects a hermeneutic of difference. On the level of praxis, the open narrative calls attention to the interruptive grace-event of God which, in turn, demands a critical consciousness of closed narrative patterns and a critical awareness of the identity-determining, interruptive role of encounter with the other.²⁶⁵ Characterised as it is by “a receptive openness towards alterity,” Boeve explains that the open narrative “stand[s] open for the event and accept[s] the claim which this makes on the narrative.”²⁶⁶ Thus, it “refuse[s] to put forward claims to absoluteness and universality and [is] always prepared to recontextualise.”²⁶⁷ As the open narrative calls for and is marked by a “fundamental contemplative attitude,” which leads to a continuous recontextualisation, Boeve argues that this, in turn, leads to a renewed critical consciousness that is reflected in praxis. The open narrative, he writes, is “a way of standing within life, of relating to and coping with what can happen, with the other, making space for this other, without intending to master it; a way of living.”²⁶⁸

A Synthesis

The open *Christian* narrative “enables the conceptualisation of Christian particularity and truth” in the context of plurality, Boeve contends.²⁶⁹ It holds in tension the heterogeneity reflected in the postmodern thinking patterns of Lyotard and the recognition of particularity called for in Rorty’s approach. In this way, it benefits from a “postmodern critical consciousness” but does not fall prey to the “indifferentism” of Welsch, the “exaltation of heterogeneity” in Lyotard’s radical approach, or the relativism that results from Rorty’s *irreducible* particularity.²⁷⁰ Moreover, Boeve contends that it opposes Habermas’ call for universality, but at the same time recognises the “unrepresentable universality” that is broken open by the “event of heterogeneity.”²⁷¹

As a methodological approach, the open Christian narrative is an attempt to witness to the narrative power of the Christian story to “speak without speaking,” that is, to witness to the power of the story to “link phrases to each other to confess the God who reveals Godself in history, but [who] can never be grasped or encapsulated in it.”²⁷² It reflects a (paradoxical and tensive) attempt to witness explicitly to the Christian tradition while avoiding tendencies towards hegemony. It refuses

Trespass, 109-10). In my reading of Boeve, however, I would argue that his plea for a “more radical hermeneutic” serves not as a point of departure, but a point of congruence with deconstruction. See Ch. 4 of the present work for a discussion of the narrative of the *Tower of Babel* as an example of the interruption of God in scripture, and Ch. 8 for my own consideration of the Pentecost in light of this re-reading.

²⁶⁵ Boeve, “SDP,” 266-7, 269.

²⁶⁶ “CCPC,” 463, 62.

²⁶⁷ “CCPC,” 462.

²⁶⁸ “PNT,” 419-20.

²⁶⁹ “ECT,” 208.

²⁷⁰ “CCPC,” 461.

²⁷¹ “CCPC,” 464. As we will see in Chs. 4 and 8, this “unrepresentable universality” relates to the consideration of grace.

²⁷² “ECT,” 209; see also Derrida, “Denials.”

to close itself against the interruption of alterity and recognises the identity-determining character of such an interruption. It exhibits a critical consciousness of “irreversible plurality” in the contemporary context and a recognition of the threat posed to such plurality by hegemonic narratives, which in Boeve’s assessment “strive to neutralise other discourses in order to realize” their own.²⁷³ In doing so, the open Christian narrative stands as witness to the conflict that appears in any narrative: a phrase is always followed by another and, although the second phrase always closes the event of *le différénd* opened by the first, that second phrase is but one of a multitude that could have followed.²⁷⁴ As Boeve writes, the threefold critical consciousness of an open narrative—the recognition of irreversible plurality, the allergy towards hegemonic narratives, and the awareness of the conflict that this entails—“accompanies all linkages, setting out to keep the narrative open, and fostering the basic open attitude which is both its condition and its source.”²⁷⁵

Therefore, as an ongoing process of recontextualisation, the open Christian narrative calls not merely for a re-interpretation of the tradition to meet contextual issues, but for the retelling of the narrative over and over, “involv[ing] ourselves in the dynamic process of being inheritor and testator... [and] qualify[ing] *theologically* the current life condition, *out of* actually reflexively standing within the Christian narrative.”²⁷⁶ A recontextualised—open—Christian narrative thus emerges as a discourse of God’s self-revelation as *interruption*, a discourse that compels us to witness to the “esthetical-ethical moment,” and a Christian praxis which reflects a postmodern critical consciousness.²⁷⁷

Schaeffler’s influence is clearly reflected in Boeve’s articulation of the open Christian narrative. For Boeve, the criticism directed at the Christian tradition by the contemporary philosophical critical consciousness, with its sensibility for difference, plurality and heterogeneity, has led to a rupture, or crisis, in the Christian critical consciousness. In the contemporary context, the Christian tradition, with its closed narrative patterns and tendencies towards absolutes, has lost its plausibility. Boeve contends that such a rupture need not lead to the discontinuation of the tradition, as secularists might hold, but to the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative such that it

²⁷³ Boeve, *LT*, 93.

²⁷⁴ *LT*, 93.

²⁷⁵ *LT*, 93.

²⁷⁶ “PNT,” 421. Boeve cites Schillebeeckx, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (Baarn, 1989), 99. Boeve offers a useful articulation of the notion of the Christian as “inheritor and testator” in his 2003 book, *Interrupting Tradition*: “A non-cumulative, dynamic perspective on the development of tradition, such as recontextualisation, implies that we are not simply receivers of the tradition that comes to us from the past. We are *not only heirs to the inheritance, we are also its testators*. Living tradition is also our responsibility. By way of recontextualisation, we are called to experience and reflect upon Christianity’s offer of meaning and to pass it on. This certainly does not mean that the tradition simply adapts itself—some will say ‘surrenders’ itself—to time and context. What it does imply is that every time and context challenges us to give shape to the message of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ in a contemporary way. If we do not accept this challenge we run the risk of sliding into inauthenticity.” *IT*, 24.

²⁷⁷ “PNT,” 424.

“continues the theology of the former context, but at the same time becomes radically other.”²⁷⁸ The postmodern philosophical critical consciousness, with its “objective interest in religion,” has pressed religion to recontextualise itself and to remedy the crisis that it faces.²⁷⁹ The recontextualised Christian narrative, in turn, cannot but influence philosophical critical consciousness in the contemporary context. In such a context, the reflexive partnership between philosophical critical consciousness and religious critical consciousness can lead to a renewed awareness and respect for the particularity of religious traditions and their respective truth claims, all the while recognising the inadequacy of such truth claims: in the encounter with the other, the particular is called to recontextualise again.

One of the criticisms that has been directed at Boeve relates to his reading of the contemporary context. Conor Sweeney contends that by reading the context as “plural,” Boeve posits an approach that offers a “logic of same.”²⁸⁰ He writes, “one could suggest that such a pluralization of incommensurable and irreducible ‘diversity’ does not so much represent the discovery of and respect for the ‘other’ as much as it does a sad fall away from the authentic difference and otherness grounded in a Trinitarian center.”²⁸¹ On one level, Sweeney’s criticism reflects a concern others have raised, that Boeve’s approach is Christo-centric; in this regard, the criticism is perhaps well-placed.²⁸² To this effect, in the present work, I am concerned to discover whether or not Boeve’s insights (as they are reflected in his theology of interruption) are supported by engaging a trinitarian perspective. On another level, Sweeney’s criticism relates to Boeve’s reading of the context, and it is on this point that I disagree with him. Against Sweeney, I argue that it is precisely Boeve’s recognition of plurality that allows him to offer an approach which (to refer to his own aim) is both “contextually plausible and theologically legitimate” *within* a postmodern, pluralising and detraditionalising context.²⁸³ As I noted in chapter 1, Boeve is certainly not alone in his assessment of the context in this way, and it will become clear in the present work that I side with Boeve in this regard. It is my contention that failure to take seriously the context in which theology

²⁷⁸ “BW,” 364.

²⁷⁹ “TRCCC,” 461.

²⁸⁰ Conor Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence After Heidegger: Onto-Theology, Sacraments and the Mother's Smile* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2015), 125. Sweeney makes it clear at the end of his book that he is a proponent of Radical Orthodoxy. In Ch. 3, I discuss Boeve’s criticism of Radical Orthodoxy, particularly its proponents’ negative estimation of the context precisely as plural.

²⁸¹ *Sacramental Presence*, 125.

²⁸² Joseph Lam Cong Quy’s criticism of Boeve follows this line. See Joseph Lam Cong Quy, “Maurice Halbwachs’ ‘Collective Memory’ and Contemporary Approaches to Theology,” *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 18, no. 3 (2011): 239. 245. Lam Cong Quy contends that Boeve’s Christo-centrism leads him to regard truth as “historical truth, with the consequence that Christians “situate themselves within the plural religious context.” (245). As we will see in Ch. 4, this is a misrepresentation of Boeve’s argument. In “Christus Postmodernus,” Boeve argues that taking seriously the Christian affirmation of Christ as both human and divine leads to the recognition that truth is historical (in the sense that it is *relational*) and at the same time *exceeds* the historical: Christ points to the *sacramental* notion of truth.

²⁸³ Boeve, *GIH*, 58.

takes place today and to recontextualise the Christian narrative in such a way that it is attuned to the lessons (“interruptions”) presented by the context will lead to the very aim to which secularists strive: the reduction of Christian faith to simply “something of the past.” As we will see in chapter 3, what is required moves beyond a simple correlation between the Christian narrative and the present context; it requires a radical understanding of what can be known about God (albeit elusively) in the *differences* between them.

In this chapter, I have outlined the philosophical basis of Boeve’s recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an open narrative and I have begun to discuss the basis of such a conception in light of the philosophical and theological tradition of apophatics. As we will see, this recontextualisation both preconditions and follows Boeve’s philosophical-contextual approach to theology, which he calls a *theology of interruption*. In dialogue with contemporary philosophy and apophatics, we have seen that Boeve recontextualises the Christian narrative as an “open narrative,” a conception that he contends reflects the historical, dialectical, hermeneutical and reflexive sensibilities of the tradition. Such a recontextualisation recognises God as the interruptive grace-event, who is both radically in and transcends the narrative, and allows for a renewed recognition of the indescribable and unnameable ways that God might be experienced in human history. In the next chapter, I will explore Boeve’s theological dialogue partners in order not only to situate him within the context of postmodern contextual-political theology, but also to outline in more detail the theological basis of Boeve’s conception of the Christian narrative as an open narrative. In doing so, I will begin to articulate Boeve’s theology of interruption as a theological-philosophical-contextual approach that underpins the task of faith seeking understanding today.

Chapter 3. A Voice in the Midst of Postmodern Culture: Towards a Theology of Interruption

In chapter 2, we saw that Boeve's engagement with Schaeffler and postmodern "thinkers of difference" (particularly Lyotard) assisted him to recontextualise the Christian narrative in order to offer what he posits is a "contextually plausible and theologically legitimate" understanding of the narrative that reflects the contextual critical consciousness of today.¹ The result—his conception of the open Christian narrative—seeks to hold in tension a recognition of the heterogeneity of the postmodern context with the affirmation of the particularity of the tradition in such a context. As a philosophical-cultural-theological recontextualisation, the open Christian narrative recognises the dynamic interplay between context and tradition and affirms the role of the Christian (theologian) as "inheritor and testator," who takes on the task of reflexively qualifying both context and tradition from within the tradition itself.²

The hallmark of Boeve's conception of the Christian narrative as an open narrative is his "theology of interruption," a philosophical-conceptual approach that brings together a postmodern critical consciousness and the Christian tradition of contextual theology. A theology of interruption aims to "continue[-] the theology of the former context," Boeve writes, while at the same time becoming "radically other."³ As we will see, Boeve's critical engagement with modern theologies forms an abiding background to the development of his theology of interruption, underpinning his contention that theology and context must be considered partners in dialogue towards the development of an authentic Christian praxis for today. Indeed, a theology of interruption offers a way of doing theology that respects and reflects the open Christian narrative, which Boeve argues is at the heart of the Christian tradition, and it serves as a way of keeping the narrative open when Christians engage in dialogue with other perspectives. In chapter 2, I explored Boeve's philosophical dialogue partners in his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an open narrative; here, I will examine his theological influences with a view to situating him within a *postmodern* contextual theology.

"A Voice in the Midst of Culture"⁴

In 2011, Joseph Lam Cong Quy stated that "while Boeve recognises the value of contextual theology for the intra-Christian evangelization, he nevertheless questions its practicality on the level of

¹ The phrase "thinkers of difference" first appeared in Boeve's publications in 1999 (see Boeve and Feysaerts, "RM," 158). The phrase "contextually plausible and theologically legitimate" can be found throughout Boeve's work, but perhaps most prominently in Boeve, *GIH*, 58.

² "The Interruption of Political Theology," in *The Future of Political Theology: Religious and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Péter Losonczi, Mika Luoma-aho, and Aakash Singh (Farnham, GB: Ashgate, 2011), n.1; "PNT," 421.

³ "BW," 364.

⁴ *GIH*, 58.

religious plurality.”⁵ As we will see, I disagree with the implication that Boeve distances himself from contextual theology when considering the relationship between theology and the pluralising context. However, Lam Cong Quy’s statement does highlight two central elements of Boeve’s work: that Boeve critically engages contextual theology (and we can assume from the context of Lam Cong Quy’s mention of Boeve that he refers to *modern* contextual theologies developed since the Second Vatican Council), and that he (Boeve) takes seriously the contemporary condition of plurality. In the present chapter, through an engagement with Stephen B. Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology*, I will argue that Boeve’s project seeks precisely to recontextualise contextual theology so that it takes seriously the context of detraditionalisation and pluralisation.⁶ In doing so, I will show that through his dialogue with a postmodern contextual critical consciousness, Boeve offers something that is radically new—an inextricable fusion of the postmodern context with contemporary theology.

In *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans presents six approaches that hold a place in the current theological landscape: the *Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental* and *Countercultural* models.⁷ While theology relates in different ways to the context in each of these approaches, eliciting different results, a discussion of them here provides a helpful way of positioning Boeve among his contemporaries. To be clear, Boeve rarely explicitly names these models of contextual theology (nor does he refer to them *as* models), and he certainly does not engage Bevans’ work explicitly. However, Boeve nonetheless draws from these ways of understanding contextual theology through his critical engagement with the key thinkers associated with the models, and the fruits of such dialogue certainly propel the development of his theology of interruption.

Bevans contends that each model of contextual theology (even the countercultural model) takes seriously “the experience of the *past* (recorded in scripture and preserved and defended in tradition) and the experience of the *present*, that is, *context* (individual and social experience, secular or religious culture, social location, and social change),” and together, they elucidate the main considerations for dialogue between theology and context in the contemporary landscape.⁸

⁵ Lam Cong Quy, “Halbwachs’ ‘Collective Memory,’” 237. Lam Cong Quy does not offer a citation of Boeve’s work, here, although he later cites: Boeve, *IT*; “The Sacramental Interruption of Rituals of Life,” *Heythrop* 44, no. 4 (2003); Lieven Boeve, Anthony J. Godzieba, and Michele Saracino, “Resurrection—Interruption—Transformation: Incarnation as Hermeneutical Strategy, A Symposium,” *Theological Studies* 67, no. 4 (2006); and Boeve, “RD.”

⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, rev. and exp. ed., Faith and Cultures (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002). See Ch. 1 for a definition of these terms.

⁷ *Models*. Writing the first edition of this text in 1992, Bevans defines the contemporary landscape as postmodern, but as we will see, we might better define these contextual approaches as ‘modern’ or ‘late-modern.’ For a discussion on Bevans’ definition of the postmodern, for which he cites David Tracy, see *Models*, 93-4.

⁸ *Models*, xvi. Note Bevans’ definition of context as including “secular or religious culture.” As I noted in Ch. 1, Boeve argues that approaching the context from a secularisation paradigm does a disservice to the plurality of religious voices in the contemporary context. Thus, he uses the term “detraditionalisation,” rather than “secularisation,” when referring to the process of the growing distance between faith and context. See Boeve, “SDP,” 258-70. This nuanced definition of the context is important for the discussion later, when I explore the

However, each model attends to the various elements of the context (or “culture”) in different ways. While Bevens argues that a strong, contemporary, contextual theology holds all of the models together in an inclusive and “healthy pluralism,” it is the tension between these approaches that Boeve engages in his theology of interruption, which emerges from his understanding of the open Christian narrative.⁹ In what follows, I will briefly describe each of the models as Bevens has presented them, and I will discuss Boeve’s critical engagement with the key thinkers within these approaches with a view to elucidating the key contextual-theological elements of his theology of interruption. In doing so, I will discuss the important influence of two particular theologians on Boeve’s work, namely, Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz.

No Mere Translation

The first model that Bevens explores, the *translation* model, can be considered to be mono-correlational, as it is concerned with the one-way translation of the meaning of Christian doctrine/s into terms relevant to the context. Its starting point is the “essential doctrine” of the tradition (the “kernel” of truth, which is considered to be unchanging) stripped of its past contextual wrappings.¹⁰ The kernel is then clothed in new terms and structures, which are drawn from the new context, and presented therein. Exponents of this model include Pope John Paul II, who wrote prolifically on the relationship between faith and culture during his pontificate. In 1982, he created the Pontifical Council on Culture and gave it the task of “giving the whole Church a common impulse in the continuously renewed encounter between the salvific message of the Gospel and the multiplicity of cultures, in the diversity of cultures, to which she must carry her fruits of grace.”¹¹ As this statement implies, the translation model takes the context seriously only insofar as the context provides new modes for articulating the Christian message. Like the Christian missions of the past, when taken to its extreme this model subordinates the context; the Christian message functions as something which is “put into” the context with a view to effecting change.¹² Emphasis is placed on making the message *relevant* in the new context, without regard for the influence that the context can have on the tradition’s self-understanding.

way in which Boeve engages critically with (and in some cases distances himself from) certain forms of contextual theology.

⁹ Bevens, *Models*, 139.

¹⁰ A process that David J. Hesselgrave calls “decontextualization.” See Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1978), 86), cited in Bevens, *Models*, 46. As I note, below, and discuss in greater detail in Ch. 4, Boeve rethinks the notion of the “kernel” in light of a recontextualised understanding of truth.

¹¹ John Paul II, *L’Osservatore Romano*, June 28, 1982: 1-8, cited in *Models*, 49-50.

¹² *Models*, 40-42.

In “Orthodoxy, History and Theology,” Boeve implicitly distances himself from the presuppositions of the translation model by referring to his conception of the open Christian narrative as no “mere adaptation.”¹³ He writes,

As a theological category, recontextualisation implies that Christian faith and tradition are not only contained in a specific historico-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political context, but are also co-constituted by this context. To be sure, faith cannot be reduced to history and context, nor can the development of tradition be described as a mere adaptation to both of them.¹⁴

While Boeve affirms the need to draw from the language patterns and structures of the context in order to be able to posit a contextually plausible theology, he aims to do so in such a way that respects the history of the tradition and the development of the doctrine in the contexts that have gone before. The mono-correlational approach reflected in the translation model sees the context as serving merely a linguistic function for the traditions, providing new modes of explanation of Christian truth in a context which is considered subordinate. This approach is, of course, problematic for Boeve, who contends that dialogue between context and tradition must operate in such a way that mutual interruption is possible, and even encouraged. For Boeve, the context must influence the development of the tradition just as surely as the tradition does so for the context (recall the discussion of Schaeffler’s insights in chapter 2). Moreover, as we will see below and in chapters 4 and 8, Boeve’s conception of truth is quite different from proponents of the translation model.

Grounded in the Human Person

The second model that Bevens presents is the *anthropological* model which, he contends, reflects a far greater concern to preserve the cultural identity of the people within the context.¹⁵ The primary consideration for proponents of the anthropological model is culture, rather than tradition. In the translation model, the tradition acts as the stalwart encountering the “new” context; however, in the anthropological model, the tradition is the “new” worldview encountered by the established context. The imposition of something new over and against the culture is thus regarded with suspicion. When encountering this “new” tradition, the people of the culture are careful to ensure that the tradition does not merely assert itself hegemonically into the culture, and the theologian is called to approach dialogue with humility and openness so that faith practices are able to develop from within the culture itself.

¹³ Lieven Boeve, “Orthodoxy, History and Theology: Recontextualisation and its Descriptive and Programmatic Features,” in *Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Adaptation. Essays on Ways of Worldmaking in Times of Change from Biblical, Historical and Systematical Perspectives*, ed. B. Becking, Studies in Theology and Religion (Montreal: Fides, 2011), 194.

¹⁴ “OHT,” 194.

¹⁵ Bevens, *Models*, 54.

Stemming from a theology of mission, as does the translation model, the anthropological model aims for evangelisation. However, it does so in line with the Second Vatican Council's understanding of revelation, not as a deposit of truth but as ever emerging in the encounter between scripture, tradition and context.¹⁶ According to Bevans, at the heart of this model is the recognition that the divine presence is manifest "within every person, and every society and social location and every culture."¹⁷ The model rests, therefore, on "the value and goodness of the *anthropos*, the human person."¹⁸ As human experience is realised in culture, God is understood to be revealed within the "complexity of culture itself" and in the "web of human relationships and meanings"—the "values, relational patterns and concerns"—that bring the culture to fruition.¹⁹ Unlike the translation model, where the tradition is placed into the culture seemingly unreflectively, here, the dialogue between tradition and context is seen as mutually beneficial in terms of the challenges that each poses for the other.²⁰ Bevans notes that in this model when the grace of Christ is found to be manifest in ways otherwise hidden within particular cultures, the self-understanding of the wider Christian tradition develops. The clear insight of this model, Bevans suggests, is that "the theologian must start where the faith actually lives. And that is in the midst of people's lives. It is in the world as it is, a world bounded by a history and culture and a particular language, that God speaks. To ignore this would be to ignore the living source of theology."²¹ Bevans cautions that without due regard for the past "as recorded in scripture and tradition" we are unable to hear the full message of revelation (to paraphrase Bevans, it is like listening to a symphony in monaural rather than in stereo).²²

The anthropological approach, as described by Bevans, holds a clear place in Boeve's articulation of a theology of interruption, and there is no doubt that he is heavily influenced by proponents of this approach. In fact, Boeve's colleague in Leuven, Didier Pollefeyt, bases his hermeneutic-communicative model of religious education on the very notion of anthropology found in this model. It is an anthropology that stems from a Judeo-Christian understanding of the human person, an understanding that sees the "human being [as] a 'life-filled' 'image of God', [who] is receptive and has the ability to be creative in the development of his or her own life."²³ Pollefeyt holds that as human persons "we discover and we ascribe meaning and we are also capable of recognizing and acknowledging others as people in search of meaning, longing for meaning and

¹⁶ *Models*, 56. This understanding of revelation, which is in line with the Second Vatican Council's *Dei verbum*, undergirds Boeve's theological project.

¹⁷ *Models*, 55.

¹⁸ *Models*, 55.

¹⁹ *Models*, 56, 55, 56.

²⁰ *Models*, 57.

²¹ *Models*, 61.

²² *Models*, 61.

²³ Didier Pollefeyt, "The Lustre of Life. Hermeneutic-Communicative Concept of Religious Education," in *International Speaker Series 2013*, ed. Melbourne Catholic Education Office (Melbourne: CEOM, 2013), 1 (English trans. of Dutch article, "De Luister van het Leven. Hermeneutisch-Communicatief Godsdiensonderwijs," *Narthex* 13, no. 1, 2013: 62-68).

absorbers of meaning.”²⁴ Boeve’s theology of interruption reflects not only this intuition, but also the insight that Bevans notes stems from the anthropological model, that theology “involves attending and listening to a situation so that God’s hidden presence can be manifested in the ordinary structures of the situation, often in surprising [or, as Boeve would say, *interruptive*] ways.”²⁵ The anthropological model recognises the role of dialogue and the unpredictability of such dialogue in contextual theology.²⁶ Indeed, as does the theology of interruption, it recognises the mutual interruption that can take place when dialogue between a tradition and the people of a context is undertaken with an attitude of openness.

Inextricably Bound to Praxis

A third approach to contextual theology that Bevans presents is that of *praxis*. This model has its roots in Marxist ideologies, drawing on the hermeneutics of suspicion developed in the works of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, and it is exemplified in practical and political theologies, such as the liberation theologies and feminist theologies of late modernity. It can be seen most particularly in the works of Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx, and in the practical theologies of Latin-America, Africa and Asia. As Bevans points out, the term *praxis*, as it is used in this model, means more than simply “*practice or action*.”²⁷ It refers to a particular theological method which aims for “action with reflection,” that is, “reflected-upon action and acted-upon reflection.”²⁸ It takes as its starting point the notion that God’s saving activity is revealed in the events, struggles and structures of everyday life, and that a response in faith necessarily calls the Christian to participate in the “healing, reconciling, liberating” work of God.²⁹ As Bevans notes, this model holds that “we best know God by acting in partnership with God.”³⁰ The method itself is cyclic: it begins with committed action from the perspective of faith, moves to reflection on this action in light of the context in which it has taken place and in light of a “rereading of scripture and tradition,” and then to “action once more, but this time more refined, more rooted in the Bible, and more rooted in contextual reality.”³¹ This action, in turn, is followed by more reflection and so on, always aiming towards “right action” (*orthopraxy*), but with the recognition that such a task is ongoing.³²

Given Boeve’s explicit engagement with Metz and fellow Flemish theologian, Schillebeeckx, it is clear that the *praxis* approach, too, was highly influential in his theological development. In his early post-doctoral years (c. 1995), Boeve worked as a research associate for the Centre for

²⁴ “Lustre,” 1.

²⁵ Bevans, *Models*, 55.

²⁶ *Models*, 66.

²⁷ *Models*, 71, emphasis original.

²⁸ *Models*, 72. Bevans here cites Philip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer, Stone, 1987), 86.

²⁹ *Models*, 75.

³⁰ *Models*, 75.

³¹ *Models*, 76.

³² *Models*, 72.

Liberation Theology at KU Leuven, and the influence of the work of Metz and (more extensively) Schillebeeckx as “exemplars” of political theology can be seen throughout his work.³³ In fact, Boeve considers Metz’s and Schillebeeckx’s work so important that he credits the conception of two of his monographs, *Interrupting Tradition* and *God Interrupts History*, to “continuous dialogue and discussion” with these contextual theologians.³⁴ A consideration of the main insights of Schillebeeckx’s theology will assist us to explore the praxis approach more deeply. Later in this chapter, I will argue that Boeve’s engagement with the praxis model in general, and Schillebeeckx and Metz more specifically, supports his use of a theology of interruption as a postmodern contextual approach to theology that offers both continuity and discontinuity with the tradition.

Schillebeeckx: experience, culture, praxis

Of particular interest to Boeve is Schillebeeckx’s notion of experience.³⁵ In modern correlation theologies, such as those presented by Metz and Schillebeeckx, knowledge is understood to be reached by way of experience, and according to Boeve, “religious lived faith experience” (“faith experience that precedes tradition and doctrine”) becomes the test of the “truth and plausibility” of Christian faith.³⁶ It is important to distinguish between two notions of experience, here, which are differentiated by the German terms, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. According to Boeve, *Erlebnis* refers to lived experience, experienced occurrence, or sensation, and *Erfahrung* refers to ‘being experienced’ (experience acquired “in and from the past”).³⁷ In Schillebeeckx’s work, these two notions of

³³ Boeve, “BW,” 379 (author bio). Boeve regards Schillebeeckx as “an exemplar of a Catholic theologian living and working in the second half of the twentieth century.” “Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology,” in *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricœur*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Laurence Paul Hemming, Studies in Philosophical Theology (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), 199.

³⁴ See “The Enduring Significance and Relevance of Edward Schillebeeckx? Introducing the State of the Question in Medias Res,” in *Edward Schillebeeckx and Contemporary Theology*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Frederiek Depoortere, and Stephan van Erp (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 6. He also names Tillich and Ratzinger here, however, he engages their work in very different ways.

³⁵ A theme he highlights in two papers, published in 2004-5, each of which forms a chapter in *God Interrupts History* (2007). See: “Theology and the Interruption of Experience,” in *LEST: Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Yves De Maeseneer, and S Van Den Bossche (Leuven 2003), also published in 2005 in *Theology and Contemporary Religious Epistemology*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Yves de Maeseneer, and Stijn Van den Bossche (Leuven: Peeters, 2005); and “EAES.” (Hereafter, where the texts overlap, I will cite only *God Interrupts History*).

³⁶ *GIH*, 61. Boeve’s full explanation on “religious lived faith experience” reads: “faith experience that precedes tradition and doctrine (and on the basis of which this tradition and doctrine can either be upheld or placed under critique).” He defines modern correlation theology as: “a collective term used for a diversity of theological approaches that, despite internal differences, generally proceed from the notion that two poles, tradition and context, need to be brought into relation with each other.” He continues: “This modern theological project strove to reflect on Christian faith on the basis of dialogue with a context of modernization and secularization.” *GIH*, 61.

³⁷ *GIH*, 60. Kevin Hart explains the terms as: “experience in the sense of a journey” (*Erfahrung*), and “experience as lived” (*Erlebnis*). He cites Heidegger, noting that in his work, *Erfahrung* was used to “argue that a shared, public world necessarily precedes any and all private experience.” Kevin Hart, “The Experience of the Kingdom of God,” in *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (New

experience are inextricably linked. The *Erfahrung* of an individual or group, which develops and is passed down in history, provides the “interpretative framework” for lived experiences or occurrences (*Erlebnisse*) in the ‘here and now.’³⁸ As Schillebeeckx explains, “articulated experiences are already conditioned by a theory,” and the theory (*Erfahrung*) provides a “context” within which the interpretation of lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) occurs.³⁹ Therefore, according to Boeve, Schillebeeckx is concerned with the “reflexive character of experience,” where an experience that occurs (*Erlebnis*) makes a “cognitive claim” that unfolds at the same time.⁴⁰

On the experience of revelation, Schillebeeckx differentiates between “basic” experience (*Erlebnis*, as experience that “affects human existence most deeply”) and those experiences that are layered with historical interpretative frameworks (*Erfahrung*, in this case, exemplified in the tradition of faith).⁴¹ According to Boeve, Schillebeeckx argues that even “basic experiences” are understood to already contain (or carry with them) “intrinsic interpretative elements.”⁴² Interpretation is therefore “deeply interwoven” with experience to the extent that “fundamental basic [human] experiences” are already mediated through “pre-existing interpretative frameworks.”⁴³ The “pre-existing frameworks” of interpretation (*interpretandum*, the elements that “constitute the objective kernel of experience”) can be distinguished from other interpretative (situational) elements (*interpretaments*), such as those found in the culture of the day.⁴⁴ These other interpretative elements (for example, “literature ... or popular culture”) also function as “underlying theories and models” for the human understanding of the world and human experience within it.⁴⁵ In the case of religious experience, Schillebeeckx writes:

It is said that a theory as such never comes into being as a result of induction from experiences; it is an autonomous datum of the creative spirit by means of which the human person deals with new experiences, while being already familiar with a long history of

York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 73. A more detailed explanation can be found in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 11-12.

³⁸ Boeve, *GIH*, 60.

³⁹ Edward Schillebeeckx, “Can Christology be an Experiment?” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 35 (1980): 6.

⁴⁰ Boeve, *GIH*, 63.

⁴¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: the Human Story of God* [Mensen als verhaal van God], ed. Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens, XI vols., vol. X, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 82.

⁴² Boeve, *GIH*, 63-64.

⁴³ *GIH*, 64. Boeve here cites Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ*, ed. Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens, XI vols., vol. VIII, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 10-12 (1980: 13-14). Elsewhere, Boeve writes: “Schillebeeckx distinguishes three elements in his analysis of what experience is: an experiential dimension (or let us better term this a ‘lived’ dimension), an interpretative dimension that acquires concrete form by the expression of that experience into concrete images, concepts and narratives (‘interpretaments’), and a theoretical dimension (a model) that forms the framework in which experience and interpretation occur and are contained.” Boeve, “EAES,” 206-07.

⁴⁴ *GIH*, 64. On this point, Schillebeeckx writes: “The so-called interpretive moment of experience is itself included in a more general, namely theoretical, interpretive framework.” Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII, 15 (1980: 18).

⁴⁵ Boeve, *GIH*, 64. For a more extensive discussion in this regard, see Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII.

experiences. Accordingly, what someone calls a religious experience contains not only interpretation (in the sense of specific concepts and images), but a theoretical model as well, on the basis of which divergent experiences are synthetically integrated.⁴⁶

The distinction between *interpretandum* and *interpretaments* is important for Schillebeeckx (and also for Boeve), as it allows him to conceive of the “fundamental *Christian* basic experience” as distinct from the historical “contextually-coloured interpretations of that same shared basic experience.”⁴⁷ To this effect, Boeve notes that according to Schillebeeckx, “stubborn adherence to certain traditional *interpretaments* may result in restricting access to this basic experience (the *interpretandum*).”⁴⁸ For Schillebeeckx, the Christian tradition is a “tradition of Christian experience”: the experience of grace and salvation encountered by the first disciples, which came to be expressed in scripture.⁴⁹ This “kernel” has subsequently been understood in multiple ways in the history of the tradition, and the renewed expression of this kernel in contextual-historical circumstances has become the “driving force” for tradition development.⁵⁰ As such, arguing that “revelation can only be discerned ‘in and through human experiences,’” Schillebeeckx contends that tradition and tradition development are legitimated only by the extent to which they “enable faith experience for Christians today.”⁵¹ The relationship between tradition and context here comes to the fore in Schillebeeckx’s work.

Moreover, Schillebeeckx argues that when it is critically reflected upon, human experience can become authoritative in the search for truth: “Provided it is critically pondered, human experience as a revelation of reality not humanly conceived of or created actually becomes authoritative and valid; it possesses cognitive, critical and productive or liberating power in

⁴⁶ *IR*, VIII, 15 (1980: 19).

⁴⁷ Boeve, “EAES,” 214, emphasis mine. Boeve explains that for Schillebeeckx “just as the New Testament gave testimony to that basic experience in various ways depending on the situation, so too did the ‘living tradition’ as a history of consecutive contextually-coloured interpretations of that same shared basic experience because, through the combined action of experience and interpretation, tradition is both the condition of possibility for, and the result of, participating in the same fundamental experience of ‘finding grace in Jesus’. When an appeal to tradition does not make this possible, then only traditionalism and dogmatism devoid of experience remain. The only legitimate development of tradition should be that which makes it possible for Christians today to also have access to that faith experience.” “EAES,” 210.

⁴⁸ *GIH*, 64. Schillebeeckx writes: “The apparent point of departure is the presupposition that what is handed down in tradition, and especially the Christian tradition, is always meaningful, and that this meaning only has to be deciphered hermeneutically and made present and actual. The fact that tradition is not only a source of truth and unanimity, but also a source of untruth, repression and violence is not forgotten in hermeneutics.” Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* [Geloofsverstaan. Interpretatie en kritiek], ed. Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens, trans. N.D. Smith, XI vols., vol. V, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 114. On the primacy of experience, Schillebeeckx writes: “although institutions and dogmatic positions are essential aspects of religion, they remain subordinate to religious experience, which is concerned with God, i.e. to the religious orientation of faith.” *IR*, VIII, 4.

⁴⁹ *IR*, VIII, 47, 53. For an extended discussion on this, see *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, ed. Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens, trans. John Bowden, XI vols., vol. VII, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

⁵⁰ Boeve, “TIE,” 15.

⁵¹ *GIH*, 63, 65. Boeve cites Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII, 21-22 (1980:26).

humankind's protracted search for truth and goodness, justice and happiness."⁵² Therefore, "fundamental basic experiences" not only reflect God's relationship with the world but, as revelation, they call humankind towards a critical reflection on the nature of human life and existence. In this light, Schillebeeckx coins the term "contrast experiences" to connote the experience of being human in a world where the human desire for "a sustainable future" is threatened by a recognition of the injustice and suffering experienced by many human beings.⁵³

It is here that the centrality of praxis in Christian experience becomes evident in Schillebeeckx's work as, for Schillebeeckx, basic human experiences find their Christian expression in and through Christian praxis.⁵⁴ The relationship between tradition and context is therefore continually assessed based on the *interrelationship* between reflection and action. On this point, Boeve writes that in Schillebeeckx's work, "concrete contrast experiences help to perceive in the Christian tradition the liberating claim of the God of salvation in a different light. At the same time, the same tradition, as the interpretation history of experiences of salvation, provides perspectives that allow for this modern context of experience to be structured from a Christian point of view."⁵⁵ In Schillebeeckx's own words, contrast experiences that refer to the very real threat of suffering in the world (and also to the desire to eradicate such suffering) provide

the context of human experience in which Christian talk about God can be heard in a way which is both secularly meaningful and universally intelligible. There is indeed a convergence or correlation between what is affirmed in the gospel message as a promise, a demand and a criticism and what man [sic] experiences as emancipation in his resistance to the threat to the *humanum* that he is seeking.⁵⁶

For Schillebeeckx, then, the correlation of Christian faith with the modern context is enacted through a correlation of religious and human answers to questions that reflect both religious and human sensibilities.⁵⁷ He contends that what is considered to be genuinely human is also understood to be genuinely Christian.⁵⁸

Schillebeeckx holds that revelation and interpretation occur simultaneously, each bound together in the dynamic of human experience, and this revelation-interpretation dynamic provides

⁵² *Essays: Ongoing Theological Quests*, ed. Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens, XI vols., vol. XI, The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx (London/ New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 13.

⁵³ Boeve, *GIH*, 65. Boeve here cites Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII, 46-47 (1980:55). See also Boeve, "EAES," 204, 212.

⁵⁴ "Experiences of God are transmitted through histories and stories in which they become so involved that in and through these *human* experiences they come to have specifically *Christian* experiences." Schillebeeckx, *Essays*, XI, 9.

⁵⁵ Boeve, *GIH*, 66. He cites Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII, 46-47 (1980: 55).

⁵⁶ *Understanding*, V, 82.

⁵⁷ See *Understanding*, V, 69-88. With this insight, the praxis model differs from the translation approach, which takes human questions and answers them only from an explicitly Christian perspective.

⁵⁸ According to Boeve, underlying this argument is the assumption that for Schillebeeckx, "people are marked with a 'natural (religious) disposition,' one that can be considered a general human trait. ... The generally human ... is then built upon by—and brought to fruition in—the Christian." Boeve, *GIH*, 70-71.

the means by which a critical praxis can take place.⁵⁹ The “fundamental Christian basic experience” of grace and salvation is made present in and through the authentic praxis of Christians, and it is through this authentic praxis (*orthopraxis*) that God’s self-revelation can be experienced today.⁶⁰ As Boeve explains, according to Schillebeeckx, “This is today the locus of religious experience, the privileged place where God’s commitment to the human person can be experienced: in resistance to suffering and injustice. Being Christian today entails a closely intertwined politics and mysticism.”⁶¹ For Schillebeeckx, the plausibility of Christian faith in the modern context is reflected in its “distinctive comprehensibility” of human existence, particularly where suffering and injustice occur, and the authentic praxis of Christian faith in such a context provides the condition of possibility for the correlation of faith and context to take place.⁶²

With his desire to get back to the “kernel” of Christian experience, it seems that Schillebeeckx’s theology has some alignment with the translation model of contextual theology, as Bevans has defined it. However, as Boeve argues, the notion of praxis was to become the central tenet of Schillebeeckx’s political theology. As a model for considering the relationship between faith and context, Schillebeeckx’s approach by way of praxis was instrumental in “the renewal of theology in the second half of the twentieth century.”⁶³

To this effect, Boeve argues that political theologies and liberation theologies of the “third-world” can be “allies” of “first-world postmodern theology ... in the opening up of the Christian story,” particularly as they serve as examples of the use of contextual philosophical tools in theological recontextualisation.⁶⁴ However, he argues that such theologies, which aim at the correlation of faith and context, cannot be taken up without qualification in a postmodern context.⁶⁵ The underlying assumption of approaches which aim at correlation is that “faith, faith tradition, and

⁵⁹ As I noted earlier, Boeve contends that in Schillebeeckx’s work, interpretation is the self-expression of experience, “deeply interwoven in the actual experience itself.” *GIH*, 64, citing Schillebeeckx, Interim Report, 10-12 (1980: 13-14).

⁶⁰ “EAES,” 214. On Schillebeeckx’s definition of *orthopraxis*, Boeve writes: “Whoever has come to understand his [sic] own existence will be led to a renewal of this existence: there is a mutual, intrinsic relation between theory and praxis, between Christian orthodoxy and Christian orthopraxis. Orthodoxy is only ‘orthos’ in as much as it is realised in concrete praxis.” “EAES,” 203. Boeve cites Schillebeeckx, *Understanding*, V, 61-3 (1972: 67-9).

⁶¹ Boeve, *GIH*, 67. Boeve cites Schillebeeckx, *IR*, VIII, 49-51 (1980: 59-60).

⁶² Boeve, *GIH*, 67. Boeve here cites Schillebeeckx, *Church*, X, 80-81 (1990: 84). Elsewhere on this point, Schillebeeckx writes: “the Christian message or *kerygma* can only be geared to what is common to all—an unceasing resistance to the inhumane and a permanent search for the human, a search that man himself [sic] tries to solve in the praxis of his life (even though this often results in inhumane behaviour). Christian identity has to do with human integrity, and even though the latter cannot be theoretically and practically defined in one all-embracing system, man’s existential problem is, in it, inwardly linked with the Christian revelation ... the Christian answer is at one with man’s universal protest against the inhumane.” *Understanding*, V, 81.

⁶³ Boeve, *GIH*, 61.

⁶⁴ “BW,” 378.

⁶⁵ Boeve cites Paul Tillich as the theologian who coined the term “correlation” as a theological remedy to the growing distance between the Christian tradition and the modern context. See P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-64), 3 vols, cited in Boeve, *GIH*, 32.

reflection on faith” take place not in isolation but in close relationship with “life, culture, society, [and] history—the context in which they are embedded.”⁶⁶ In late modernity, Boeve argues, modern correlation theologians (such as Schillebeeckx) took up the critical consciousness of modernity, with its focus on “rationality, human freedom and social liberation,” and “recontextualised” the tradition in light of these insights.⁶⁷ The “salvific message” of the Christian tradition was “correlated” with the human desire for “rationality and emancipation,” giving rise to a “modern” way of theologising that affirmed the role of the context in shaping tradition.⁶⁸ This ‘correlational’ approach was underpinned by three presuppositions, Boeve notes: first, theology must engage in a dialogue between tradition and context, whereby the context is defined as secular; second, the standards of the context (defined by rationality, with its claims to “universality, transparency, and communicability”) necessarily regulate the dialogue, except in instances where religion is excluded; and third, because there is a “fundamental continuity ... between modern culture and Christianity ... there should be no discrepancy between being a sincere modern human being and being an authentic Christian.”⁶⁹ These presuppositions are evident in the praxis model more generally, but they are clearly exemplified in Schillebeeckx’s theological project, as I have briefly defined it here.

Boeve points out that these presuppositions are unproblematic when there exists “a factual overlap between context and Christian faith,” however, in the context of postmodernity, with its plurality of worldviews and life-options and where plurality can be seen not only in the context but also within the tradition itself, such an overlap cannot be so easily assumed.⁷⁰ He contends that in the postmodern, pluralised context,

Theology is no longer engaged in a dialogue between two partners, but immersed in a dynamic, irreducible, and often conflicting plurality of religions, worldviews, and lifeviews. Many Christians today, especially in Western Europe, are becoming increasingly aware that the Christian faith (with its own plurality) is only one position among others on the field of religions and convictions.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *GIH*, 31. For a useful overview of (late) modern theologies—correlation and otherwise—see David Tracy, “The Uneasy Alliance Reconciled: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity,” *Theological Studies* 50, no. 3 (1989): esp. 553-560. Note: while Tracy situates many of the correlation theologies within post-modernity, for the purposes of our engagement with Boeve, I will side with Boeve and place them in the late-modern paradigm.

⁶⁷ Boeve, *GIH*, 32.

⁶⁸ *GIH*, 33, 32-33. While it is beyond the scope of the present work to take issue with Boeve’s definition of modern theology or its presuppositions (we are concerned here only with the way in which he develops his theology of interruption and its implications for our understanding of doctrine in postmodernity), it is nevertheless interesting to note that in defining correlational approaches, David Tracy argues that “the concept ‘correlation’ in correlational theology does not entail a belief in harmony, convergence, or sameness.” Tracy points out that this is a “common misconception of the logic of the term ‘correlation.’” Tracy, “Uneasy Alliance,” 562.

⁶⁹ Boeve, *GIH*, 33-34.

⁷⁰ *GIH*, 34. Boeve critiques Schillebeeckx’s work in this regard, arguing that at the “cultural level, profound human experiences can no longer be quasi-automatically interpreted within Christian interpretative frameworks.” *GIH*, 74.

⁷¹ *GIH*, 34.

In this context, Boeve contends that correlation has become “counter-productive.”⁷² Rather than establishing the plausibility of the Christian tradition within the context, it has instead led to the “dilution of the Christian tradition in an effort to reestablish continuity” via consensus.⁷³ The result is the relativisation of Christian faith, he argues, “a horizontal and functionalized reduction of Christianity in terms of cultural Christianity, ethics or aesthetics.”⁷⁴ In other words, it leads to the forgetting of Christian specificity and historicity, particularly as it “acquired shape in concrete narratives and communities,” both past and present.⁷⁵ The desire for continuity in modern theologies has thus led to an increasing *discontinuity* on the part of tradition development, marked by the detraditionalisation of the context today.

Liberation theologies

Through the use of a modern philosophical critical consciousness, late-modern liberation theologies offered a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative, which aimed to demonstrate, through praxis, the critical liberating power of the narrative to give preference to—indeed, to give voice to—those who are poor, vulnerable, or oppressed as a result of modern social and cultural ideologies. The centrality of *praxis* in these approaches served to call to account oppressive structures and ideologies that did not live up to their own contextual critical consciousness. Here, the Christian narrative, with its concern for the vulnerable, offered an abiding background to a just and cohesive society.

However, as a result of the postmodern critical consciousness, Boeve contends that highlighting injustices in the context no longer instinctively leads to the recognition of Christianity as the way to emancipation. A postmodern consideration of some liberation theologies would, in fact, highlight tendencies towards meta- (or master) narratives, particularly in instances where they seek to replace, rather than open up, the predominant narrative of the context. The reciprocity between a religious critical consciousness and a philosophical critical consciousness (which I discussed in chapter 2) is evident here: the reflexive nature of *praxis* in the modern religious critical consciousness led to renewed reflexive sensibilities in the postmodern context, whereby any narrative (including the Christian narrative) that posits itself over and against another is called into question.⁷⁶

Therefore, in dialogue with modern political theologies but approaching them from a *postmodern* perspective, Boeve highlights the importance of developing “a critical vigilance against closed stories and a sensitivity for the victims of hegemonic discourses.”⁷⁷ He argues that liberation theologies, which are “born out of the experience of being marginalized by a hegemonic story,” can

⁷² GIH, 35.

⁷³ GIH, 35.

⁷⁴ GIH, 74.

⁷⁵ GIH, 35.

⁷⁶ “BW,” 362. Boeve contends that the “postmodern condition” can be described as “modernity-in-crisis become reflective.”

⁷⁷ “BW,” 378.

assist postmodern theology (perceived as an open narrative) to structure praxis: to take on the task of calling to account other narratives that fail to reflect the alterity and heterogeneity of the context.⁷⁸ In modern liberation theology, the “other” of the social narrative—the poor, oppressed and excluded—were drawn into the Christian narrative, given preference, and emancipated. The poor became the *locus theologicus* and influenced the way in which theology was approached and practised. In a postmodern context, the “other” also represents the excluded, the oppressed, the outcast, but no longer merely the *socially* and politically excluded. In a (postmodern) theology of interruption, as it is presented by Boeve, religions and worldviews other than Christian are encountered in dialogue, welcomed and heard, and the recognition of such voices serve to assist the Christian narrative to avoid hegemony. In an open Christian narrative, the other is not subsumed into the narrative, nor explained away. Instead, the other *interrupts*, causes new questions to be asked and serves as a catalyst for recontextualisation.

Liberation theology’s recognition of injustice, then, and the desire to offer salvation and liberation from injustice forms a key element in a theology of interruption, which seeks to recognise and give voice to the oppressed other in language and narrative. As we will see, the theology of interruption relies on the Christian believer holding a position of openness to and reflection upon the surprising and transforming revelation of God in history. In a theology of interruption, the notion of praxis refers to the recognition of and witness to the silenced voice(s) of the other in dialogue. In this way, we could argue that a theology of interruption provides the postmodern linguistic counterpart to the liberating creative praxis of political theologies.

Affirms the Role of Dialogue

Bevans’ fourth model of contextual theology—the *synthetic* model—provides another clue for understanding of Boeve’s theology, particularly in terms of its relation to traditions other than Christian. The *synthetic* model draws together insights from the *translation*, *anthropological* and *praxis* models, but recognises and adds the voices of other contexts, religious experiences and traditions outside the Christian tradition. Termed the *synthetic* model to refer to the synthesis for which it aims, Bevans explains that this model seeks to “keep in creative tension” the Christian tradition, the context in which it is situated (Christian or otherwise), and other contexts, thought patterns and experiences which can serve to shed light on the issues and concerns of the local context.⁷⁹ It is an explicitly dialogical model because it recognises the unique expressions and experiences of both culture and tradition and maintains that dialogue between these poles can have a “mutually transforming effect on both conversation partners.”⁸⁰ With reference to David Tracy,

⁷⁸ “BW,” 378.

⁷⁹ Bevans, *Models*, 92-3.

⁸⁰ *Models*, 93.

Bevans explains that the understanding of truth in this model is that truth emerges in the questions and challenges of conversation.⁸¹ Therefore, it espouses a more open concept of revelation than other models and affirms the *ongoing* nature of revelation in the living tradition and emerging contexts.⁸²

With the desire of practitioners of the *synthetic* model to include (and learn from) other worldviews and contexts, it perhaps comes closer than the other models discussed thus far to Boeve's open Christian narrative. It certainly affirms, with Boeve, the role of dialogue in God's self-revelation and, as a model for approaching dialogue between theology and context, it is open to the transforming role of true dialogue with "otherness." As Bevans explains, in this model truth is understood as "a reality that emerges in true conversation between authentic women and men 'when they allow questioning to take over,'" that is, when respectful listening is juxtaposed with the clear articulation of each position, where conflict is encouraged and where each partner is open to the challenge of the other's point of view.⁸³ Boeve takes up this position in *Lyotard and Theology*, with his recognition that the "praxis of the open narrative (implying openness to the other, as a witness to the other, and self- and world- criticism)" is necessarily dialogical.⁸⁴ He contends: "It is precisely here, in relation to otherness, that truth claims find their anchor: the truth of a narrative is

⁸¹ *Models*, 93. Bevans cites David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York/London: Harper and Row/SCM, 1987; repr., 1994), 18.

⁸² On the nature of revelation as ongoing, I would like to make a point about the perceived distinction between God's full self-disclosure in Christ—the revelation of God to humankind—and the personal revelation of God to individuals, which enacts a deepening of faith in Christ and an ever-deepening understanding of God's mystery. In a forthcoming chapter of an edited book, Robyn Horner provides a helpful discussion on how we might think about this distinction in light of an understanding of revelation as both "static" and "dynamic," an understanding that is evocatively expressed in *Dei verbum* and in the work of Joseph Ratzinger. Horner writes: "One of the perhaps startling consequences of thinking about revelation as dialogue is that it implies that it is ongoing. This might at first seem contrary to article 4 of *Dei verbum*: 'we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord.' Yet to quote Ratzinger ... : 'God does not arbitrarily cease speaking at some point of history.' While Ratzinger acknowledges that 'Christ is the end of God's speaking, because after him there is nothing more to say,' he also insists that 'if we made the point that Christ was the end of God's speaking ... that also means that *he is the constant address of God to man....*' Dialogical revelation is personal, even while also addressed to persons in community. Moreover, it is historical, *pace* Ratzinger: '[Article 3] emphatically asserts the historical character of revelation, which comes to man not as a timeless idea, but as the historical operation of God in our own time and sets man in the context of this history as the place of his salvation.' One way of reconciling a static concept of revelation (revelation is all that is contained and completed in Christ, who 'is the end of God's speaking') with a dynamic concept of revelation (Christ is '*the constant address of God to man*') is to read one always in terms of the other. According to a dynamic and personal view of revelation, a Christian is enabled to *recognise* the God of Jesus Christ as the author of an address that speaks newly in each situation." Robyn Horner, "Experience of God: Revelation as Affective Knowledge in the Works of Ignatius Loyola," in *Mysticism in Contemporary Thought*, ed. John Arblaster (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming, 2020). Horner cites Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Chapter I," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London/New York: Burns and Oates/Herder and Herder, 1969), 172, 175, 172-73.

⁸³ Bevans, *Models*, 93. Bevans cites Tracy, *Plurality*, 18, 19.

⁸⁴ Boeve, *LT*, 96.

then no longer a matter of true propositions, it is perceived according to the quality of its relation to otherness.”⁸⁵

When I discuss the details of Boeve’s theology of interruption (in the next chapter), I will return to this quite radical understanding of dialogue and the Christian tradition’s relationship with its other. For now, however, it is important to note that what could be considered to be a strength of the synthetic model—the creative synthesis of particular discourses—also points to inherent dangers.⁸⁶ First, it risks a relativisation of the Christian tradition or the watering down of its particular message so that harmony and synthesis are made easier. Second, without the use of an adequate hermeneutical framework (at the very least, a hermeneutic of suspicion) to ensure that the achieved synthesis does justice to each narrative, the dominant voice or culture in a particular context can effectively overpower the dialogue. Third, the aim of the synthetic model is that each partner in the dialogue comes to a deeper understanding of themselves; however, if the dialogue amounts to a mere juxtaposition of ideas, the narrative of neither partner is enhanced by the encounter.⁸⁷

There is no doubt that Boeve draws from practitioners of this *synthetic* model, but he also explicitly recognises the dangers of an uncritical use of this approach and strives to avoid them. He calls to account those theologians who reduce the Christian message to a series of values or an ethic of humanism, and while he defends the truth of the Christian tradition in this light, he seeks neither to subsume other religious traditions into the Christian narrative, nor to dismiss them as having no claim to truth.⁸⁸ Striving to avoid such dangers, Boeve’s theology of interruption involves a dynamic dialogue between tradition and context, where the contemporary context is defined by heterogeneity and the recognition of differences. Through mutually respectful and open dialogue, he argues, each discourse interrupts the other so that each partner in the dialogue is compelled to consider her or his truth claims in light of new insights. As a result, a recontextualisation of *both* particular discourses can take place. Each discourse and dialogue partner is changed irrevocably as a result of the encounter, but at the same time, each discourse maintains its particularity, albeit in a new and (hopefully) enhanced way.

⁸⁵ *LT*, 96. “In other words, the truth of the Christian tradition is bound to the authenticity of the tradition’s stance towards the other.” In “Christus Postmodernus,” Boeve introduces his contention that the notion of truth is relational; it cannot be possessed or appropriated, but one can stand in relation to truth, remain in it and witness to it. See “Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology,” in *The Myriad Christ. Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Leuven University Press/Peeters, 2000), 579. As we will see, this notion becomes important for Boeve’s conception of a theology of interruption (see Ch. 5), and subsequently, for our discussion of its implications in the consideration of Christian life and faith in the Trinity today (Ch. 8).

⁸⁶ Bevens, *Models*, 94-5.

⁸⁷ *Models*, 93-4. Tracy argues that conversation is a kind of game, that “liberate[s] our ability to understand ourselves by facing something different, other, and sometimes strange.” Tracy, *Plurality*, 18.

⁸⁸ As a point of qualification, see n. 85.

While the four models of contextual theology discussed thus far aim towards the articulation of the *content* of theology and the product of theologising in such a way that the context is taken seriously, the fifth model presented by Bevens is more concerned with the activity and *process* of theology, as undertaken by the theologising subject.⁸⁹ Seen most particularly in the works of Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, this model—the *transcendental* model—takes as its starting point the worldview of the theologising (individual or communal) subject and brings to the fore the subject’s particular historical and cultural standpoint as well as his or her experience of God within the context of the Christian tradition.⁹⁰ Bevens explains that when theology is conducted by way of this approach, it “is conceived as the process of ‘bringing to speech’ who I am or who we are,” recognising that we are the product of both our faith tradition and our “historical, geographical, social, and cultural environment.”⁹¹

Like the synthetic model, the transcendental approach affirms the role of encounters with other worldviews in “coming to understand the authentic cultural and faith expressions of other peoples and other ages.”⁹² However, *unlike* the synthetic model, the transcendental approach mitigates tendencies to reduce the particular, through a focus on the mutual construction and affirmation of identity that takes place as a result of the encounter. Bevens writes of this model,

as a person from one context encounters a person from another, ... one must never relinquish one’s authenticity as a particular historical or cultural subject. These positive or negative encounters with others can be extremely fruitful for one’s own theological thinking, but never provide ready-made answers. But as one tries personally to appropriate the ideas of another, as one runs these ideas through the filter of one’s own context, one can be challenged to greater authenticity and to broader horizons.⁹³

Here, revelation is understood not as content found in context or tradition, but as *event*. As Bevens explains, according to this model revelation occurs—or better, is recognised—when a person is open to the event of God’s offering of Godself in concrete reality; that is, revelation is found within human experience when a person “is open to the words of scripture, ... open to the events in daily life, and open to the values embodied in a cultural tradition.”⁹⁴

Hermeneutics holds a necessary and central place in this approach, as theology occurs through the struggle of the subject to “articulate and appropriate” more adequately her or his ongoing and developing relationship with the divine.⁹⁵ It calls for “sympathy” as well as critical

⁸⁹ Bevens, *Models*, 108.

⁹⁰ *Models*, 107.

⁹¹ *Models*, 104.

⁹² *Models*, 106.

⁹³ *Models*, 106.

⁹⁴ *Models*, 105.

⁹⁵ *Models*, 105.

distance on the part of the theologising subject when he or she encounters a different worldview.⁹⁶ As Bevans writes, with reference to Lonergan, as the activity of the “contextualised subject” is centred on “‘bring[ing] to speech’ his or her experience of God as experienced in a particular spatiotemporal or cultural milieu,” the theological articulation that results is a “contextualized theology.”⁹⁷

In his summary of the criticisms of the transcendental model, Bevans asks, “if subjective authenticity is the criterion for authentic theology, what or who provides the criterion of subjective authenticity?”⁹⁸ He goes on say that “attention to subjectivity in the transcendental sense,” runs the risk of “degenerat[ing] into subjectivity in the sense of relativity, or ... ‘into expressive and utilitarian individualism.’”⁹⁹ While Bevans is concerned to illuminate the limitations of the transcendental approach with respect to its universal claims, he has alluded to a deeper issue here, which reflects the postmodern criticism of modern theology’s “turn to the subject.” In chapter 6, when I discuss Karl Rahner’s approach to trinitarian theology, I explore the limitations of his approach from a postmodern perspective and I discuss critically his contention that the subject can be present to itself. I refer, there, to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy who writes, “the major characteristic of [postmodern] thought is the putting into question of the instance of the ‘subject,’ according to the structure, the meaning, and the value subsumed under this term in modern thought.”¹⁰⁰ According to Bevans, in the transcendental approach the subject seeks to understand faith “as an authentic believer and cultural subject.”¹⁰¹ However, in doing so, the subject appropriates the object of knowledge (in this case, God) into itself.¹⁰² To borrow Bastera’s explanation of the issue, to which I refer in chapter 6, in such an approach “the self is depicted as engulfing the other in order to satisfy desire, but also, paradoxically, as needing that very other it supersedes to achieve external recognition of itself as self-conscious being.”¹⁰³ As I discuss in greater detail later, Rahner’s approach, as an example of the transcendental model, runs the risk of de-mystifying God in order to satisfy the desire of the human subject to know itself.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Boeve’s theology of interruption relies on insights from the transcendental approach, particularly the understanding of revelation as event and the openness of the subject to the recognition of such an event. Bevans suggests that this transcendental model, with

⁹⁶ *Models*, 106.

⁹⁷ *Models*, 107.

⁹⁸ *Models*, 108.

⁹⁹ *Models*, 108. Bevans quotes Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Introduction,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

¹⁰¹ Bevans, *Models*, 108.

¹⁰² This begs the question: Does Rahner think God in this way? I discuss this question in Ch. 6 (see pg. 177ff).

¹⁰³ Gabriela Bastera, “Tragic Modern Subjectivity,” in *Seductions Of Fate: Tragic Subjectivity, Ethics, Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 67.

its “careful but passionate search for authenticity of expression of one’s religious and cultural identity” takes seriously St. Anselm’s definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, where faith seeks “understanding rather than certitude.”¹⁰⁴ Like the transcendental model, Boeve contends that through the encounter with the other, Christians can come to a deeper understanding and articulation of their particular identity as Christians and to a deeper understanding of their relationship with God. However, he argues that this need not take place “over and against the other,” as the transcendental model implies.¹⁰⁵ As we will see in the following chapters when we explore examples of Boeve’s application of a theology of interruption, Boeve presents an approach that seeks not to subsume the other as the object of knowledge, but to maintain the tensive difference between self and other in dialogue.

In the next chapter, I discuss a story that Boeve relates often, about a Christian woman’s experience as a guest at an Islamic dinner for the ‘breaking of the fast.’¹⁰⁶ In Boeve’s retelling of the story of this dinner, he notes that the dialogical encounter between a Christian woman and her Muslim friends provided insights that interrupted the Christian woman’s religious self-understanding. She was moved towards a more authentic expression of her faith as a result of her encounter with a person from a different religious tradition. The challenge of the other sharpened her expression of faith. She came to a deeper understanding of her own tradition and began to *express* this understanding with new awareness. As we will see in chapter 4, in line with Boeve’s broader argument on the theology of interruption, the questions raised for the Christian woman during the dinner were the outcome, or effect, not of subsuming the identity of the other into her own, but of the interruptive event of grace itself.¹⁰⁷

Not Counter-Cultural; In Dialogue With Culture

The sixth and final model of contextual theology that Bevans presents is the *countercultural*, or “confessional” model. Like the other models, Bevans contends that this model also takes the context seriously in the articulation of a contemporary theology; however, *unlike* the other models, it takes a negative view of the context, positing the Christian tradition as a correction to the “hostile or

¹⁰⁴ Bevans, *Models*, 108.

¹⁰⁵ *Models*, 108.

¹⁰⁶ Two examples of this retelling occur in Boeve, *IT*, 97-98 (n.9); and *GIH*, 90-91.

¹⁰⁷ See *GIH*, 176. “The person who desires to know God must look to Jesus Christ who, as a human person, definitively revealed God in history. At the same time, divine truth for Christians is also to be located in concrete events and narratives. It is only in the all-too-historical, the concrete, the accidental, that God can become manifest, that God becomes manifest. This does not mean that God coincides with the concrete and the accidental, but that the concrete and the accidental make the manifestation of God possible, not in spite of but rather thanks to the concrete and the accidental. Every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God’s manifestation.” Mention of Boeve’s recounting of the story of the Iftar dinner points to Boeve’s understanding of experience as revelation and the influence of Schillebeeckx in this regard. Additionally, a discussion of Boeve’s retrieval of apophatics is useful for understanding how he conceives of revelation, especially as it is implied here. See Ch. 4 in the present work for such a discussion.

indifferent culture” of the contemporary world—a world that it defines as ambiguous and insufficient, and which needs the gospel to shape it and form it.¹⁰⁸ According to Bevens, in this model revelation is understood as “the total fact of Christ.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, the truth of Christ in his incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection is taken to provide “the clue to all of human and indeed cosmic history, and it is against this fact that all human experience or context is to be measured.”¹¹⁰ In this model, the Christian gospel is considered the only means by which history can be understood. It provides the only authentic way to live—counter to the contemporary culture of “materialism, individualism, consumerism, militarism, and quick gratification.”¹¹¹ According to this model, Christians represent a “contrast community,” living as “resident aliens” in a culture with which they are increasingly at odds.¹¹²

Bevens cautions that this model can tend towards being *anticultural*, rather than countercultural. In its extreme form, Bevens notes, the countercultural model can lead to sectarianism, but at the very least it can tend towards a “Christian exclusivism” (although he points out that some proponents of this model are careful to articulate a more inclusive understanding of revelation in Christ).¹¹³ In any event, Bevens notes that the intention of proponents of the countercultural model is not that the Christian closes himself or herself off from the culture, but engages with it in such a way that he or she becomes a beacon or model of the truth that is Christ.¹¹⁴

In *God Interrupts History*, Boeve criticises what could be considered an extreme example of countercultural theology which has gained momentum as a result of the perceived “postmodern crisis of modernity”: the movement of “Radical Orthodoxy,” espoused in the work of John Milbank and others.¹¹⁵ Boeve contends that the Radical Orthodoxy movement takes an anti- or pre-modern

¹⁰⁸ Bevens, *Models*, 119, 120.

¹⁰⁹ *Models*, 121.

¹¹⁰ *Models*, 121.

¹¹¹ *Models*, 122.

¹¹² *Models*, 119. Bevens draws the term “contrast community” from Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, translated by John Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹¹³ *Models*, 125-7.

¹¹⁴ *Models*, 122, 125.

¹¹⁵ Boeve, *GIH*, 36. This crisis is perceived as the “destruction” of the modern theological project of correlation, a destruction that it considered to be the result of a “too contextual” theology. Boeve writes: “The anti-modern diagnosis accuses modern correlation theology of being too contextual. The modern context is said to have infected the Christian faith and thereby disempowered it. The remedy is to affirm a theological discourse that breaks with the dynamics of the modern and postmodern context and offers a radical counter narrative.” *GIH*, 37. Bevens explicitly lists Milbank in his examples of proponents of the countercultural model, along with Leslie Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas, and some elements of John Paul II’s work. Bevens, *Models*, 124. Boeve also contends that the later works of Joseph Ratzinger, particularly during his time as pope (between 2005 and 2013), have “similar features” to radical orthodoxy. See Boeve, “OPC,” 86. From the collection of Milbank’s work, Boeve explicitly cites in *God Interrupts History* 31 (n.3): J. Milbank, “‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism’: A Short Summa in Forty-Two Responses to Unasked Questions,” *Modern Theology* 7 (1991):225-37; and J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

approach to theology.¹¹⁶ Citing Milbank, he notes that Radical Orthodoxy “seeks to reconfigure theological truth” after modernity by calling the tradition back to “a neo-Augustinian conceptual framework.”¹¹⁷ This “reconfiguration,” he says, is founded on “a profoundly dual understanding of reality” and holds the presumption of “rigid discontinuity” between faith and context.¹¹⁸ In line with what Bevans calls the countercultural model of contextual theology, Boeve contends that in Radical Orthodoxy the Christian tradition is understood to provide a counter-narrative to the secularism and nihilism of postmodernity, with the (Western) postmodern critical consciousness understood to be “helpful only in revealing the false presumptions of the modern projects of auto-sufficiency and emancipation.”¹¹⁹

Like Boeve, Bevans notes a concern with the analysis of context seen in countercultural models of contextual theology. He posits that the main criticism of an approach such as this is that it does not account for the multiple expressions of religiosity that are found in the contemporary context, nor does it engage these expressions in such a way as to lead to a deeper self-understanding. Bevans writes:

Particularly in a Western context that is becoming more and more multireligious, a way has to be found to discover commonalities and continuities within other religious traditions rather than to emphasise the discontinuity and superiority of the “Christian fact” and the “Christian story.” Jesus Christ is the clue to human history and human and cosmic well-being, and Christians believe that he is the clearest and best clue. But just as important in our multireligious age is to acknowledge that there very well may be other clues as well.¹²⁰

Boeve contends that the counter-cultural approach of Radical Orthodoxy “maintains that the integrity of reality and the reality of truth can be ensured only from an exclusively theological perspective.”¹²¹ The reflexivity evident in other models of contextual theology—where dialogue with the world is understood to “contribute[-] intrinsically to our understanding of the Christian faith”—is

¹¹⁶ According to Boeve, some proponents of this approach consider themselves to be “postmodern” but only “in the chronological sense: ... a theology after modernity, a theology that leaves modernity behind, or at the very least its secular presuppositions.” *GIH*, 36.

¹¹⁷ *GIH*, 36. Boeve here quotes Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 15.

¹¹⁸ Boeve writes, “The relationship between the eternal and the temporal, the heavenly and the worldly, the Church and the world, is considered to be hierarchical and asymmetrical, and must be strictly differentiated, without confusion. Orthodoxy is the remedy against the failures of the context.” “OPC,” 86; *GIH*, 37.

¹¹⁹ “OPC,” 86. “Auto-sufficiency,” “emancipation” and “rationality” are considered “modernity’s so-called master narratives,” which (along with other thinkers) Boeve contends “have lost their plausibility” as a result of the critical consciousness of postmodernity. *GIH*, 36. It is important to note the reference to “Western” postmodernism here. Boeve notes that “the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ movement... has taken the Anglo-Saxon world by storm and acquired a place of importance therein.” *GIH*, 36. Moreover, one of the important criticisms that Bevans raises with regards to the countercultural model of contextual theology is that it is predominantly practised by white, middle-class, Western theologians. See Bevans, *Models*, 125-26.

¹²⁰ *Models*, 127.

¹²¹ Boeve, “OPC,” 86.

rejected in this countercultural model.¹²² Dialogue is encouraged only to affirm the authority of Christian truth and to “call[-] the world to conversion.”¹²³

In the conclusion of *Models of Contextual Theology*, Bevans muses that each of the six models has a place in theology today; each of them necessarily comes to the fore at different times, depending on the circumstances and *context*.¹²⁴ As a *postmodern* contextual theologian who intends to offer a theology which, he says, “continues the theology of the former context, but at the same time becomes radically other,” we could say that Boeve engages implicitly each of Bevans’ first five models in the development of his theology of interruption (although as I noted earlier he does not explicitly refer to these models as such); however, he “firmly rejects” countercultural approaches to theology.¹²⁵ As we will see in the next chapter, in line with the *transcendental* model, Boeve’s theology of interruption calls for an openness on the part of the self to the interruptive grace-event of God and, with the *anthropological* approach, he upholds the recognition that God is manifest in hidden and surprising ways in everyday human existence. He draws from *translation* models but calls for reflexivity to mark such approaches, seeking a multi-correlational rather than mono-correlational method, and he explicitly recognises the importance of dialogue (as per the *synthetic* model). Throughout his work, the influence of the action-oriented approach of the model of *praxis* is clear.

As I noted, in his rejection of countercultural approaches, Boeve particularly criticises Radical Orthodoxy for its negative estimation of the contemporary context. He argues that Radical Orthodoxy presumes a secularised context and defines pluralisation only negatively (“as relativism, chaos and the absence of perspective”).¹²⁶ As a reaction to this negative diagnosis of the contemporary context, Boeve argues, Radical Orthodoxy replaces the “principle of continuity” between context and tradition (as evident in correlation theologies, such as the *translation* and *praxis* approaches) with one of “rigid discontinuity.”¹²⁷ In doing so, he says, countercultural models ignore the possibility that God may be revealed in hitherto unknown ways in the very events of the world.

In the movement of Radical Orthodoxy, orthodoxy is defined as the instance whereby the deposit of Christian truth is reaffirmed within the context.¹²⁸ However, Boeve contends that “orthodoxy is not a closed set of doctrines and practices, to be held to or withdrawn from, but involves opening ourselves to the truth of a tradition and its identity-constructing capacity, without absolutizing or encompassing that truth.”¹²⁹ He argues that an attitude of openness on the part of

¹²² “OPC,” 86.

¹²³ “OPC,” 86.

¹²⁴ Bevans, *Models*, 139-40.

¹²⁵ Boeve, “BW,” 364; *GIH*, 37.

¹²⁶ *GIH*, 37.

¹²⁷ *GIH*, 37.

¹²⁸ “OPC,” 86.

¹²⁹ “OPC,” 89.

the subject allows for the recognition that revelation occurs not only in scripture and tradition, but also in the very events, encounters and experiences of everyday life.¹³⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, proponents of Radical Orthodoxy have criticised Boeve's approach for placing too much emphasis on the (postmodern) context to the detriment of tradition. Richard Schenk, for example, argues that Boeve sacrifices the tradition by "conforming" and "assimilating" it to the postmodern context.¹³¹ Boeve's response to Schenk (rightly, I would argue) recalls the central theme of *Gaudium et spes*: the Second Vatican Council's appeal for dialogue with the world.¹³² For Boeve, the call to "read the signs of the times" did not end with the criticism of modernity, but is an ongoing call for the life of the Church. He contends that the task of recontextualisation stems from "the intuition that there is an intrinsic relationship between tradition development and context" and that theology must therefore seek ways to recontextualise, or "incarnate," Christian faith today.¹³³ Boeve's use of the term "incarnate," here, seems to be a deliberate reference to Christ's incarnation (I take up this discussion in chapter 4). Indeed, Boeve argues that recontextualisation is not undertaken merely "on contextual grounds," but first "on theological grounds."¹³⁴ The Council's call for dialogue with the world has not changed with the postmodern criticism of modernity and with the changed cultural context, Boeve argues, but what has changed is "the way in which this dialogue can proceed."¹³⁵

"Between Bridge and Rupture"¹³⁶

By affirming the positions of a range of contextual theologies and engaging their proponents in his work, Boeve makes it clear that he does indeed aim to posit a contextual theology within a postmodern pluralising paradigm, in contrast to the assumption that seems to underlie the statement by Lam Cong Quy, which I noted earlier.¹³⁷ In *God Interrupts History*, Boeve writes,

¹³⁰ See Boeve's discussion of the insights from *Gaudium et spes* and *Dei verbum*, in, respectively: "GSCM."; "BMADGS."; "Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Lessons from Vatican II's Constitution *Dei verbum* for Contemporary Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (2011). For more on the notion of revelation as ongoing, see n. 82 in the present chapter.

¹³¹ Richard Schenk, "Officium signa temporum perscrutandi: New Encounters of Gospel and Culture in the Context of the New Evangelization," in *Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times and Interpreting them in Light of the Gospel*, ed. J Verstraeten (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 167-205. As we will see in Ch. 8, Conor Sweeney makes a similar accusation, but his concern is particularly with Boeve's seemingly "vague" sacramental imagination, which he contends is the result of Boeve's desire to avoid any onto-theological tendencies. See p. 255ff.

¹³² See Lieven Boeve, "Beyond the Modern and Anti-modern Dilemma: Theological Method in a Postmodern European Context," in *Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times and Interpreting them in Light of the Gospel*, ed. J Verstraeten, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 165-66.

¹³³ "BMADTM," 166.

¹³⁴ "BMADTM," 166.

¹³⁵ "BMADTM," 166.

¹³⁶ *GIH*, 6, 42, 57.

¹³⁷ That Boeve distances himself from contextual theology due to the recognition of plurality in the current context (see p. 57).

Religious experience, rituals, and the relationship between religion and science are frequently occurring themes in our contemporary culture. Drawn to this renewal of interest, the theology of interruption may discover that it has much to say about it from its own theological inspiration, *not so much as a counter-cultural voice* but rather as *a voice in the midst of culture*. The context thus appears to encourage theology to renew itself from within and to re-establish a contextually plausible and theologically legitimate place for itself in a culture within which it most assuredly has a role to play, albeit a different role when compared with the past.¹³⁸

Boeve's reference to two very different approaches to contextual theology in the quoted text above ("as a counter-cultural voice" and "as a voice in the midst of culture") affirms his contention that the relationship between tradition and context must be marked by mutually interruptive dialogue. His theology is one that takes a positive view of the postmodern context—with its recognition of particularity, contingency, heterogeneity and difference, and with its criticism of totalising, universalising worldviews—and at the same time, it recognises the important place of the Christian tradition in such a context.¹³⁹

Interrupting Metz and Schillebeeckx

In the above discussion, on the praxis approach as an example of contextual theology, I noted the important influence of Metz and Schillebeeckx on Boeve's work and I discussed Schillebeeckx in some detail. The influence of Metz bears further discussion here, particularly as it relates to Boeve's conception of the nature and role of contextual-political theology. In "The Interruption of Political Theology," Boeve contends that it is the very interruption of the tradition posed by the contextual processes of pluralisation and detraditionalisation that compels the contemporary recontextualisation of the Christian narrative to the extent that it can be considered as an open narrative.¹⁴⁰ He draws the notion of interruption from Metz, who posits that "the shortest definition of religion [is] interruption," and he uses this notion to demonstrate the ways in which shifts in context interrupt Christian faith and propel tradition development.¹⁴¹

According to Boeve, Metz considers the Christian tradition to be marked by reflexive "interruption": it interrupts its "self-perception" through the notions of "praxis, remembrance [and] suffering," and it interrupts the world (context) by way of a "critical-active engagement" within it.¹⁴² However, unlike Boeve's theology of interruption, which understands the Christian narrative to be not only historically situated but also intimately bound up in its context, Metz understands the

¹³⁸ Boeve, *GIH*, 58, emphasis mine.

¹³⁹ See Ch. 6 for a more extensive discussion of the postmodern criticism of modernity.

¹⁴⁰ Boeve, "IPT," 54.

¹⁴¹ Metz, *FH*, 171, thesis vi. As we will see in Ch. 4, where Metz's conception of interruption is contained to a discussion of the mutual interruptions that take place on the contextual level when religious tradition meets context, Boeve additionally considers the notion of interruption as a theological category, thus offering it as a philosophical-conceptual approach for engaging theological questions.

¹⁴² Boeve, "IPT," 57.

Christian narrative as an interruptive counterforce against the generalised cultural amnesia reflected in the world.¹⁴³ In his thirty-five theses on timelessness, Metz juxtaposes Christianity's eschatological concept of time with the empty notion of time that he sees in secular society and he challenges society's indifference towards suffering, which he contends is a result of being resigned to "a form of pragmatic rationality."¹⁴⁴ "Catastrophes are reported on the radio in between pieces of music," he writes, but "[t]he music continues to play, like the audible passage of time that moves forward inexorably and can be held back by nothing.... 'When crime is committed, just as the rain falls, no one cries: Halt!'"¹⁴⁵ Boeve summarises Metz's assessment of the modern world as marked by "forgetfulness, relativism, indifferent pluralism, [and] anti-universalism," and notes that Metz criticises secular society for "too easily adopting the logic of the market."¹⁴⁶ For Metz, modernity's forgetfulness of history is counterbalanced by the "dangerous memory" of Christ's suffering and resurrection, as it "anticipates the future as a future of those who are oppressed."¹⁴⁷ This is a dangerous and "liberating memory that oppresses and questions the present," Metz writes, "because it reminds us not of some open future, but precisely this future and because it compels Christians constantly to change themselves so that they are able to take this future into account."¹⁴⁸ To this effect, Metz calls Christians also towards a recognition of the centrality of praxis in Christian life.¹⁴⁹ In the Christian narrative, the paradox of suffering and freedom in Christ provides an inextricable thread throughout the narrative of salvation, and it is this very notion that Metz argues provides the impetus for the interruption of modernity.¹⁵⁰

However, in "The Interruption of Political Theology," Boeve calls Metz to account for forgetting his own mandate. While Metz drew from the late-modern contemporary contextual critical consciousness in developing his political theology, which affirmed the reflexive interruption of tradition and context, Boeve notes that when confronted with the shift towards a new (postmodern) critical consciousness "Metz interrupts the process of recontextualization itself."¹⁵¹ He contends that Metz is "no longer able to deal with the interruption the postmodern context provokes within his late-modern political-theological paradigm."¹⁵² Boeve attributes this to Metz's limited dialogue with postmodern "thinkers of difference," as well as to his negative estimation of the context, which,

¹⁴³ See Johann Baptist Metz, "The Future of Faith in a Hominized World," in *Theology of the World* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 56-77; also, "Memory," in *FH*, 184-97.

¹⁴⁴ *FH*, 170, theses III, V.

¹⁴⁵ *FH*, 170, thesis V.

¹⁴⁶ Boeve, "IPT," 57.

¹⁴⁷ Metz, *FH*, 90.

¹⁴⁸ *FH*, 90.

¹⁴⁹ "The Christian idea of imitation and the apocalyptic idea of imminent expectation belong together." *FH*, 176, thesis XXVIII.

¹⁵⁰ See "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," in *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity and Modernity*, ed. Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

¹⁵¹ Boeve, "IPT," 59.

¹⁵² "IPT," 59.

Boeve argues, leads Metz to an assumption of discontinuity between tradition and context in postmodernity.¹⁵³ In this light, Boeve takes up the task of continuing Metz's program of dealing with the "aporias of late-modernity," while bringing them into dialogue with a post-modern critical consciousness.¹⁵⁴ In doing so, he aims to achieve a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative that is both continuous and discontinuous with Metz's political theology: a *postmodern* political theology.

I began this chapter with mention of Boeve's aim to "continue[-] the theology of the former context, but at the same time" offer a theology which is "radically other."¹⁵⁵ As I have argued throughout this chapter, Boeve is cognisant of the need to draw from the insights of modern theology, but he also recognises that the postmodern critical consciousness brings *new* insights to the dialogue between context and tradition. Schillebeeckx's understanding of revelation and interpretation in his later work are particularly helpful for Boeve in this regard. In Schillebeeckx's early work, Boeve notes that he endeavours to develop a "theo-ontological" "theology of culture," which is anchored in a Thomistic understanding of the relationship between creation and creator (where creation functions both to exhibit and mediate divine activity).¹⁵⁶ However, Schillebeeckx's "hermeneutical turn" in the late 1960s led him to develop what Boeve calls a "critical-hermeneutical, praxis-oriented theology," which I briefly presented above.¹⁵⁷ For Boeve, Schillebeeckx's hermeneutical turn and the centrality of experience in his theology provides the theoretical framework for a distinction between older contextual interpretations (*interpretaments*) and new contexts (or experiences) which are already bound up in and interpreted in light of the experience of revelation (*interpretandum*).¹⁵⁸ According to Boeve, in Schillebeeckx's work this distinction offers a dialectic which "fosters a continuous process of tradition development, in which ruptures do not threaten the continuity of tradition, but may be urged precisely to guarantee this continuity."¹⁵⁹

To this effect, Boeve's engagement with Schillebeeckx occurs at a hermeneutical level, considered against the background of a contemporary philosophical critical consciousness.¹⁶⁰ This engagement is evident in the following passage from *God Interrupts History*:

In the inextricable dynamics of experience and interpretation, which Schillebeeckx saw as the source of the development of tradition, tradition does indeed involve itself with the context, and the critical-practical re-evaluation of theology occurs in dialogue and/or confrontation

¹⁵³ "IPT," 59.

¹⁵⁴ "IPT," 58, 60.

¹⁵⁵ "BW," 364.

¹⁵⁶ "ESES," 10; "EAS," 199. On Schillebeeckx's theology of culture, Boeve cites the first four volumes of Schillebeeckx, *Theologische peilingen* [Theological Soundings] (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1972).

¹⁵⁷ "EAS," 199, 200.

¹⁵⁸ "EAS," 210.

¹⁵⁹ "EAS," 210. Elsewhere, Boeve writes, "For Schillebeeckx, it is the current faith experience that helps renew traditional interpretations, in order for tradition to be a living tradition. Interpretation learns from experience," *GIH*, 71. And elsewhere still: "The interplay of experience and interpretation constitute the engine of tradition development," "TIE," 24.

¹⁶⁰ "ESES," 1, 21.

with this context. Nevertheless, this does not stem from a presupposed continuity between tradition and context, but rather from respecting the difference between both—the very difference theology has learned to observe and value as constitutive of the dialogue with the current context. This is the lesson that makes it possible for us to consider the structure of the Christian faith experience from a contextual-theological perspective.¹⁶¹

For Boeve, contextual theology in postmodernity is not about correlating experiences, or ethics, or questions, or answers (as was the aim of his late-modern counterparts) but about the contextual critical consciousness that undergirds experiences, question and answers, and the insights that the *postmodern* contextual critical consciousness can provide for the consideration, renewal and recontextualisation of Christianity (and Christian theology) today.

In chapter 2, I explored Boeve's argument that the Christian tradition reveals an intimate and inextricable relationship with the contexts in which it has been developed and passed on, and this relationship is affirmed in Schillebeeckx's contention that experience determines tradition.¹⁶² We know that Boeve sides with Schillebeeckx, here, rather than with proponents of Radical Orthodoxy who argue the reverse, but he adds an important qualification. In the past, the dialogue between context and tradition has led not only to continuity in the history of the Christian tradition, he argues, but also to the *interruption* of the tradition such that it has needed to "recontextualise" in order to remain contextually plausible. To put this another way, the philosophical critical consciousness of the context has historically interrupted the tradition, causing the renewal (recontextualisation) of the *religious* critical consciousness of the Christian tradition, which, in turn, has led to the criticism and renewal of the context. In this light, Boeve contends that it is possible (and necessary) to "think of Christian experience as being both distinctive and [as] maintaining an intrinsic relation between tradition and context."¹⁶³ It is in this way that Boeve *interrupts* Schillebeeckx's notion of experience.

Boeve's engagement with modern contextual theologies such as those of Metz and Schillebeeckx serves to elucidate his theology of interruption from a cultural and theological standpoint, but it also serves to highlight the ways in which Boeve uses the category of interruption to recontextualise the Christian narrative for the postmodern context. In *God Interrupts History*, he writes:

¹⁶¹ *GIH*, 86.

¹⁶² The following excerpt, to which I referred in chapter 2 (see Ch. 2, n. 276) aptly summarises Boeve's argument in this regard: "A non-cumulative, dynamic perspective on the development of tradition, such as recontextualisation, implies that we are not simply receivers of the tradition that comes to us from the past. We are *not only heirs to the inheritance, we are also its testators*. Living tradition is also our responsibility. By way of recontextualisation, we are called to experience and reflect upon Christianity's offer of meaning and to pass it on. This certainly does not mean that the tradition simply adapts itself—some will say 'surrenders' itself—to time and context. What it does imply is that every time and context challenges us to give shape to the message of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ in a contemporary way. If we do not accept this challenge we run the risk of sliding into inauthenticity," *IT*, 24.

¹⁶³ "TIE," 32-33.

It is into this debate [regarding the ‘category of experience in contemporary religious philosophical and theological discussions’] that we tread in an effort to reconceptualize the concept of religious experience as an ‘experience of interruption.’ We do so in discussion with modern theologies in which experience, often in a tense relationship with tradition, is portrayed as the primary instrument Christians can use to bring their faith up to date. On the other hand, we also enter into debate with (literally) postmodern theologies that portray religious experience as a rupture with the present culture of nihilism and loss of meaning and which jettison every intrinsic relationship between context and Christian belief.¹⁶⁴

When Boeve contends, therefore, that his approach by way of a theology of interruption “continues the theology of the former context, but at the same time becomes radically other,” he intends to posit a way of approaching theology and context that holds in tension both continuity and discontinuity; that is, his theology affirms the role of tradition development in line with the past, but it also welcomes the interruption of the new to propel new understandings about God and God’s relationship with the world.¹⁶⁵ He contends that through a theology of interruption, it is possible to take adequate account of the tradition while at the same time recognising that the context (which he conceives to be postmodern) continues to shape and (re)define the tradition. In short, his theology of interruption bears the insight that God’s self-revelation can be understood not merely in the texts and history of the Christian tradition, but also in the context, where God’s creativity endures.

One of the ways in which Boeve holds the tension between continuity and discontinuity is to offer his theology of interruption as a “*Korrektivtheologie*.”¹⁶⁶ He credits Metz for this term, explaining that according to Metz, *Korrektivtheologie* “understands itself as a corrective with respect to existing theological projects and systems.”¹⁶⁷ Metz posits that theological continuity “can only be maintained or acquired by practical fundamental theology if the latter is seen as a corrective with regard to existing theological systems and approaches and if it preserves and passes on the substance and intention of those systems in a critical and corrective relationship with them.”¹⁶⁸ According to Metz, *Korrektivtheologie* is continuous with the tradition while also offering something new. In his criticism and revision of the transcendental theology of Karl Rahner, Metz himself offered a *Korrektivtheologie* in light of his understanding of the centrality of praxis and argued that “fundamental theology is bound to be systematically interrupted” by “the praxis of faith in its mystical and its political dimension.”¹⁶⁹ As we have seen, Boeve contends that in his own approach, the interruption to theology not only takes place by way of “the praxis of faith” but also by way of

¹⁶⁴ *GIH*, 59.

¹⁶⁵ “*BW*,” 364.

¹⁶⁶ “*IPT*,” 53.

¹⁶⁷ “*IPT*,” 53, n.2.

¹⁶⁸ He continues, “What is more, the form of this corrective may also be the way which we are given today and are expected to follow, by means of which a purely theological continuity will succeed in theology.” Metz, *FH*, 10-11.

¹⁶⁹ *FH*, 10. Metz writes: “Karl Rahner’s transcendental theology can only be continued without a break if it is criticized and corrected with the help of experiences and a praxis that are not derived from the theological system hitherto in use.” *FH*, 13, n.15.

the context in which the faith is situated. Schillebeeckx, too, undertook a *Korrektivtheologie*, Boeve says, correcting his own (initially) neo-Thomistic theology by way of a hermeneutical turn and positing in its place a “critical-hermeneutical, praxis-oriented theology.”¹⁷⁰ Boeve follows Schillebeeckx’s lead through the use of hermeneutics and offers his own *Korrektivtheologie*: a correction to Schillebeeckx’s work, by way of an engagement with postmodernity.¹⁷¹

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that by developing the notion of interruption within an open Christian narrative, Boeve responds to and takes seriously the postmodern interruption of late-modern contextual theology. As a contextual category, a theology of interruption functions in several ways. First, it acts as a critical-corrective bridge between late-modern theology and the postmodern context. Second, it affirms the intimate relationship between experience and interpretation and the role of experience in shaping and determining the faith-life of the Christian (in line with Schillebeeckx’s ‘theology of experience’) and at the same time calls into question the notion that the gap between human experience and religious experience can be bridged by a mono-correlational approach.¹⁷² Third, it interrupts the modern concept of empirical experience as necessary for the verification of truth, affirming instead Schillebeeckx’s notion of experience as intimately bound to interpretation.¹⁷³ Fourth, it affirms Boeve’s contention that the Christian tradition must reflect an ongoing dialogue with the context, even—and especially—when the tradition finds itself within a new context or when incremental shifts take place within the context. And finally, with a nod to the kataphatic-apophatic tradition of Christian theology, while a theology of interruption recognises that the passing on of the memory of God’s self-revelation in history necessarily takes place through “language, tradition [and] narrativity,” it also recognises the role of new and changing contexts in compelling the tradition towards a deeper understanding of God, and of the relationship between God and the world.¹⁷⁴ In this way, a theology of interruption enables the Christian tradition to be considered a plausible and legitimate voice in the midst of postmodern culture.

Having surveyed Boeve’s key philosophical and theological partners in chapters 2 and 3, respectively, and having explored the ways in which he engages these partners in his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as an *open* narrative, I now turn to an explication of the main elements of his theology of interruption. In chapters 4 and 5, we will see that what is presented as a contextual category in political theology takes on a theological frame in Boeve’s project. For Boeve, the postmodern interruption of political theology “leads to a theology of interruption,” that

¹⁷⁰ Boeve, “EAES,” 200; “ESES,” 2.

¹⁷¹ “ESES,” 2.

¹⁷² “TIE,” 34.

¹⁷³ “TIE,” 34; *GIH*, 82-3.

¹⁷⁴ *GIH*, 82.

is, interruption defines the Christian narrative not only by way of its relationship with the world (its context) but also as a result of God's self-revelation as the One who interrupts.¹⁷⁵ In the next chapter, I explore how Boeve develops the notion of interruption as a theological category and I discuss the central tenets of his approach.

¹⁷⁵ "IPT," 59.

Chapter 4. From an Open Narrative to a Theology of Interruption

“The shortest definition of religion: interruption,” said Johann Baptist Metz in 1977, in his thirty-five theses on timelessness.¹ As a political-fundamental theologian, Metz intended to offer this statement as a correction to the tendency of religion to focus on eschatological expectation without due regard for the necessity of praxis in the present.² His statement reflects his contention that religions must interrupt the secular context and that the secular context, in turn, must interrupt believers on the level of praxis. This insight captures Boeve’s attention and compels him to consider the notion of interruption from both a contextual and a *theological* perspective. As we will see, by “thinking in terms of difference” and thus reflecting a postmodern critical consciousness, Boeve reconceives the relationship between God and the world, and conceptualises God’s self-revelation as interruptive of hegemonic metanarratives.³ In chapter 2, I explored the mutually critical relationship between philosophical critical consciousness and religious critical consciousness, and I discussed Boeve’s application of the insights of a postmodern philosophical critical consciousness in order to re-imagine Lyotard’s *le différend* as the *interruptive* grace-event of God. In chapter 3, I explored Boeve’s interruption and recontextualisation of modern correlation theologies, which he achieves by again bringing a postmodern critical consciousness into dialogue with a modern religious critical consciousness. In the present chapter, I will examine the ways in which Boeve develops and articulates his theology of interruption and I will elucidate the main insights of his approach. In doing so, we will see that not only does Boeve posit the Christian narrative as interruptive of the current (postmodern) context, but he also contends that the notion of interruption is “narratively signified” in the Christian tradition.⁴

Context and Tradition: A Mutual Interruption

Essential to Boeve’s conception of a theology of interruption is the understanding that it functions as a substantial *contextual* and *theological* hermeneutical category, providing the hermeneutical “key,” or lens, for the consideration of the relationship between theology and context and of the relationship between theology and God.⁵ The discussion in chapters 2 and 3 has laid the foundations

¹ Metz, *FH*, 171, thesis vi.

² *FH*, 169. As Boeve explains, Metz’s thesis is that “Christian faith can never slip unpunished into a sort of bourgeois religion, ... nor withdraw itself from or against its context.” Instead, Christians are called to “seek out the boundaries of life and coexistence, moved as they are by the human histories of suffering that compel them toward a preferential option for the poor, the suffering and the oppressed. By its very nature, the Christian faith ... interrupt[s] the ideologies of the powerful and the powerlessness of the victims.” Boeve, *GIH*, 203-4. Boeve cites J.B. Metz as one of the first to define religion as interruption, although Metz uses the term in a political (practical) sense, rather than as Boeve does, in an epistemological sense.

³ *GIH*, 205.

⁴ *GIH*, 205.

⁵ “RD,” 119.

for the conception of a theology of interruption as a *contextual* hermeneutical category, where context and tradition are understood to interrupt each other and to propel the task of recontextualisation. In *God Interrupts History*, Boeve argues that as a contextual category, interruption is the “exponent of what can be termed our contemporary *contextual* critical consciousness,” which reflects the mutual interruption that takes place between context and tradition.⁶ As we have seen, the postmodern critical consciousness is marked by an awareness of plurality, heterogeneity, difference, contingency, and particularity. Boeve contends that when Christians are confronted with this philosophical critical consciousness, they become aware of the particularity of their narratives and are compelled to attend to elements of their discourse(s) that reduce this particularity, seek uniformity, or make universal claims that subsume or ignore differences.⁷ Boeve explains, “The postmodern contextual critical consciousness, gained from the confrontation with plurality and difference, informs the Christian narrative of its borders at this juncture and criticizes the tendency, inherent in every narrative (thus also in the Christian narrative), to withdraw into its own self-secured identity.”⁸

The notion of interruption as a contextual hermeneutical category assists theologians to think about the specificity of Christian discourses when confronted with “religious otherness” and interrupts any tendencies towards absolutes.⁹ The result of such a confrontation leads Christian thinkers towards an awareness of their truth claims and those of others, causing them to formulate claims to truth on the basis of the “irreducible narrativity and particularity” of their discourses.¹⁰ Here, Boeve argues, “the confrontation with the other *interrupts* the Christian narrative at the point at which it tends to close itself off.”¹¹ In other words, when confronted with the contextual critical consciousness of alterity, Christians are forced to recontextualise their religious critical consciousness.

Reflexively, the rediscovery of particularity allows Christians to engage critically with other narratives, criticising and countering tendencies to seek uniformity, claim mastery, or relativise the particular.¹² Inclinations towards the sublation of differences, which might have been found in a *modern* critical consciousness, are criticised to the extent that each partner in the dialogue becomes

⁶ *GIH*, 43.

⁷ *GIH*, 43-44.

⁸ *GIH*, 43.

⁹ *GIH*, 43.

¹⁰ *GIH*, 44. For example, a Christian entering into dialogue with a person from a different religious tradition might begin with a statement such as, “From the point of view of Christian faith,” For Boeve, this goes some way towards recognising the irreducible differences between Christian faith and other faith traditions and worldviews.

¹¹ *GIH*, 45, emphasis mine.

¹² *GIH*, 44.

aware of the particularity of their own (and others') discourses and becomes aware of the need to uphold the tension between the conflict of difference and the harmony of similarity.¹³ Boeve writes,

the rediscovery of its own particularity is also the manner in which the Christian narrative can be interruptive in the current context. Such interruption not only critically engages with other narratives that have closed themselves off or harden[ed] themselves in a fundamentalist way, it also warns us of the erosion of the particularity and alterity in many current discourses.¹⁴

The recognition of the diversity of particular narratives in the pluralising context leads to the critique of views which seem to be sympathetic towards religion, Boeve argues, but at the same time, it implies "a post-Christian functionalization of religiosity," which relativises and subordinates religion and other fundamental life options under a unifying discourse.¹⁵ In this way, the Christian narrative aware of its own narrativity and particularity becomes *interruptive* of the context and participates in the development of a new contextual critical consciousness.

God's Self-Revelation: Theological Interruption

As a contextual hermeneutical category, the notion of interruption can assist Christians to articulate the place of the Christian tradition within a detraditionalising and pluralising context, and it implies a reflexivity in the encounter with otherness, whereby confrontation with the other contributes to the articulation of a renewed religious critical consciousness. However, as a contextual category, interruption provides little help to Christians in the determination and understanding of the revelation of God in such an encounter.

As a *theological* hermeneutical category, however, the notion of interruption provides a compelling means of thinking about the nature of revelation in history, up to and including the contemporary context, and it is this notion that Boeve develops in his *theology of interruption*. He explains: "As a theological category, interruption structures the way in which we reflect upon the relationship in which God is engaged with God's creation" and allows for the continual recontextualisation of the Christian narrative.¹⁶ As we will see, in a theology of interruption the revelation of God is understood to occur in the event of the interruption of the other, and it is this

¹³ See the discussion in Ch. 2 on Lyotard's criticism of modern metanarratives.

¹⁴ Boeve, *GIH*, 44.

¹⁵ *GIH*, 44. Examples of the functionalisation of religion include the reductive position that religion simply fulfils the religious dimension of humanity, or the need for ritualisation, or that it provides effective therapy against loss. To be sure, Boeve agrees that religion does fulfil these functions, however, he argues that it should "not be reduced to such functions." (44-45). Refer also to the discussion, in Ch. 3, of Boeve's criticism of modern correlation theologies. He argues that when applied uncritically in the postmodern context, correlation theologies can lead to the relativisation of Christian faith.

¹⁶ *GIH*, 45.

insight that Boeve argues can assist Christians in the development and articulation of identity in the pluralising, detraditionalising, context.¹⁷

As a theological category, Boeve contends that interruption provides a “key” for reading and understanding the God of the scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. He argues that each time a narrative tends towards hegemony, oppresses the vulnerable, silences a victim, or seeks to contain or grasp God, it is “broken open by God or on behalf of God.”¹⁸ From the Hebrew scriptures, he cites, for example, God’s intervention through Moses in Egypt against Pharaoh’s oppressive reign, the testimony of the prophets, who denounced corruption and challenged oppression, and the Flood narrative of Genesis 6-9.¹⁹

In my own consideration of the Hebrew Scriptures, two examples from Genesis come to mind. The first is the story of the *Tower of Babel* (Gen 11:1-9) where, from the very first verse, we see the Shemites claiming that they know better than God. Richard J. Clifford points out in his commentary on this narrative that the Shemites had been commanded by God to spread throughout their lands but decided instead to settle together and build a city.²⁰ In an attempt to “make a name for [them]selves,” the Shemites begin to build “a tower that reaches to the heavens” (Gen 11:4). While Clifford notes that this is an instance of “human disobedience, ... the refusal to accept one’s place as a human in the universe under God,” an additional insight offered by Jacques Derrida provides a more nuanced—and perhaps, for our purposes, helpful—reading.²¹ In his deconstruction of the narrative, Derrida notes that by building the tower, the Shemites attempt to *master* the universe.²² As Kevin Hart explains, “‘shem’ means ‘name’.”²³ According to Hart, Derrida posits that “in building a tower that reaches into heaven the Shemites wish to impose not just their language but more particularly their proper name upon the entire universe.”²⁴ In the end, however, the Shemites’ attempt to unify their people, to make a name for themselves and place themselves at the level of the heavens, results not in unity, but in the *interruption* of God halting the building of the tower and “scatter[ing] them over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:9). Their claim towards

¹⁷ This is an important insight, which I will explore in depth below, and in Chs. 5 and 8. In Ch. 3, n. 82, I referred especially to Horner’s explanation of revelation (drawing from Ratzinger) as *both* God’s full self-disclosure in Christ and the personal revelation of God to individuals, which enacts a deepening of faith in Christ and an ever-deepening understanding of God’s mystery. As we will see, for Boeve, the event of difference is the locus of the personal revelation of God. He writes, “from within a Christian hermeneutics ..., the encounter with irreducible otherness may be precisely the place where traces of God become manifest.” “BMADGS,” 302.

¹⁸ *GIH*, 46.

¹⁹ *GIH*, 44, 133-35.

²⁰ Richard J. Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, “Genesis,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 17, n.14; 18, n.15. See, also, Clifford’s commentary on the narrative of the Tower of Babel in “Genesis,” 18, n.15.

²¹ “Genesis,” 18, n. 15.

²² See Jacques Derrida, “Des tours de Babel,” in *Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); also Hart’s exegesis of Derrida’s reading, in Hart, *Trespass*, 109-10. See Ch. 2, n. 264 in the present work.

²³ *Trespass*, 109.

²⁴ *Trespass*, 109.

totalisation thus results in their downfall by way of God's interruption. I will return to this narrative in chapter 8, when I consider the contention of some theologians that the narrative of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21) enacts the reversal of Babel.

A second example of God's interruption in the Hebrew scriptures can be seen in the epic narrative of Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37-50). In the story of Joseph, Roland E. Murphy writes, the "whole adventure [is] marked by uncanny events," events that Joseph later attributes to the acts (or, for our purposes, *interruption*) of God (Gen 45:5-8).²⁵ In this narrative, the interruption of the action (which is attributed to God) serves not only to break open the narrative each time it seems to close, but also to present the authors' understanding of God as instrumental in keeping the narrative open at every stage in order that it reach its fulfilment.²⁶ In the example at hand, we read that when Joseph is due to be murdered by his brothers, one brother (Reuben) convinces them to spare him (Gen 37). Joseph is bought as a slave by the captain of Pharaoh's guard and subsequently imprisoned, but he is later freed (an act attributed to God) when he is summoned to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, and he is given leadership of Egypt in return (Gen 39-41). When Joseph's brothers—in line to inherit the land of Israel—face death by famine, they journey to Egypt to find their favour in God's eyes restored at the hands of their forgiving brother (Gen 42-45). Each event in the story seems to occur in order eventually to secure a "change of heart" in Joseph's brothers (evidenced in Judah's speech to Joseph, Gen 44:18-25) so that they are equipped to inherit and carry on God's covenant with Israel.²⁷ Indeed, Joseph's explanation in Gen 45:5-8 affirms this: it "was all God's doing."²⁸

While we understand the Hebrew scriptures to be a collection of stories written over a period of nearly 1000 years and brought together at different times (often much later than when the stories were composed) to form the Canon, together they relate the narrative of God's salvific relationship with God's people in history. As such, the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures serve to interrupt each other. Not only do they highlight the ongoing revelation of God to the people throughout history, but they also reflect the people's *qualification* of God's revelation and their development of an ever-deepening understanding of the nature of God's relationship with them. The stories of the Tower of Babel, Joseph and his Brothers, and the examples offered by Boeve (Moses, the teachings of the prophets, and the Flood) serve as examples of this broader narrative, whereby God is revealed as a God who *interrupts* human history, opening the narratives of humankind each time they tend towards hegemony, claim mastery, or claim knowledge of the truth. As we saw in the

²⁵ Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 39, n. 66. As I discuss later, as interruption is a reflexive critical consciousness, an interruptive event is often only recognised as such *after* the event has taken place.

²⁶ In his commentary on Gen 37-50, Michael Fallon argues that the story of Joseph and his Brothers is not a compilation of separate stories, like the previous stories in the patriarchal narrative, but a "unified literary production." Michael Fallon, *The Book of Genesis: An Introductory Commentary*, Introductory Commentaries on the Sacred Scripture (Kensington, N.S.W.: Chevalier Press, 2008), 198.

²⁷ Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 40, n. 67.

²⁸ See "Genesis," 40, n. 68.

story of Joseph and his Brothers, the interruption of God is presented as no mere reaction to arbitrary human deeds but effects the unfolding of the narrative itself. In the same way, in the broader context of the Hebrew Scriptures, the narrative of salvation continually witnesses to the interruptive revelation of God, which serves to keep the narrative open. According to Boeve, this continually opened narrative of revelation reaches its fulfillment in Christ, who is the paradigm of the open narrative.

Christ as Paradigm

Applying the “key” of interruption to the New Testament, Boeve finds the ultimate image, or paradigm, of God’s interruption in the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. For Boeve, Christ bears witness to *le différénd* throughout his ministry by critiquing and *interrupting* the narratives of the first century.²⁹ Boeve writes that in his ministry,

Jesus forgives sins and heals the sick on behalf of God, opening new opportunities for those who were outcasts in the eyes of the religious and social authorities. On behalf of the same God, Jesus criticizes those who reduce religion to the mere observance of the Law, or to a scrupulous offering of the required sacrifices, or to political activism, etc. Jesus asks us to become like the children, like the poor, the outcast, and the persecuted (because they are blessed), like the widow who only has a single penny to sacrifice. He invites us to follow in the footsteps of the father embracing his younger, prodigal son (and not to partake in the incomprehension of the older son). He teaches us to recognize him in the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner, the naked, in short in the vulnerable and wounded other.³⁰

Moreover, in Jesus’ ministry (as also in the examples of Moses and the prophets, discussed above) the interruption of God is mediated not only by those *within* the narrative—the protagonists themselves—but also through the instances (or events) of “confrontation with otherness.”³¹ In many cases in Christ’s ministry, it is the confrontation with the “other” (with alterity, difference, or paradox) that provides the condition of possibility for God’s interruption. In this light, we can consider the “others” in the narratives of Jesus—the sick and sinners who come to Jesus; the man who is attacked and left for dead only to find help given by the Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37); or even the *listeners* to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, who had expectations of Jesus as one who would follow their own understanding of the law—as providing the means by which Jesus interrupts a hegemonic understanding of neighbourly conduct in the communities of the first century.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus acts not only as interrupter, by “breaking open” the oppressive narratives of the first century, but his own narratives, too, are challenged and broken open by those whom he encounters. Among other examples, Boeve cites the narrative of the

²⁹ In Ch. 2 (p. 36) I defined *le différénd* as the moment of indeterminacy where witness is given to the silenced or oppressed other of a discourse. I discuss this notion again in Ch. 7.

³⁰ Boeve, *GIH*, 46. For an extended discussion on Jesus as “God’s interrupter,” see *IT*, 115-46.

³¹ *GIH*, 46.

Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30).³² In this story, a Syrophoenician woman (a Gentile) hears about Jesus and goes to him while he visits a house in Tyre (presumably a Jewish house, but in a predominantly Gentile area). She implores him to cast out an “impure spirit” from her daughter (v.25). Jesus rebukes her, saying, “First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” (v.27). The woman replies, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v.28). Jesus then responds favourably: “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter” (v.29). Jesus’ initial exclusion of the woman, in favour of his Jewish hosts, is countered by the woman’s response. She challenges the exclusivity of salvation as something which is offered to Israelites only, and affirms her own inclusion (albeit as a recipient of the scraps). In this story, Boeve explains, “Jesus’ narrative about God is interrupted ... [and he learns that] God is made manifest *outside the boundaries of Israel*.”³³ In light of this insight and of the earlier examples I discussed, Boeve asserts that “the entire metaphorical constitution of the Christian narrative appears to be permeated by the interruption, on God’s behalf, of narratives, including one’s own narrative, through confrontation with otherness.”³⁴ I shall return to this notion later, when I discuss the implications of the theology of interruption for the recognition of alterity in the contemporary context.

Continuing with the theological explication of his theology of interruption, Boeve contends that it is not only the *ministry* of Jesus that serves to reveal God as “interrupter,” but as the “continual central point of reference” for Christians and Christian theology, Boeve posits that Christ is the “*locus* of revelation and mediation.”³⁵ He explains, “In his life, words and deeds, Jesus of Nazareth taught us to recognise ... God as interrupting Love,” that is, in Christ, we come to know God as infinite and ungraspable Love, a love that transcends human history and yet is radically present in experience.³⁶ In this way, we could say that as Word-made-flesh, Christ *is* the very interruption of God. Just as the interruptive grace-event of God is revealed in the incarnation, Boeve contends, the revelation of God as interruption comes to its fullness in the resurrection: the resurrection is the “paradigm of interruption.”³⁷ In Christ, he says, the Christian narrative is fundamentally open (and opened) and in the resurrection, we learn that even death is not closed. On this point, Boeve writes, “Even when God is eliminated, ... interruption still occurs. Belief in the Resurrection is the sharpest

³² Or Mt 15:21-28, where she is referred to as a Canaanite woman. Boeve discusses this text in *GIH*, 206.

³³ *GIH*, 206, emphasis mine. In a personal conversation with Boeve on 21.05.2019, he clarified his argument here with reference to the Holy Spirit. He said: “Here, the Spirit makes Jesus understand that the Spirit is at work in the other. I speak about God at work and God revealing, but from a trinitarian perspective, it is the Spirit in the other woman who drives her to Jesus. But the result is that Jesus understands his own faith better. The first interruption is the interruption of Jesus.” I return to this important insight in Ch. 8, when I discuss the implications of a theology of interruption for thinking about God as Trinity.

³⁴ *GIH*, 46.

³⁵ “CP,” 577. Boeve here cites Pierre Gisel, “*De grenzen van de christologie of de bekoring van de absoluteitheid*,” *Continuum* 1 (1997): 76.

³⁶ “SDP,” 269.

³⁷ *GIH*, 46.

expression of this. When narratives are forced shut, even unto death, God nevertheless still breaks them open.”³⁸

When Christians consider the incarnation and resurrection through the lens of an open narrative, Boeve contends that we are confronted with a fundamental paradox between “the word (our words) and the Word (the Logos)”; that is, while we are called to express in our narratives the experience of God in Christ, we nevertheless must recognise “the inarticulateness” of our words to grasp the truth in faith.³⁹ As I discussed in chapter 2, Boeve’s critical appropriation of Lyotard’s *le différend* (the critical element in an open narrative, the moment of indeterminacy in language which demands witnessing so as to avoid the tendency of narratives to close, exclude or subsume differences) leads to Boeve’s explication of grace as the interruptive event of God. For Boeve, witness to *le différend* as the interruptive grace-event in Christ leads to the contention that Christ *is* the interruptive grace-event of God. In other words, Christ not only witnesses to the interruption of God through his ministry but, through the incarnation and resurrection, Christ embodies God’s interruptive grace-event, interrupting the narratives of the first century and continuing to do so in our contemporary contexts.⁴⁰

Apophatic Theology and Radical Hermeneutics

When used as a theological category, the notion of interruption leads to an understanding of the Christian narrative as a discourse of God’s self-revelation *as* interruption itself.⁴¹ To put this differently: in an open Christian narrative, God is both radically *in* the narrative (in the sense that the narrative refers to God and relates the story of God’s dynamic relationship with creation) and God *transcends* the narrative. This recognition of the dynamic immanence-transcendence of God allows for Boeve’s recontextualisation of the *event* of revelation, so that he comes to understand revelation as God *interrupting* (breaking open) the narrative each time it closes in on itself.⁴² To this effect, Boeve contends, the incarnation teaches us that the concrete and contingent (in *particular* human history) is the condition of possibility for the manifestation of God.⁴³ God is revealed “in and through” Christ’s humanity, making revelation possible in the events of history.⁴⁴ Taking this a step further, Boeve notes that it is because of the incarnation that in the contemporary context, “every

³⁸ *GIH*, 47.

³⁹ “CP,” 580. Boeve points here to the important place of apophatics in his theology of interruption, a notion that I take up below, and in more detail in Ch. 5.

⁴⁰ “SDP,” 269.

⁴¹ “PNT,” 423.

⁴² “CCPC,” 466.

⁴³ *GIH*, 176.

⁴⁴ *GIH*, 177.

concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God's manifestation."⁴⁵

In part II of the present work, I will explore modern and postmodern understandings of the doctrine of the Trinity and the respective conceptions of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity. There, I will elucidate some of the main concerns raised by postmodern thinkers in relation to modern theology, particularly as the latter relies on metaphysical categories to elucidate the revelation of God and to express the relationship between humankind and the divine. With the notion of God *as* interruption, Boeve potentially replaces one metaphysical understanding of God for another. However, as I discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 3, Boeve's retrieval and use of theological and philosophical apophatics underpins his theology of interruption and (as we will see in further detail below) this move allows him to qualify the notion of interruption as *exceeding* the bounds of language.

Boeve's contention in this regard can be seen in his treatment of the dogmas of the incarnation and Christ's dual natures.⁴⁶ He argues that these dogmas call attention to the ever-present need for a hermeneutical engagement with the context. In Christ, God both "enables and escapes" the concrete, Boeve argues.⁴⁷ Thus, in the contemporary context every encounter demands "an ongoing 'radical hermeneutics' in which the particular as the possibility of divine revelation is taken seriously and at the same time relativized, since the particular never coincides with God."⁴⁸ As I discussed in chapter 2, Boeve posits that "as a philosophical notion, negative theology ... functions as a background for the model of the 'open narrative,'" as it affirms the inadequacy of language to encapsulate the referent that escapes the predicate.⁴⁹ The event of the open narrative, as posited by

⁴⁵ *GIH*, 176.

⁴⁶ As well as "Christus Postmodernus," see especially "Jesus both God and Human: Incarnation as Stumbling Block or Cornerstone for Interreligious Dialogue?" in *GIH*, 160-79; "Religious Truth, Particularity, And Incarnation A Theological Proposal For A Philosophical Hermeneutics Of Religion," in *Religions Challenged by Contingency. Theological and Philosophical Approaches to the Problem of Contingency*, ed. D. Grube and P. Jonkers, Studies in Theology and Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2008); and "TPI."

⁴⁷ "ECT," 208.

⁴⁸ "... just as God and humanity are united in a single person, undivided and undiluted." *GIH*, 177. I return to this later, especially in Chs. 5 and 8, when I articulate the implications of a theology of interruption for interreligious dialogue and Christian praxis.

⁴⁹ "PNT," 418. Denys Turner provides a helpful definition of apophatic theology. He writes: "'Apophaticism' is the name of that theology which is done against the background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that 'we do not know what kind of being God is'. It is the conception of theology not as a naïve *pre*-critical ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cues called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth century English mystic called it, who, we might say, invented the transitive verb-form 'to unknow' in order to describe theological knowledge, in this its deconstructive mode. Finally, 'apophaticism' is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, the 'negative way'." It follows from the *unknowability* of God that there is very little that can be *said* about God; or rather, since most theistic religions actually have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God *mean*. And, strictly speaking, that is what 'apophaticism' asserts, as one can tell from its Greek etymology: *apophasis* is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in face of

Lyotard, is elusive, “unutterable, inexpressible [and] irreducible,” and any attempts to capture this inexpressibility through language (even by way of the adjectives used here) fails to do justice to the event.⁵⁰ For Boeve, the use of apophatics in the case of the open narrative in fact *affirms* the need for negation.⁵¹ By retrieving apophatic theology from the history of the tradition and bringing it into dialogue with “the reflexive framework of the model of the ‘open narrative,’” Boeve aims to effect “an apophatic structuration of contemporary theologizing,” and this “apophatic structuration” forms the basis of his theology of interruption.⁵² In chapter 2, I discussed Boeve’s engagement with “philosophies of difference” (particularly those of Derrida and Marion) and, along with the retrieval of “the critical impulses of negative or apophatic theology” (Denys the Areopagite, Aquinas and the scholastics), I noted Boeve’s “plea for a more appropriate hermeneutics of religion,” hermeneutics that are “more radical” than what has been put forward by other “thinkers of difference” such as John Caputo and Richard Kearney.⁵³ Indeed, by placing apophatics at the centre of his theology of interruption, Boeve proposes a “radical hermeneutical approach” that is modelled on the hermeneutics of the incarnation and that reflects the tension between the particular character of the Christian narrative and the qualification of this character in light of a recognition of heterogeneity. This “radical hermeneutical approach” aims to hold the tension between affirmation and negation. It recognises God as Other and, at the same time, affirms “the involvement of God with human beings and history.”⁵⁴

Boeve’s “radical hermeneutical approach” reflects what he calls a “Christian critical-hermeneutical consciousness.”⁵⁵ It is a reflexive consciousness, which, he contends, originated in the paradigmatic Exodus event and culminates in the New Testament.⁵⁶ This reflexive critical consciousness can be seen in the way that the stories of scripture serve to interrupt each other. The

the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark.” In contrast, Turner defines the ‘cataphatic’ as “the verbose element in theology, ... the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character, causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many other discourse... For, in its cataphatic mode, theology is, we might say, a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes. And when we have said that much, narrowly, about the formal language of theology, we have only begun: for that is to say nothing about the extensive *non-verbal* vocabulary of theology, its liturgical and sacramental action, its music, its architecture, its dance and gesture, all of which are intrinsic to its character as an *expressive* discourse, a discourse of theological articulation.” Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19-20. Turner cites: Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.12, a.13, ad 1, q.13, ad 1, ad 2; and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, esp. Chs. 4-7.

⁵⁰ Boeve, “CCPC,” 454; also “PNT,” 418.

⁵¹ See “PNT,” 418.

⁵² “PNT,” 408. As we will see, the “apophatic structuration” of a theology of interruption is not limited to the use of negative theology (the *apophatic* negation of *kataphatic* affirmations); it includes a retrieval of “mystical” theology (*hyperphasis*—the “third way”). See n. 49, above, and in the in-text discussion, below.

⁵³ Boeve and Brabant, “LPT,” 227. See in the present work, Ch. 2, n. 206, 260, and 264. For an extended discussion on Boeve’s engagement with Derrida, Marion, Caputo and Kearney, see Boeve, “RTPI,” 194-197.

⁵⁴ Boeve contends that these two elements are “the constitutive elements of Christian faith.” *GIH*, 154.

⁵⁵ *GIH*, 154.

⁵⁶ *GIH*, 155.

stories of God's revelation in Scripture reflect an ongoing and developing relationship between the people and God, and at the same time reflect the people's *qualification* of the revelation of God through history. By way of example, in *God Interrupts History*, Boeve cites two stories that buttress the Exodus event: Moses' theophany (his encounter with God in the burning bush [Ex 3:1-21]) and the narration of God's prohibition of idols (Ex 20:4).⁵⁷ In the latter story, the Hebrews' reflexive critical consciousness assisted them to qualify their understanding of God and their relationship with God, and the narrative reflects the Hebrews' awareness that "the God active in history cannot be contained by history."⁵⁸

Boeve contends that this reflexive (apophatic) critical consciousness is radicalised in the New Testament. He cites the stories of the Transfiguration (Mk 9:2-12) and the Road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-32) as examples in this regard.⁵⁹ In the former, the reader is led precisely to history to understand who Christ is; in the latter, we see that the risen Christ "is not to be grasped in his earthly form" and yet is inseparable from it.⁶⁰ In each case, Boeve argues, it is within concrete history (in all its contingency) that God reveals Godself, and it is through a hermeneutical engagement with this history that Christians are at the same time able to articulate the "ineffability" of God.⁶¹

In Boeve's "radical hermeneutical approach," apophasis and kataphasis exist in a cyclic and reflexive relationship: the affirmation of God's activity in history is understood in light of an apophatical hermeneutical engagement with it, and this understanding leads the hermeneut precisely back to history, calling Christians to reflect and make present God's ongoing creative activity in the world. Additionally, as we can see in his choice of examples from scripture, Boeve's "more radical" hermeneutical approach seeks to move beyond the implied binaries between apophasis and kataphasis.⁶² He argues that negative theology, when understood from the perspective of postmodern theology, "attempts to provide an answer on the questioning of [the] question [of the nature of God]."⁶³ It does not merely accompany positive theology "as an added relativization of what was expressed," but it conditions all speech.⁶⁴ In this way, Christian praxis is not limited to *action* and *activity*, but is reflected in the pragmatics of language. He writes,

The interpretation of the event, as an axis of the open narrative, is not so much a matter of the negation of an affirmation in a *via negativa*, resulting in the negation of the negation; here, an affirmation of the negation seems much more to be in order. The event is immediately described in terms of an elusive moment, indeterminacy, inexpressibility, irreducible heterogeneity, indecision, ... However, the negation of the negation eventually

⁵⁷ See *GIH*, Ch. 7, esp. 155; "CP."

⁵⁸ See *GIH*, 155.

⁵⁹ *GIH*, 155-56.

⁶⁰ *GIH*, 155-56.

⁶¹ *GIH*, 156.

⁶² Again, see Ch. 2, n. 206, 260, and 264.

⁶³ Boeve, "PNT," 418. See n. 52, above.

⁶⁴ "PNT," 418.

also appears here: these terms as well are incapable of grasping the ungraspable now-moment and they constantly shortchange it in their particularity.⁶⁵

For Boeve, the dialectical relationship between apophasis and kataphasis structures the way in which a theology of interruption functions as a theological category. Lyotard's *le différend*, understood by Boeve on the basis of the interruptive event, becomes the "reflexive expression of the radical hermeneutical awareness" that forms the basis of postmodern theology, a theology that is aware of its particular narrativity.⁶⁶ Therefore, apophasis abides with and conditions kataphasis while, at the same time, serving a corrective function. Moreover, in a theology of interruption, this dialectic goes beyond the cycle of apophasis and kataphasis. It points to a third way—*hyperphasis*—whereby negation does not erase the affirmation but allows the referential properties of the affirmation to "function anew."⁶⁷ Recall the discussion in chapter 2, on the "three ways" in scholastic teaching: *via affirmativa*, *via negativa*, and *via eminentiae*.⁶⁸ Here, the term "hyperphasis" functions in a similar way to *via eminentiae*, as it points beyond the all-too-human and particular categories through which God can be expressed, while at the same time referring to the recognition that God exceeds these categories altogether.⁶⁹

In "Postmodernism and Negative Theology," Boeve cites Denys Turner's discussion of the relationship between apophasis and kataphasis, noting that apophasis operates at two levels within this dialectic: first, in Turner's words, through "the cataphatic employment of conflicting negative-and-affirmative images" and second, through "the apophatic negation of the negation between those first-order descriptions."⁷⁰ By way of example, Turner refers to Denys the Areopagite's image of 'divine darkness,' which, he says, both describes the product of "affirmations and denials" while at the same time describing the excess that "transcends and surpasses the contradiction" contained in the affirmation-negation ("divine darkness").⁷¹ Turner explains that the imagery of "divine darkness"

⁶⁵ "PNT," 418.

⁶⁶ "PNT," 418.

⁶⁷ Boeve defines hyperphasis as a neologism that means "above speech, ineffable." He writes, "To qualify theological discourse as hyperphasis starts from the awareness of the peculiarity of God-talk: although the theologian apophatically negates what is said of God in kataphasis, this negation is not an erasure, but rather, so to speak, a crossing out: words, written on paper, when crossed out, still remain readable, and form, in their being crossed out, a new semantical item, which is not to be reduced to affirmation, or mere negation. Moreover, a crossing-out cannot happen without these words, which through the negation function anew to refer to their ungraspable referent." "LAT," 18, n.1.

⁶⁸ See p. 42 in the present work.

⁶⁹ "Similar," but not the same, due to the different origins of these terms. *Via eminentiae* is theological/mystical, whereas *hyperphasis* has philosophical origins. By retrieving mystical theology from the classical tradition, Boeve expands the philosophical notion of *hyperphasis* to consider its theological implications. See p. 100, below. My thanks to Anthony Kelly for sharing his insights on these terms.

⁷⁰ Turner, *Darkness*, 252. Cited in Boeve, "PNT," 418, n.21. Boeve's paraphrase of Turner's first-order description reads: "the kataphatic use of the dialectic between negation and affirmation." Note that while I have used a "k" in the spelling of kataphasis throughout the present work, some others use a "c".

⁷¹ Turner, *Darkness*, 253.

thus “transcends the distinction between ‘similarity and difference’ itself, passing beyond all language into oneness with God.”⁷²

When Jean-Luc Marion takes up the question of naming God in his *Dieu sans l'être*, he strikes a cross (x) through the name “God” to remind us of the inadequacy of speech to refer to the un(re)presentable and, in doing so, he uses the name while simultaneously referring beyond it to point to the excess that cannot be captured by the name.⁷³ In a later work, in response to Derrida’s criticism of negative theology (that it amounts to hyperbole), Marion follows the development of the “three ways” in the tradition of negative theology and argues that Denys’ use of the prefix *hyper* to point beyond is pragmatic rather than hyperbolic.⁷⁴ The “third way,” he says, “does not hide an affirmation beneath a negation,” but transcends the oppositions altogether.⁷⁵ With reference to Denys the Areopagite, Marion writes,

[Denys] uses apophasis only by including it in a process that includes not two but three elements. It therefore does not contend face-to-face with the affirmative way in a duel where the last to enter the fray would be at once the victor over and the heir to the first, for both must, in the end, yield to a third way. ... The game is therefore not played out between two terms, affirmation and negation, but between three, different from and irreducible to each other.⁷⁶

Marion explains that in Denys’ argument, “it is no longer a question of naming, nor by contrast of not naming, but of de-nominating God,” so that the nomination is at the same time undone and released from its predicative state.⁷⁷ In his use of a cross to strike through the name “God,” Marion effectively de-nominates God in order to avoid making an idol of the name and to highlight, instead, its

⁷² *Darkness*, 253.

⁷³ Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être* [God Without Being: Hors-Texte], trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1991 (1982)), see esp. 46-7, 95. For Marion, the literal cross, which he strikes through the name “God”, metaphorically refers to the revelation of God on the cross: “We are speaking of the Gōd who is crossed by a cross because he reveals himself by his placement on a cross” (71). Boeve explicitly refers to Marion’s work in his definition of hyperphasis (see n. 67, above). In the same place, on Marion’s crossing out of the predicate, God, Boeve writes, “Jean-Luc Marion, ... in his refusal to posit God ontotheologically, consequently crosses out the word God—in line with cognitive semantics is implied the concept GOD—to refer to the one who escapes this reference. In this way God-talk is stripped of its potential for affirming predicates of God.” Boeve, “LAT,” 18, n.1.

⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It,” in *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 132-39.

⁷⁵ “In the Name,” 138.

⁷⁶ “In the Name,” 135-6. Marion cites Denys *Divine Names*, VII, 3, 869d-872a. Here, Denys writes: “We cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or of reason. But we know [God] from the arrangement of everything ... We therefore approach that which is beyond all as far as our capacities allow us and we pass by way of the denial and the transcendence of all things and by way of the cause of all things. God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. [God] is known through knowledge and through unknowing. ... [God] cannot be understood, words cannot contain him and no name can lay hold of him. ... [God] is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. [God] is known to all from all things and he is no thing among things” (trans. Luiheid).

⁷⁷ “In the Name,” 139.

indicative character.⁷⁸ For Marion, following Denys' line of argument, denomination is "no longer a matter of saying or unsaying, but of referring to the One who is no longer touched by nomination, a matter no longer of saying the referent, but of pragmatically referring the speaker to the inaccessible Referent."⁷⁹ As Boeve explains, it is no longer a matter of saying; instead, religious language has to do with hearing.⁸⁰

When Boeve uses the term *hyperphasis* to refer to the way in which negation functions in a theology of interruption, the influence of Marion's work is clear (indeed, he cites Marion explicitly each time he uses the term); however, as I noted in chapter 2, Boeve is somewhat critical of Marion, precisely on account of the argument that religious language functions merely pragmatically. Boeve contends that in Marion's work, and that of others like him (such as Lacoste and Levinas), the "concrete discourses of particular religious traditions ... only matter insofar as they express" the phenomenological structure of religion; that is, the absolutely passive subject in a "totalising asymmetrical relationship" with the divine.⁸¹ According to Boeve, in this account God becomes "too other ... God becomes alien, unknowable, and so absolutely transcendent that such a God may as well turn into a stranger."⁸² In such an approach, he says, language loses its "mediating place" and the naming of God is rendered "futile."⁸³

In a theology of interruption, the notion of *hyperphasis* serves as a reminder of, and a referent to, the tension between the kataphatic, particular, affirmations of God and the apophatic recognition of the all-too-human nature of this kataphasis. Boeve argues that when Marion crosses out "God" in *Dieu sans l'être*, the "kataphatic has changed from its form of speech, but it has not lost its particular setting."⁸⁴ Here, Boeve argues, particularity becomes "the very condition" for relating to God. He contends that in a theology of interruption, "theological hyperphasis is then the particular way in which, starting from a Christian experience and interpretation of reality and within a Christian vocabulary, one gives expression to the mystery of this reality, confessed to be constitutive of this reality, but never to be fully grasped either in or by it."⁸⁵

Like Denys the Areopagite, Turner and Marion, Boeve points to the mystical implications of the third way. Turner argues that apophasis constitutes the "'mystical element' in all theology," and

⁷⁸ I refer, here, to the 2nd definition of indicative, as presented in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "adj. that indicates, points out, or directs; that hints or suggests." OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/view/Entry/94418?redirectedFrom=indicative> (accessed November 17, 2019).

⁷⁹ Marion, "In the Name," 142.

⁸⁰ Lieven Boeve, "God, Particularity and Hermeneutics: A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81, no. 4 (2005): 313. Recall the discussion in Ch. 2 (in the present work) of Boeve's use of Marion in his articulation of the open Christian narrative.

⁸¹ "NGON," 83.

⁸² "NGON," 83.

⁸³ "NGON," 83, 84.

⁸⁴ Boeve and Brabant, "LPT," 228.

⁸⁵ "LPT," 228.

as all theology is necessarily both apophatic and kataphatic, he reasons that all theology is therefore “mystical.”⁸⁶ For Boeve, the retrieval of this mystical element for contemporary theology is key to his theology of interruption, as it “stands for a spirituality, a way of being within reality” which allows for the recognition of the O/other who interrupts our narratives.⁸⁷ It is a way of referring to God and to the way in which God reveals Godself today, which does not seek to contain God, to posit hegemonic truth claims, or to totalise the discourse. The praxis of a theology of interruption, therefore, is both political and mystical.⁸⁸ It refers to a way of acting, speaking and responding in the world, but—most importantly—it is underpinned by a spirituality which seeks to “turn towards” God rather than merely “come to know” God.⁸⁹ In Boeve’s engagement with Denys the Areopagite, he cites Diedre Carabine’s summary of Denys’ thought, noting that while kataphatic theology “is grafted onto what comes forth from God in creation,” apophatic theology “signifies the return of all things to their source.”⁹⁰ Indeed, by positing a theology of interruption as an approach to the task of theology in the context of today, Boeve aims to provide a means by which the contemporary Christian might live in relation to God. For Boeve, this living in relation to God occurs not by way of a reduction of particularity such that Christians succumb to a general cultural religiosity—a belief that there is “something more” to reality that cannot be named—but precisely by naming and situating God in history and recognising that the “something more” that Christians name ‘God’ continues to reveal in time and history.⁹¹ In *God Interrupts History*, he writes, “God’s ineffability ... has nothing to do with vagueness, nor with something that leads away from the concrete. On the contrary, it leads immediately back to history itself. God as the Other of history is involved in it as determinate Love, as prophetic challenge to all to make visible God’s invisible presence and activity.”⁹²

Recognition of the process of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis* in Boeve’s theology of interruption, aligned as it is with Lyotard’s open narrative, allows for contemporary Christian theology to draw radically from the context, to reflect the particularity and contingency of the Christian narrative within this context, and at the same time to create a narrative space to witness

⁸⁶ “In so far as, in the classical traditions of the Middle Ages, that apophatic element is an essential, not an optional, constituent of theology *as such*, the apophatic may be said to constitute the ‘mystical element’ in all theology. And the apophatic is not to be understood as functioning in isolation, so that one could construct some such thing as an ‘apophatic theology’. The apophatic, I have argued, is intelligible only as being a moment of negativity within an overall theological strategy which is at once and at every moment both apophatic and kataphatic. If these things are so, then theology in so far as it is theology is ‘mystical’ and in so far as it is ‘mystical’ it is theology.” Turner, *Darkness*, 265.

⁸⁷ Boeve, “PNT,” 419.

⁸⁸ Recall my discussion of the influence of Metz and Schillebeeckx in Boeve’s work, in Ch. 3.

⁸⁹ B. Blans, “Een wolk van niet-weten. Een orientatie in de negatieve theologie” [A cloud of not-knowing. An orientation in negative theology], in I.N. Bulhof and L. ten Kate (eds.), *Ons ontbreken heilige namen* [We Lack Holy Names], 30-31, 43-44), cited in Boeve, “PNT,” 419.

⁹⁰ Boeve and Feyaerts, “RM,” 156. The latter quote here is attributed to Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 3, cited in Boeve “RM,” 156.

⁹¹ For an extended discussion on cultural apophaticism, see Boeve, “CA.”

⁹² *GIH*, 156.

openly to the possibilities presented by otherness. By its very nature, this hermeneutical process defies moves to close, isolate or reduce the Christian narrative when confronted with changing contexts and, as we will see in chapter 5, constitutes a central move in Boeve's theology of interruption. The use of this three-fold-process in a theology of interruption reflects the recognition that the Christian narrative *refers* to the truth and, yet, cannot contain the truth. As Boeve writes, "The 'peculiarity' of the Christian truth claim ... is that Christians cannot claim the truth, and yet they are always already living in relation to it, in respect for the radical-hermeneutical tension of a narrative that both concerns God and is interrupted by God."⁹³ In short, a theology of interruption reflects the interruption of the Other within the narrative itself, and the narrative remains open for the ongoing revelation of this Other—God—through the interruption of the *other* in the contemporary context.

Implications

Interrupting the Christian Hermeneutic

This leads us to an important qualification in Boeve's thinking. In chapter 3, I explored Bevan's explication of the *translation* model of contextual theology and I noted the desire of proponents of this model to return to the unchanging "kernel" of truth of Christian faith and then to clothe this kernel in new terms, concepts and structures found in new and changing contexts.⁹⁴ In light of the discussion thus far, it is clear that Boeve would argue the inadequacy of this form of contextual theology when taken on its own, as it disregards the important place of history in co-constituting theological truth. Boeve argues that the "radical hermeneutics" exemplified in the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon, where Christ is affirmed as both fully human and fully divine—one person in two natures—serves as a model for a hermeneutical engagement with history. He contends that it is precisely "in and through" Jesus' humanity—in his "concrete words and deeds"—that God is revealed, just as today it is only in and through "all-too-human terms" that God's ongoing revelation is experienced and expressed.⁹⁵ To this effect, expressions of Christian truth cannot be separated from the historical contexts through which they have moved, particularly as they reflect the hermeneutical and tensive relationship between affirmation and negation. The following excerpt from *God Interrupts History* illustrates this point:

⁹³ *GIH*, 48.

⁹⁴ See p. 59 of the present work. See also Bevan, *Models*, 46.

⁹⁵ "Historically situated in a very specific context, Jesus' concrete words and deeds reveal God. Also today, every current statement about this God and this revelation must comply with the same rules. Even today, it is only possible to give expression to God's involvement in history and the world in all-too-human terms. Jesus' particular humanity, concrete history and events, Christian narratives and interpretative frameworks, do not represent a stumbling block on our journey to God, they represent the very possibility of the journey." Boeve, *GIH*, 177.

[In Christ,] God and humanity are united in a single person, undivided and undiluted. This is the core around which the Christian tradition turns: [the tradition] cannot be substituted nor can it be absolutized. It speaks of God—and without it there can be no talk about God—but it is not God. Where tradition is absolutized, it is precisely Godself who interrupts such self-enclosing rigidity and fosters recontextualization. It follows, therefore, that *there is no such thing as a core of truths that can be distinguished as such from every form of mediation, which is given expression in ever changing historical frameworks. ... On the contrary, theological truth is co-constituted by the all-too-human, by concrete history and context.* This does not do an injustice to such truth, since it is only thus, through time and history, that we can speak about God. Likewise, it is through this tradition that God speaks to Christians today, embedded in the current historical context, whereby this tradition both perpetuates and renews itself.⁹⁶

God's ongoing revelation in the world, therefore, is reflected in the interruptions of ever-changing contexts, interruptions that propel and perpetuate the renewal of the tradition each time it tends towards exclusion, claims hegemony or mastery, or posits absolutes. To this effect, the "constitutive elements of Christian faith," for Boeve, are simply thus: "faith in God as the Other of history;" and "the inscription of the involvement of God with human beings and history, an involvement that can only be concretely shaped and read in the very particularity of history."⁹⁷ The role of tradition development, therefore, is not to be understated. God's interruption is not confined to scripture; it is reflected in the development of doctrine in the history of the tradition, and it continues to be reflected in the ever-changing contexts of today. I will continue this discussion on Boeve's understanding of truth in light of the Christian narrative in the next chapter, when I examine Boeve's reading of the doctrine of Chalcedon in "Christus Postmodernus."

We have seen that in Boeve's explication of a theology of interruption, the Judeo-Christian narrative not only interrupts the narratives of its time (a notion signified within the unfolding of the narrative itself), but by *interrupting* itself (recall the example of the Syrophoenician woman, or, indeed, the resurrection), it also signifies the ongoing unfolding of the narrative as open to the revelation of God from *outside* the narrative.⁹⁸ If we take this seriously, the implications of a theology of interruption for both theological thinking and contextual engagement are far-reaching. I have

⁹⁶ *GIH*, 177, emphasis mine.

⁹⁷ *GIH*, 154.

⁹⁸ Recall the discussion on p. 94, where I noted that for Boeve, God is both radically *in* the narrative and *transcends* the narrative (God cannot be contained within the Christian narrative, but exceeds what can be articulated in the narrative). For my discussion on the narrative of the Syrophoenician woman, see p. 93. A further example of interruption within the Judeo-Christian narrative can be seen in the story of the women who are the first witnesses to the Resurrection. In each of the gospels, women come to the tomb to find it empty (a group of women in the synoptics, and one woman—Mary Magdalene—in John's gospel), and the women are the first to be given the news that Jesus is risen (Mk 16:1-7; Mt 28:1-7; Lk 24:1-7). Indeed, there are many examples in the gospels where the subordinate status of women is interrupted through an engagement with Christ. It is curious, however, that in the history of the tradition early movements towards the restoration of equality between men and women in the early Church have been shut down time and again by proponents of a context that favoured the patriarchy. In the contemporary climate, with its critical consciousness of the recognition of difference and the role that such a recognition plays in the restoration of dignity and identity, perhaps we are on the verge of yet another interruption in relation to this issue.

noted Boeve's claim that from a contextual perspective the recognition of plurality in the contemporary context leads Christians towards an awareness of the particularity of their narratives. This awareness, in turn, leads to a recognition of other particular discourses, so that the Christian's understanding of his or her narrative is interrupted by such discourses. From a theological perspective, Boeve contends that the very interruption that Christians experience when they encounter the other is the condition of possibility for the revelation of God; that is, in the interruptive encounter with the other, God, "the Other of our narrative," makes Godself known.⁹⁹

At this point, it is perhaps helpful to note Boeve's articulation of his argument in relation to God as "the Other" of the Christian narrative. In my earlier discussion of Boeve's exegesis of scripture, I presented his argument that God is both radically within and yet transcends the narrative. In "Particularity and Religious Truth Claims," Boeve uses this turn of phrase—God as "the Other of our narrative"—to highlight the very notion that the Christian narrative is a particular discourse on the theological distinction between Creator and creation. He writes, "the particularity of creation can bear witness to its Creator, but cannot grasp God nor be identified to God. In as much as the encounter with the concrete other reveals this to believers, it is this very otherness of the concrete other which reveals God as the Other of our narrative, both as its boundary and its condition, both as its limit and its challenge."¹⁰⁰ Later, he uses this phrase not only to highlight the tensions inherent in the Christian narrative—that God is "its boundary and its condition, ... its limit and its challenge"—but also to explicate the implications of this understanding for the ongoing recontextualisation of the Christian narrative.¹⁰¹ In *God Interrupts History*, he makes this point explicitly:

As the Other of the Christian narrative, God withdraws from it, even though it is only in and through this narrative that God is revealed, i.e., comes to speak. The God who ultimately has everything to do with this narrative cannot be grasped by it; instead as *the Other of the narrative*, God questions the narrative from within, interrupts it, forces it to collide with its borders. Only when faith experience reckons with this interrupting aspect of a God who refuses to be reduced to the Christian narrative (even though God cannot be conceived of without it), can the development of tradition be reflected upon theologically today.¹⁰²

He goes on to say,

It is for this reason that encounters with others, reading texts, reflecting on events, confrontation with joy and sorrow, wonderment and horror, etc. can serve as moments of interruption in which Christian identity formation is paradoxically questioned from within, because for Christians it is precisely in these opportunities that God is announced as *the One who interrupts*.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Boeve, "PRT," 195.

¹⁰⁰ "PRT," 195.

¹⁰¹ "TIE," 37.

¹⁰² *GIH*, 86, emphasis mine.

¹⁰³ *GIH*, 86, emphasis mine.

The final point here is critical for understanding Boeve's theology of interruption: from within the Christian narrative (that is, from the point of view of Christian faith), the Christian's *hermeneutic* is interrupted by God and it is precisely in the moments of everyday human experience that the conditions for such an interruption arise.¹⁰⁴ In the pluralising context, Christians are confronted with *difference*, encountering on a daily basis other particular (equally irreducible) political, social or religious narratives. If we take seriously Boeve's contention that God is made known as the *interruptive event* of the Christian's encounter with the social, cultural or religious other, we can come to understand such encounters as hermeneutical intersections. After all, Boeve contends, the incarnation, ministry and resurrection of Christ points to the inescapable paradox of Christian truth. Recall the quotation I used earlier, when I discussed the role of apophysis in the Christian hermeneutic: "Christians cannot claim the truth, and yet they are always already living in relation to it, in respect for the radical-hermeneutical tension of a narrative that both concerns God and is interrupted by God."¹⁰⁵

In the contemporary context and "from within a Christian hermeneutic," Boeve argues that it is precisely in the encounter with the other that "traces of God" may be revealed.¹⁰⁶ The "irreducible otherness" of the other causes Christians not only to confront the particularity of their own and the other's discourses, but also opens the possibility for their own narrative to be interrupted in such an encounter. It is precisely this condition that allows for the recognition of the revelation of God today,

¹⁰⁴ I am grateful to Stephan van Erp who brought this insight to my attention.

¹⁰⁵ Boeve, *GIH*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ "BMADGS," 302. While there is significant discussion on "the trace" in the work of Derrida and Levinas, Boeve does not engage this explicitly. He refers to Derrida's use of the trace only through his definition of "*dénégation*": Boeve writes, "[Derrida] points out that in the very act of negating God one actually negates one's negation of God. Derrida calls this a '*dénégation*': even the most negative discourse always contains a predicative moment, one that qualifies the *trace of the other* (and thus contaminates)." "RNT," 444, emphasis mine. In *GIH*, Boeve connects the notion of "traces of God" with Schillebeeckx's term, "contrast experiences," but as I noted in Ch. 3, he recontextualises Schillebeeckx's work in light of the changing context. He writes: "Schillebeeckx takes as his point of departure [the] category ... [of] the Christian contrast experience: the experience of being confronted with traces of God in one's life, which 'are purified into ritual' in sacramental praxis. As contrast experiences, *traces of God* can be suitably thought of as experiences of otherness, conflict, difference, interpreted against the background of the Christian narrative. Theologically speaking, moreover, such experiences reveal the boundaries of the Christian narrative itself—testifying to God's involvement in human history as its condition and its critical limit. As experiences of otherness, they interrupt ongoing narratives, Christian narratives included. They introduce a God-oriented perspective. God, then, is not thought of exclusively in the first instance as operating within the narrative, but precisely as the One who always escapes this narrative, an escape to which the Christian narrative itself is called to bear witness. The God who interrupts is not a God of premature reconciliation, but on the contrary a God whose trace reveals irreconcilability." *GIH*, 117, emphasis mine; also "SIRL," 414. As we will see in Ch. 5, this becomes crucial for understanding the reflexive critical consciousness of a theology of interruption: "If we are to detect *traces of God* in reality, to see where God interrupts history and the Christian narrative, both the narrative in question and the interpreting community are important—at the same time putting pressure on both narrative and community to recontextualize when interruption takes place." "ESES," 19, emphasis mine. In a later article, Boeve notes that the main argument of *God Interrupts History* is this: "A theology which is interrupted by contextual newness and otherness may become a theology of interruption when it learns to read such interruptions as *loci theologici*, places where God may reveal Godself in our times. Interruption then becomes a theological reading key." "STTH," 43, n.25.

Boeve argues.¹⁰⁷ For just as God reveals Godself in the Christian narrative as interruptive, so, too, can God be revealed in the interruption that ensues in the contemporary context by way an encounter with difference. On this point, Boeve writes, “From a theological-epistemological point of view, the encounter with the other is in fact the place in which God’s interruption can be revealed and where the borders of one’s own Christian narrative in naming this God can become visible.”¹⁰⁸ He continues, “the challenge introduced by otherness then becomes a *locus theologicus*.”¹⁰⁹ This understanding has both epistemological and practical implications. The Christian narrative, understood as inherently open because of God’s revelation as the interruptive event of grace and reflected and made manifest in the incarnation and resurrection, is by its very nature open to the interruption of the other. As such, it creates the conditions for the possibility of the radical Other—God—to break open and interrupt the otherwise closed, hegemonic (Christian) hermeneutic (a hermeneutic which could otherwise aim at mastery and tend towards victimisation) and to break open and interrupt the otherwise closed, hegemonic understanding of the place of the Christian narrative in the contemporary context.¹¹⁰

A Critical Praxis

As the paradigm of the open narrative, Boeve contends that Christ both interrupts and is interrupted. Therefore, Christians (as “*imitatio Christi*”) are called towards a “double-praxis of interruption”: “respecting the very otherness of the other, while at the same time also becoming the other of the other,” and challenging and calling into question tendencies towards mastery, hegemony and totalisation in both their own and the other’s discourses.¹¹¹ In short, “the One who interrupts” challenges the Christian to become an “interrupter of closed narratives.”¹¹² This “double praxis,” Boeve contends, leads the Christian community to “live ... its Christian identity and contribute ... to the recontextualization of a narrative tradition, both retrieving and renewing it, for the sake of its contemporaries and future generations.”¹¹³ In this way, the Christian community contributes to the ongoing renewal of the tradition and to the ongoing understanding of the revelation of God in history.

The critique of modern metanarratives in postmodern critical consciousness has led to an awareness of those who are excluded in particular narratives, the victims of hegemony whose narratives are ignored, silenced, or subsumed in the pursuit of the ideal of harmony or, indeed,

¹⁰⁷ *GIH*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ *GIH*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ *GIH*, 48.

¹¹⁰ “Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a Detraditionalised and Pluralised Context,” in *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, ed. Herman Lombaerts and Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 249.

¹¹¹ *GIH*, 48.

¹¹² *GIH*, 48.

¹¹³ *GIH*, 48.

power. Boeve contends that the recognition of the Christian narrative as an open narrative that is continually open to the interruption of God not only compels Christians to witness to the interruptive event but it also compels us towards the praxis of interruption.¹¹⁴ Witnessing to the interruptive event of heterogeneity, Boeve argues, “mobilises action against any hegemonic, totalising discourse that proclaims itself to be the privileged master.”¹¹⁵ If the task of postmodern philosophy is to bear witness to *le différénd* in critique and praxis, then it is the task of postmodern *theology* to witness to the interruptive grace-event that calls attention to the excluded other and to engage in an active praxis which recognises, reflects and respects the particularity and contextuality of the diversity of discourses in the contemporary context.¹¹⁶ A theology of interruption, Boeve contends, “opens new thinking patterns for a revitalization of the Christian narrative as a narrative characterized by receptivity and liberative praxis for the subordinated or excluded particular other, which is theologically speaking the instantiation of the Other, the Unrepresentable God-with-us.”¹¹⁷

A helpful illustration of Boeve’s argument occurs in both *Interrupting Tradition* and *God Interrupts History*, where he recounts the story of a Christian woman who attended a dinner for the ‘breaking of the fast’ of Ramadan.¹¹⁸ He writes in *Interrupting Tradition*:

The woman reported that the conversation around the table quickly became serious and absorbing, especially when religious themes such as the importance of ‘fasting’ and Muslim/Christian relations were introduced into the discussion. She was surprised to note, for example, that the discussion surrounding ‘fasting’ tended to accentuate the differences between Islam and Christianity, even though at first sight both groups appeared to maintain a similar tradition on the issue. Far from relativizing matters and concluding that fasting is fasting whatever form it takes, the group preferred to respectfully recognize these differences and the unique value of each approach.¹¹⁹

In *God Interrupts History*, he articulates the effect of such an encounter:

... the Christians began to question themselves about the seriousness of their own faith: did they, for example, experience their own fasting as something authentic? Could they explain, for example, what it was about from their own lived experience? Should they not invest more in living up to the specificity of their own faith? And how could this be done then in a relevant and plausible way for today?¹²⁰

When we consider this example from the perspective of a theology of interruption, Boeve contends, “the experience of the woman ... can rightly be described as an experience of the productive

¹¹⁴ See “BW.”; “CCPC.”; “Postmodern Sacramento-Theology: Retelling the Christian Story,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 74, no. 4 (1998); “LCMN.”; “SDP.”

¹¹⁵ “PST,” 339.

¹¹⁶ “LCMN,” 301, 310-11.

¹¹⁷ “LCMN,” 314. The influence of liberation theologies, particularly as expounded by Schillebeeckx and Metz, is clear here and throughout Boeve’s work. Recall my detailed discussion to this effect in Ch. 3.

¹¹⁸ *IT*, 97-98, n. 9; *GIH*, 90-91.

¹¹⁹ *IT*, 98, n. 9.

¹²⁰ *GIH*, 91.

interruption of one's own Christian narrative by the narrative of the other."¹²¹ In addition, in line with Boeve's broader argument on the theology of interruption, we can point to the questions raised for the Christians during the dinner as the outcome, or effect, of the interruptive event of grace. In the awareness of differences, where each partner in the dialogue witnesses to and is respectful of such differences, conscious not to relativise or subsume the differences into his or her own narrative, there is the "trace of God," the interrupter, working to open the narratives of the Christians seated around the table.¹²² Indeed, the *interruption* that the Christian woman experienced during the dialogue with her Muslim friends came in the form of a recognition of the profound *differences* between the two faith traditions (even if, initially, it seemed that there were a number of similarities).

When an interruption to one's identity occurs, it is often only *after* it has taken place that it is recognised as such. It may become apparent in the recognition that one's worldview has been adapted, one's identity has been challenged, or one's narrative *opened* to take into account a different perspective. In this case, the interruption of the woman's Christian narrative revealed itself as an "unexpected wake-up call" for her.¹²³ As a result of her participation in the dialogue, she recognised that the lived expression of her own Christian identity was perhaps not as authentic as it could be. The experience challenged her to "reshape and reprofile" the expression of her faith, leading her to a renewed awareness of the role of fasting as a Christian, particularly, perhaps (although Boeve does not explicitly note this), in preparation for the Easter event.¹²⁴

It is an interesting exercise to imagine what might have been the effects of the dialogue taking place at the 'breaking of the fast' dinner were the participants to have focused only on the *similarities*, rather than allowing (and being open to) the tension that can ensue as a result of the discussion of irreducible difference. In the reign of the modern metanarratives (recall Lyotard's criticism of the Christian narrative as a metanarrative on the Idea of love, which I discussed in

¹²¹ *GIH*, 91. Earlier in *God Interrupts History*, Boeve offers a helpful explanation of the recognition of difference in a theology of interruption: "[A] theology of interruption will therefore draw less attention to similarities and points of overlap between the Christian narrative and other narratives. Indeed, the greatest differences often reside in what we perceive to be common, precisely because of the irreducible particularity of the narrative within which one is living. The other is not in the first instance an ally or familiar partner, but rather one who challenges our narratives in his or her irreducible otherness. It is precisely the encounter or confrontation with the other as other that compels the Christian narrative ... toward self and world critique, toward recontextualization, at both the theological-epistemological as the political-theological levels." *GIH*, 49.

¹²² See n. 106 in the present chapter.

¹²³ Boeve, *GIH*, 91.

¹²⁴ *GIH*, 91. Later, Boeve makes an important distinction between mere adaptation, universalisation, and the recontextualisation that takes place as a result of the *interruption* that occurs in inter-religious dialogue: "Confrontation with different positions (Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, etc.) does not only challenge Christians to question themselves and engage in dialogue, it also—and immediately—goes hand in hand with a (re)discovery and a (re)profiling of one's own particular position. This does not imply—as some have wrongly suggested—that the tradition is adopted once again *en bloc* and unrevised, and then repositioned over and against the others. Rather, it is precisely at this juncture that the *confrontation with plurality and otherness sets the process of recontextualization in motion.*" *GIH*, 108, original emphasis.

chapter 2), the experience of the guests seated at the dinner table might have been quite different. The Muslims may have encountered a reduction of their experience into the broader Christian narrative, with Christians pointing to truths that they deemed were held in common, or to expressions of faith that they deemed were actually Christian but had found their way into other traditions. Similarly, the Muslims may have experienced a silencing of their particular truth claims or particular experiences, in order that the Christian (meta)narrative be allowed to hold the floor. Equally problematically, in an unchecked postmodern approach (consider, for example, Boeve's criticism of Welsh's approach by way of "radicalized plurality," which I discussed in chapter 2), the different positions may have been heard but relativised in the interest of harmony. When explaining their particular approach to fasting, the Muslims may have experienced the Christians saying something along the lines of "it all boils down to the same thing in the end."¹²⁵ In any case, the Muslim hosts may have experienced victimisation (despite perhaps the noble intentions of their Christian guests) if the particularity of their narrative was reduced, subsumed into the Christian narrative, or ignored altogether. As Boeve posits, "Wherever closed narratives are operative, one encounters the victims thereof. Whenever a narrative profiles itself as a metadiscourse, other narratives are either suppressed or excluded, invalidated or silenced."¹²⁶ It is perhaps easy to see how this might have occurred in an example such as this.

However, the Christians at the table in this case became *open* dialogue partners.¹²⁷ The *open* Christian narrative was operative both in the expression of the Christians seated there and also in the interruption that occurred to their personal appropriations of the narrative. In short, they were willing to allow the confrontation with difference to *interrupt* their narratives. While Boeve does not explicitly state this here, he argues elsewhere that the praxis of the open narrative leads to the affirmation of particularity for each partner in the dialogue.¹²⁸ In this case, the hope would be that the religious identity of both the hosts and their guests would be strengthened as a result of the open dialogue that took place.

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, the critical praxis of an open narrative (and, thus, a theology of interruption) is not limited to the reflexive interruption of one's own narrative when one encounters difference. With a renewed religious critical consciousness, which recognises the particularity of their own discourses and claims to truth, Christians are called also to "become the other of the other," challenging and drawing attention to tendencies of the other to forget the

¹²⁵ *GIH*, 91.

¹²⁶ *GIH*, 48.

¹²⁷ I use the term "became," here, to signify the impact of the interruptive nature of the dialogue that took place although, of course, it is possible that the Christians already approached the dinner with an open disposition.

¹²⁸ See Boeve, *GIH*, 157-59.

particularity, historicity and contingency of their respective discourses.¹²⁹ Moreover, as bearers of a critical consciousness that is both aware of its own historicity and yet draws from this history as a narrative of God's salvific engagement with the world, Christians are tasked with calling into question and interrupting the hegemonic narratives they encounter in the contemporary context and bearing witness to the subordinated or silenced other in such discourses. Consider, for example, the grand economic narratives of contemporary culture, such as the rise of the consumer market and the commodification of religion for economic gain, the accumulation of wealth to the detriment of the poor and vulnerable, or the oppressive interpretations of religion that lead to radicalism and violence.¹³⁰ An open Christian narrative, which models a praxis of witness to the forgotten or suppressed other, is called to interrupt such narratives and, in doing so, to participate in the ongoing development of the contemporary critical consciousness.

With the current renewed interest in movements that seek to redress the effects of long-held repression or subordination (for example, the work of contemporary feminists who call attention to patriarchal social structures, or indigenous advocates who work to ameliorate the effects of colonialism), we have seen the development of a contemporary (philosophical and religious) critical consciousness that is aware of the need to witness to those voices that have been marginalised throughout history. As we saw in the previous chapter, the work of late-modern theologians such as Schillebeeckx and Metz has been instrumental in this development, particularly calling Christians towards a "critical-liberative consciousness."¹³¹ In the postmodern context, it seems that Boeve's insights about the relationship between the religious and philosophical critical consciousnesses and the manifestation of these insights in his model of the open Christian narrative—with the notion of interruption at its heart—can make an important contribution in this regard. Indeed, the theology of interruption, as a philosophical-contextual-political approach to theology, could very well lend its voice to the ongoing renewal (or recontextualisation) of contemporary philosophical and religious critical consciousnesses.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the various elements of Boeve's theology of interruption and I have considered the ways in which he posits his approach as reflective of both the Christian tradition and the postmodern context. In my discussion of the use of apophatics in Boeve's work, I noted his intention to structure theological speech in such a way that it reflects a contemporary (religious and philosophical) critical consciousness—that is, to structure it in such a way that it takes into account the interruptive and determining role of the encounter with otherness. His "Postmodernism and

¹²⁹ *GIH*, 48.

¹³⁰ For Boeve's critical discussion on the economic master narrative and the commodification of religion, see "Market and Religion in Postmodern Culture."

¹³¹ Boeve, "IPT," 65.

Negative Theology” sets the tone in this regard. Here, Boeve notes that negative theology functions in three ways in contemporary theology: “as a philosophical notion, a hope to leave behind metaphysics and ontotheology”; “as a background for the model of the ‘open narrative’”; and as the “formation of a lived-through praxis that is God-centred.”¹³²

In the first instance, the use of apophatics provides the philosophical segue into questions about the nature of God. As we saw earlier, Boeve argues that in the postmodern context, negative theology “no longer forms a way of coping with the question regarding the nature of God” as it did in the early tradition, wherein it served as a counterbalance or complement to the kataphatic tradition and, thus, could not but draw from ontological categories.¹³³ Instead, “it attempts to provide an answer to the questioning” of the question of God in the postmodern context.¹³⁴ It seeks to recognise the concealing nature of religious language (even when it aims to reveal) and to refer to an absence in language, “a kind of gap, ... without structure, to be neither grasped nor understood.”¹³⁵

In the second instance, as “a background for the model of the open narrative,” Boeve contends that negative theology functions both as the “abiding and conditioning background of every positive speech about God,” and as “a correction [to] what is expressed kataphatically.”¹³⁶ As I explained earlier, it is upon this basis that Boeve mounts his case for a “radical hermeneutical approach” to theology, namely, a theology of interruption.

As we have seen, the third function of negative theology—the formation of a God-centred “lived-through praxis”—holds an equally important place in Boeve’s theology.¹³⁷ He notes that in the history of the tradition, negative theology was not restricted to linguistics, nor to the mere pragmatics of language. It was not just a way of speaking about God, but it referred “more so [to] a manner of relating to God.”¹³⁸ In chapter 3, I argued that Boeve’s theology of interruption provides the postmodern linguistic counterpart to the liberative creative praxis of political theologies, especially as it seeks to recognise and witness to the silenced voice of the other in dialogue.¹³⁹ With the explicit retrieval of apophatic theology (understood as the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*), Boeve’s theology of interruption provides an added dimension to this “lived-through praxis.” As a “manner of relating to God,” apophatic theology refers to “a way of being within

¹³² “PNT,” 417, 418, 419.

¹³³ “Contemporary thinkers thus agree with the philosophical presupposition—accepted by researchers of negative theology, like Deirdre Carabine—that a fundamental ontological premise lurks behind kataphatic and apophatic theology: kataphatic theology would take as its basis the more Western view that God is the fullness of being, while apophatic theology understands God more preferably in terms of non-being.” “PNT,” 417. Boeve here cites Diedre Carabine, *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition. Plato to Eriugena*, Leuven, 1995, 3.

¹³⁴ “PNT,” 418.

¹³⁵ “PNT,” 417.

¹³⁶ “PNT,” 418, 419.

¹³⁷ “PNT,” 419.

¹³⁸ “PNT,” 419.

¹³⁹ See p. 69ff.

reality”: a spirituality that is marked by a “contemplative openness to the event” of revelation and by a disposition of “searching” and “witnessing” to the event.¹⁴⁰ In Boeve’s theology of interruption, understood as both a contextual and a theological hermeneutical category, the critical connection between the political and the mystical is made explicit. In one of the most eloquent passages in Boeve’s catalogue, we can see this interplay at work:

This is a way of standing within life, of relating to and coping with what can happen, with the other, making space for this other, without intending to master it; a way of living, practical wisdom which is coupled with a critical attitude with regard to narratives which hegemonically attempt to master the other, the event—in speech, this inexpressible becomes easily forgotten, or, better still, the forgetting becomes forgotten. It is the nurturing, and then again the not-nurturing, of the awareness that the inexpressible at the same time makes speech possible in its greatest depths, accompanying but also limiting, breaking through, tearing apart.¹⁴¹

Boeve’s theology of interruption reflects a unique consideration of the connection between theology and philosophy in the postmodern context. As we have seen, Boeve contends that his “radical hermeneutical approach” does not do away with the particularity of the tradition in an effort to harmonise it with difference. Instead, it takes particularity into account to the broadest extent possible, so as to avoid any tendency towards universalism.¹⁴² At the same time, it recognises that the Christian tradition can never say all there is to say about the revelation of God in human life and concrete history. In God, there is always an excess that cannot be grasped, defined or even referred to in human language, and silent contemplation can only bring us some of the way.¹⁴³ A theology of interruption recognises this, calling the Christian to remain continually open to the “traces of God” that are revealed in time and context.¹⁴⁴ These traces of God, revealed today in the encounter with the other, interrupt our sensibilities, cause us to question our narratives, and disturb us to the extent that we are compelled to ask more questions, to probe more deeply, to engage more readily and to reframe, reconsider and recontextualise what we know in light of new insights.

In this chapter, I have examined the notion of interruption as both a contextual and a theology category in Boeve’s work, and I have begun to elucidate the main lines of his theology of interruption. I have considered the insights he draws from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in order to posit a theology of interruption as “narratively signified” in the tradition, and I have discussed some of the implications of his approach for theology today.¹⁴⁵ In the next chapter, I critically engage three of Boeve’s publications in which he applies his theology of interruption, and I draw from this engagement the key philosophical-conceptual elements of his approach. In part II of

¹⁴⁰ Boeve, “PNT,” 419.

¹⁴¹ “PNT,” 419-20.

¹⁴² “RTPI,” 199.

¹⁴³ This will become an important part of my argument at the end of Ch. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Boeve, *GIH*, 109. See n. 106, above.

¹⁴⁵ *GIH*, 205.

the present work, I explore the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption in order to assess the potential strengths and limitations of Boeve's approach for contemporary theology.

Chapter 5. Theology of Interruption: Case Studies

From Theory to Practice

In chapter 4, I discussed Boeve's use of interruption as a contextual hermeneutical category to illustrate the relationship between religion and context (in line with Metz's political theology) and I explored the ways in which Boeve developed this notion to present a *theology of interruption*. In doing so, I examined Boeve's argument that a theology of interruption is "narratively signified" in the Christian tradition and that the revelation of God in Christ is the paradigmatic event of God's interruption.¹ By "thinking in terms of difference" (approaching the Christian tradition and the cultural and political context from the perspective of a postmodern critical consciousness), Boeve offers an understanding of God as "radical Other," who breaks open and interrupts our narratives when we forget that our narratives (the ways in which we account for Christian faith) can never fully express or contain the mystery of God.² For Boeve, the truth of the incarnation is that "every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God's manifestation."³ As a contextual and theological approach, a theology of interruption urges Christians towards a reflexive praxis of interruption: being open to the interruption of their own narratives when they forget God's ultimate mystery, and interrupting the narratives of others when they become closed to the possibility of God's interruption.

Boeve argues that in a theology of interruption, the understanding of God as interruptive serves as a mandate for theology. If God is revealed in the difference that interrupts would-be closed metanarratives, a *living* Christian narrative must be open to the recognition of possible "traces of God" that might be revealed in everyday experiences.⁴ When difference presses on the Christian narrative and pushes Christians towards a deeper understanding of the world and their place within it, Boeve contends that they are compelled to witness to this difference and to recontextualise the narrative.

In chapter 4, I explored some of the implications of a theology of interruption for working with Christian texts and for the development of a deeper understanding of experiences that

¹ *GIH*, 205. As I noted in Ch. 4, Boeve contends that in Christ, God revealed Godself as an interrupting God, opening even death by interrupting the narrative of the cross in the first century and continuing to interrupt our narratives today. See "RD," 121.

² *GIH*, 205.

³ *GIH*, 176. Recall the discussion of Boeve's dialogue with Lyotard in Chs. 2 and 4, and his recognition of the *hyperphatic* nature of theological language. Here, the use of the term "manifestation" is not ontologically grounded; instead, it refers to an excess of meaning that escapes articulation.

⁴ *GIH*, 105, 109, 138. In Ch. 2, I considered Lyotard's definition of metanarratives ("grand" or "master" narratives): those narratives that have an internal "legitimizing function," that "legitim[ati]e social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking" on the basis of an Idea, yet to be realised, which it posits as universal. In other words, metanarratives are those narratives that aim at universalising a particular truth claim, while relativising and subsuming differences that challenge such a claim to truth. Lyotard, *PE*, 18, 19. On the term "traces of God," see Ch. 4, n. 106.

Christians encounter in their daily lives. As a theoretical-theological concept, the implications of a theology of interruption are relatively easy to discern. However, in the present work I am interested in more than a consideration of its implications as a theoretical concept: my aim is to evaluate the potential *application* of a theology of interruption for systematic theology. To be clear, Boeve does not discuss explicitly the moves that he makes when he uses a theology of interruption in his own work, nor does he ever outline it as a structured *method* as such (indeed, he might say that such a move would achieve the very opposite of what a theology of interruption seeks to do, effectively laying out a contrived set of actions and closing the opportunity for interruption to occur). Grounded as it is in a postmodern recognition of *le différend*, a theology of interruption defies structural moves. It resists attempts to define and contain it. It leads to aporias, is unpredictable and often tense. As an approach to theology, it is best defined as a series of philosophical-conceptual approaches, attitudes or dispositions that assist the theologian to remain open to the interruption of difference when engaging in the task of faith seeking understanding. In short, a theology of interruption provides a *lens* through which theology might proceed in the postmodern context.

In this chapter, I examine three examples from Boeve's work where he applies a theology of interruption and demonstrates its use in the process of recontextualisation. While a number of Boeve's texts highlight the ways in which he uses the notion of interruption as a *contextual* hermeneutical category, my concern is to explore his use of the approach as a *theological* hermeneutical category, so that I can undertake an application and critical evaluation of the approach within the present work.⁵ In the case studies chosen for analysis, Boeve's application of a theology of interruption as a theological hermeneutical category is arguably most evident. In these texts, we can see the breadth of applicability that a theology of interruption has for contemporary theologising, as each of the case studies illustrates the use of the approach for different purposes.⁶

The first case study, "The Swan or the Dove? On the Difficult Dialogue between Theology and Philosophy," constitutes Boeve's exegesis of Pope John Paul II's 1998 encyclical, *Fides et ratio*.⁷ Here,

⁵ Recall the discussion in Chs. 3 and 4, where I considered Boeve's reimagining of Metz's contextual category of interruption to offer a broader *theology* of interruption. For an example of Boeve's use of interruption as a contextual category, see Boeve, "IPT."

⁶ While Boeve notes that his 2007 book, *God Interrupts History* presents "the methodological deepening of the cultural-theological approach" developed in his 2003 book, *Interrupting Tradition*, only one of the three case studies chosen for the present chapter comes from *God Interrupts History*. Given the already extensive discussion of *God Interrupts History* and its important place in the broader context of Boeve's work, I have chosen to explore other texts that provide useful insights on the application of his approach. As I have noted, my aim is to be able to replicate the approach in order to explore its possibilities for the discernment of a recontextualised understanding of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity.

⁷ Lieven Boeve, "The Swan or the Dove? On the Difficult Dialogue Between Theology and Philosophy," in *Theology at the Crossroads of University, Church and Society: Dialogue, Difference and Catholic Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). This chapter from *Theology at the Crossroads* is largely a reprint of an earlier article, with a similar name: "The Swan or the Dove? Two Keys for Reading *Fides et ratio*," *Philosophy and Theology* 12, no. 1 (2000). However, there are some important differences in the 2016 text, which serve to

Boeve explores the assumptions and ambiguities contained in the encyclical and considers these in light of its genre. In doing so, he argues that the text itself interrupts a way of reading that focuses on the seemingly dogmatic statements contained within it. Boeve's exegesis presents a nuanced understanding of the role and place of the encyclical in Christian life and a renewed awareness of the Magisterium's affirmation of the mutually transformative relationship between theology and philosophy. The result emphasises Boeve's contention that when approaching Christian texts in an open, dialogical way, the reader potentially witnesses to the unspoken event of heterogeneity in the discourse (*le différend*).

In the second case study, "Narratives of Creation and Flood: A Contest between Science and Christian Faith?," Boeve illustrates the ways in which a theology of interruption allows for the recognition of particularity in diverse discourses (in this case, in the dialogue between faith and science).⁸ Here, he argues for the notion of interruption as the recognition of "a constitutive difference," whereby each *particular* discourse serves to interrupt its dialogue partner and potentially causes participants in the dialogue to recontextualise their position.⁹ The approach Boeve takes in this example has clear implications for the consideration of interreligious dialogue from the perspective of a theology of interruption. In fact, the basis of his argument here is founded on the argument he presents in chapter 8 of *God Interrupts History*, "Jesus Both God and Human: Incarnation as Stumbling Block or Cornerstone for Interreligious Dialogue?"¹⁰ I have chosen to explore "Narratives of Creation and Flood" in the present chapter, instead of "Jesus Both God and Human," as it offers an *application* of a theology of interruption, which we can extend to a discussion of interreligious dialogue. "Jesus Both God and Human" simply presents the theological basis for interreligious dialogue based on the precepts of a theology of interruption.¹¹

In the third case study, "Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology," Boeve offers a recontextualisation of the Chalcedonian Christological formula—that Christ is "one person in two natures"—in order, he writes, "to restore to this dated formula its power to refer

clarify Boeve's argument. Hence, I will refer to the later text in the present chapter unless otherwise specified (see abbreviations, p. xiff).

⁸ "Narratives of Creation and Flood: A Contest Between Science and Christian Faith?," in *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York/ London: Continuum, 2007), Ch. 6. This chapter was originally published as "Creation and Flood. A Contest between Science and Christian Faith?" in *On Cultivating Faith and Science. Reflections on Two Key Topics of Modern Ethics*, ed. Juhant J. and B. Zalec, Theologie Ost-West (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2007). Unless otherwise specified, the chapter from *God Interrupts History* will be cited in the present chapter.

⁹ "NCF," 127.

¹⁰ *GIH*, 160-79.

¹¹ In "Jesus Both God and Human," Boeve proposes a way of considering the incarnation, which holds in tension the universality and particularity of the Christian narrative, and offers some insights as to how this might support the process of interreligious dialogue. The central themes of that chapter are developed further in his earlier article, "Christus Postmodernus," which is the subject of the third case study. As we will see in chapter 8, Boeve's argument in "Jesus Both God and Human" is particularly useful for the application of his approach: together with "Christus Postmodernus," it provides a clear expression of Boeve's Christology, which we can extend to a Pneumatology in the consideration of its implications for trinitarian theology.

beyond, so that it may again testify to [its] religious sensibility.”¹² In this final text, we see Boeve perform his theology of interruption in order to provide a contextually plausible way of thinking about the doctrine of Christ today, and we are provided with the stimulus to conduct a similar exercise with regards to the doctrine of the Trinity.

As I noted, above, each of these case studies illustrates the different aspects of a theology of interruption at work in Boeve’s texts. While a theology of interruption defies structural moves and resists attempts to define and contain it, an articulation of the principles, concepts and approaches that underpin it is necessary in order to consider its fruitfulness for contemporary systematic theology. Boeve resists doing this, preferring instead to discuss the notion of *recontextualisation* as a theological method; however, as we have seen in the discussion thus far, a theology of interruption necessarily *precedes* recontextualisation.¹³ In chapter 8, I will demonstrate how this might be applied more broadly, by using a theology of interruption to come to a recontextualised understanding of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity. In doing so, I will evaluate Boeve’s approach and discuss the extent to which it might overcome some of the limitations of other contemporary (modern and postmodern) approaches to the Trinity.

Case Study 1: “The Swan or the Dove? On the Difficult Dialogue between Theology and Philosophy”

In “The Swan or the Dove?,” Boeve demonstrates how the category of interruption can be used as an exegetical tool for understanding and approaching encyclicals (and, by extension, other Christian texts) so that the implications of the texts for theological and contextual reflection are brought to the fore. While he does not explicitly use the term “interruption” in his text, the moves he makes can be seen to support his use of a theology of interruption, as they demonstrate his contention that by interrupting would-be closed metanarratives, theologians are able to open the narratives and allow them to speak more adequately to, and within, the postmodern context.¹⁴ In the current example, Boeve performs his theology of interruption in order to interrupt a modern way of reading the encyclical, to highlight the need for the reader to take into account the nuances of the argument presented in it, and to demonstrate how the text might be understood in light of the current theological and philosophical landscape.

¹² Boeve, “CP,” 586.

¹³ On recontextualisation as a theological method, see *GIH*, Chap 2, 30-49. In that chapter, Boeve presents recontextualisation as leading to a theology of interruption; however, he is referring there to a contextual interruption that takes place when a renewed (recontextualised) religious critical consciousness meets the context. As a philosophical-conceptual-*theological* approach, a theology of interruption must come before this. Here, I refer to Boeve’s contention that God interrupts the Christian narrative, causing it to recontextualise. See my mention of this in chapter 1 (p. 9).

¹⁴ See n. 4, above, for a brief definition of the term “metanarrative,” and Ch. 2 for a fuller discussion.

The promulgation of *Fides et ratio* met with both praise and criticism in philosophical and theological circles. Joseph Ratzinger, for example, praised the encyclical for its recognition of the fundamental quest for truth, which it presents as reflected in the disciplines of both theology and philosophy, and for its affirmation of the mutually illuminating and enriching role that each discipline can play in the human search for truth.¹⁵ Additionally, Ratzinger praised the encyclical's affirmation of the universal place of Christian faith and its recognition of the diversity of cultural expressions of the faith, with its concomitant caution towards abandoning the truths that have been gained through the history of Greco-Latin thought in the desire for enculturation. He argues that in the dialogue between Christian faith and Greek culture, the latter was able to transcend itself to become a "connecting point for interpreting the Christian message."¹⁶ For Ratzinger, the use of philosophy can thus become a point of connection between Christian faith and "other peoples and cultures," as it enables other traditions to begin to "transcend" themselves, to open themselves "to universal truth ... [and to come] out of the enclosure of pure particularity."¹⁷ Other commentators similarly praise the document for its recognition of the mutually supportive relationship between faith and reason, while maintaining the "rightful integrity" of each discipline, and they offer directions towards the application of its insights.¹⁸

Criticisms of the encyclical range from a concern with the authoritarian (even "paternalistic") tone of the document, its tendencies towards absolutes in its definition of truth, and its seemingly anti-modern approach to the discussion of dialogue between faith and reason.¹⁹ Thomas Guarino particularly notes a number of weaknesses of the encyclical, which include its call for a "renewed metaphysics," the caveats it places on the recognition of "conceptual pluralism," and the fact that it ignores, or notes only in passing "the anthropological dimensions of knowing prominent in modern thought."²⁰

¹⁵ See, for example, then Cardinal Ratzinger's response in a lecture published in 1999: Joseph Ratzinger, "Cardinal Ratzinger Presents Centennial Lecture During Historic Visit," *Dialogue and Universalism* 9, no. 7/8 (1999).

¹⁶ "Centennial Lecture," n. 8.

¹⁷ "Centennial Lecture," n. 8.

¹⁸ See, for example, Thomas Weinandy, "Fides et ratio: A Response to John Webster," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 952 (2000): quote at 227; David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski, eds., *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays on Fides et ratio* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

¹⁹ See, for example, John Webster, "'Fides et ratio', Articles 64-79," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 948 (2000): quote at 68; Andrew Murray, "Fides et ratio: A Philosophical Response," *Religious Education* 47, no. 4 (1999): esp. at 60; and Thomas G. Guarino, "Fides et ratio: Theology and Contemporary Pluralism," *Theological studies* 62, no. 4 (2001): 675-700.

²⁰ "FR Theology and Contemporary Pluralism," 693-4, 691, 692. On this last point, Guarino particularly takes issue with the fact that the encyclical ignores human subjectivity in the quest for knowledge. He writes, "Related to the issue of realism and objectivity is the matter of human subjectivity in knowing truth. The encyclical ignores, for the most part, important dimensions of the noetic act that, of themselves, do not necessarily frustrate the realism or objectivity *Fides et ratio* wishes to defend. One sees very little, for example, about the turn to the subject, horizon analysis, theory-laden interpretation, the constructive dimension of knowledge or the tacit and intuitive elements of epistemology. This failure to acknowledge the subjective element in knowing counts as a significant omission in a document discussing human rationality and its

Boeve's consideration of the encyclical begins with his assessment of its various commentaries. He notes a trend in the negative assessments of the text, with commentators generally criticising it for "mortgag[ing], in advance, a contemporary challenging and fruitful description of the relation between faith/theology and philosophy, making it even impossible."²¹ He notes that they "especially criticize the [Pope's] inability or unwillingness to take modern philosophy seriously, and they recoil from falling back on premodern forms of philosophy or the massive emphasis on an often propositionally understood revelation."²² Importantly for Boeve's exegesis, he notes that commentators recognise ambiguities in the document. They point out, he notes,

on the one hand, a rather contemporaneous and open vision, on the other, a premodern sounding closed vision of what faith and theology are; they indicate text fragments showing a willingness to dialogue without conditions, on the one hand, and others subordinating reason to faith and revelation, on the other; they point to the different evaluations of modern philosophy in the encyclical, from rigid rejection and condemnation, on the one hand, to recognition and being challenged, on the other.²³

Taking the recognition of these ambiguities as his starting point, Boeve begins "The Swan and the Dove?" with the proposal that *Fides et ratio* can be read in two ways. According to the first way of reading, the theologian might undertake a contextual-philosophical reading, beginning with an understanding of the "difficult relationship between the Church and modernity" and focusing on the encyclical's assessment of the "modern conflict between theology and philosophy."²⁴ On this way of reading, Boeve contends, "[m]odernity is said to have clipped the wings of reason, so that it can no longer ascend to ultimate truth."²⁵ The encyclical is thus read as the Church asserting its authority over reason, in service (*diakonia*) to the truth. According to the second way of reading, Boeve intends to posit a *theological* reading of the text, which reflects a sacramental understanding of truth.²⁶ In this second approach, the encyclical can be understood as an attempt to (re)open the dialogue between theology and philosophy in order to highlight their inextricable relationship and to support their mutual endeavours towards an understanding of truth. Boeve argues that the second way of

relationship to faith. Perhaps the encyclical should be credited for bypassing some of the blind alleys found in the epistemology of modernity. One wonders, however, if by ignoring the anthropological dimensions of knowing prominent in modern thought, the encyclical does not ignore modernity itself, thereby militating against its own goal of establishing a new synthesis that takes account of the entire philosophical tradition." (692).

²¹ Boeve, "SDDD," 113.

²² "SDDD," 113.

²³ "SDDD," 113.

²⁴ "SDDD," 80.

²⁵ "SDDD," 80.

²⁶ As we will see, later, he argues that this sacramental concept of truth is elaborated in Ch. 1 of the encyclical, based on the understanding of revelation expounded in *Dei verbum*. For Boeve, this sacramental concept of truth begins with the recognition of the mystery of revelation: our knowledge of God "is always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding." FR 13. At the same time, the encounter with God in grace unveils the mystery, so that, through grace, God at once reveals and conceals. "SDDD," 126-27. On this last point, Boeve cites FR 7. When I explore the third case study, I will expand this understanding of truth to include Boeve's contention that truth is not propositional, but *relational*.

reading speaks more adequately to postmodern sensibilities, as it recognises the apophatic impetus of Christian texts and discourses and affirms the strong diversity of discourses in the philosophical landscape.

In the discussion of the first case study, we will see that Boeve presents one way of reading as more helpful or authentic than the other, and he offers the second way of reading the encyclical (as a discourse on sacramental truth) as interruptive of the first (as a discourse on propositional truth). His intention in “The Swan or the Dove?” is twofold: a) to highlight the effects of approaching Christian texts through the lens of a closed or an open hermeneutic, respectively; and b) to consider the Magisterium’s support for an authentic dialogue between faith (theology) and reason (philosophy). As we have seen, this dialogue has been instrumental for Boeve in the development of his theological approach. For our purposes, the first case study offers an example of the fruits of an application of a theology of interruption, where interruption is engaged as a *theological* category. In my exploration of the second way of reading, I will examine the conceptual and dispositional approaches that Boeve engages, as it provides a performative example of his theology of interruption for the reading of Christian texts.

The Swan, with Clipped Wings

I noted, above, Boeve’s discussion of commentators who are largely critical of the encyclical. These commentators tend to approach the text selectively, he argues. They point to elements within the text where they suspect the author to be clipping “the wings of reason,” subordinating philosophy to theology, arguing against dialogue between theology and contemporary philosophical movements, and calling for a retrieval of a pre-modern (classical) understanding of reason in faith.²⁷ On this reading, John Paul II presents the Church as the master of truth—the authoritative teacher of revealed truth—and this revealed truth is presented as “objective, universal and absolute,” expressed authoritatively in a series of propositions.²⁸ Boeve notes a number of places in the text where this could be seen to be the case:

Even though truth is ultimately linked to revelation (and thus to mystery), the majority of definitions are taken from classical philosophy: truth is universal, absolute and objective; truth is transcultural (FR 69), truth is representation (and not the result of consensus [FR 56]), truth is *adaequatio rei et intellectus* (FR 82). Truth, moreover, is expressible in

²⁷ On the use of the metaphor of the swan with clipped wings, Boeve writes: “If people want to keep a swan captive, they clip a wing, so the noble animal cannot balance during flight. In *Fides et ratio* Pope John Paul [II] indicates that this happened with the wing of reason in modern times. Having lost its openness to revelation, modern philosophy has—all too often—made it impossible for ‘the human spirit to rise up to the contemplation of the truth.’ Many a philosopher and theologian, however, will be inclined to *suspect the opposite*, after reading the encyclical. Precisely by not taking modern and contemporary philosophy seriously, the pope clips the wing of reason.” “SDDD,” 119.

²⁸ “SDDD,” 123-4.

propositions. Language is capable of giving expression—only if analogically—to this truth (FR 84).²⁹

Boeve contends that when the encyclical is approached in this way, the reader understands philosophy to be recognised in the text as an autonomous discipline and, yet, considered inferior to theology. Reason is presented as preparation for faith; it constitutes a movement in a continuous trajectory, with the “correct use of reason” (*recta ratio*) leading to its natural end in faith.³⁰ Moreover, the author is understood to be asserting the Church’s right to “intervene in philosophical matters in order to formulate the necessary characteristics of good philosophy” and to ensure that philosophy does not run “counter to revelation.”³¹ On this account, truth can be obtained through reason, but only if it is in harmony with the truth of faith, a truth that is “confirmed with certainty by revelation.”³²

Among the criticisms directed at *Fides et ratio* from those reading it in this way is the lack of recognition of the philosophical pluralism of the contemporary context (note, for example, my brief reference to Guarino’s assessment, above). For Boeve, the lack of awareness of philosophical pluralism is accompanied by a concomitant lack of recognition of religious and cultural pluralism in the current landscape, leading to a propositional view of Christian faith as the one truth, over and against other faith traditions and worldviews. As a case in point, Boeve highlights the encyclical’s claim that “the person who—for one reason or another—lacks access to Christian revelation, who neither wants nor is able to enjoy such access, remains ‘seriously handicapped by the inherent weakness of human reason’” if the person wishes to search for truth.³³ While this has implications for the Church’s understanding of the salvific nature of revelation, and is clearly a concern for those who are not Christian, it also relegates to the sidelines those philosophies that are not aligned to Christian revelation as the “true ‘point of reference.’”³⁴ Critics of the encyclical who read it in this way point to the exclusively Christian understanding of truth presented in the document and see such a view to be a hindrance to fruitful dialogue between faith and reason in the contemporary context.

The Dove

In the second approach to the text, Boeve engages a more open hermeneutic than those approaching it from the first perspective and discovers support for a rigorous and productive dialogue between theology and philosophy. He argues that the recognition of the autonomy of each discipline, which is articulated explicitly in the text, provides precisely the opening for such a dialogue. As a case in point, Boeve argues that it is the very autonomy of contemporary philosophy

²⁹ “SDDD,” 123.

³⁰ “SDDD,” 120-1. See FR 4, 50.

³¹ “SDDD,” 122 Boeve cites FR, 49.

³² “SDDD,” 120.

³³ “SDDD,” 121 Boeve quotes FR, 75.

³⁴ “SDDD,” 120. Boeve quotes FR 14, 15.

that has allowed philosophy to come to an awareness of the “boundaries of reason” and towards a recognition of the (beneficially) interruptive nature of “plurality and alterity” on the development of its contemporary critical consciousness.³⁵ This has “far-reaching consequences for epistemological and metaphysical questions,” he contends.³⁶ While *Fides et ratio* defines “good philosophy” as having a “sapiential, cognitive and metaphysical dimension, as demanded by the Word of God,” contemporary philosophy has moved from a pre-modern focus on metaphysics to a critique of the way in which knowledge is understood to be attained.³⁷ Boeve notes that the autonomy granted to reason allowed philosophy to come to an understanding of difference and alterity without having first to ground its epistemology in faith.³⁸ To this effect, the critical consciousness of contemporary philosophy can serve as a challenge to theology, calling it to take seriously the plurality of traditions and worldviews found in the current context in order to consider the question of the relationship between God and the world today.

Boeve’s second way of reading *Fides et ratio* also takes a selective approach to the text, but in acknowledging this, he explains his contention that there is “sufficient evidence to justify at least a reading of the document as an inner-theological discourse” that moves it beyond “the sterile debate between anti-modern and postmodern positions.”³⁹ Here, the metaphor of the dove (descending from heaven and looking for a place to rest) seems for Boeve to be more fitting than that of the swan, as it recognises the starting point of faith in the authorship of *Fides et ratio* and approaches the text from a theological perspective. On this reading, reason can be understood as a partner to faith, as faith seeks understanding and expression in the discourse of human reason.⁴⁰ Boeve argues that when the text is approached in this way, “points of contact” can be found for further reflection on the relationship between faith and reason in light of a postmodern critical consciousness.⁴¹ These points of contact include: the recognition of the encyclical’s dialogue with the Second Vatican Council’s “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” *Dei verbum*; the consideration of the inherent ambiguities of the text, where seemingly closed, authoritarian propositions are softened or qualified; and the appreciation of a dialectic—even apophatic—element at work within the text.⁴² As we will see, in his exegesis of the text from the perspective of the dove, Boeve uses elements of deconstruction to demonstrate that the assumptions inherent in the text—that the term “truth” be understood by the reader to refer to “the truth of faith” and that cultures are considered to have played an important role in the development of the tradition—are the very elements that prevent

³⁵ “SDDD,” 122.

³⁶ “SDDD,” 122.

³⁷ “SDDD,” 122. Boeve cites FR, 81-4. See also, my discussion of Guarino’s critique, above, especially the text quoted at n. 20.

³⁸ “SDDD,” 122.

³⁹ “SDDD,” 134.

⁴⁰ “SDDD,” 124, 129.

⁴¹ “SDDD,” 134.

⁴² On the third point, see “SDDD,” 113.

the discourse from closing itself off from dialogue with its context.⁴³ Ultimately, what he offers is a compelling way of reading *Fides et ratio*, which provides a more nuanced understanding of the text. In Boeve's second way of reading, he argues that the text reflects a Church that takes seriously the task of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* and recognises the role of the philosophical context in shaping an understanding of faith.

Particularity meets apophatics

Taking his cue from the first chapter of the encyclical, Boeve argues that the document presents a sacramental, rather than dogmatic, concept of truth, which draws on the understanding of revelation presented in *Dei verbum*.⁴⁴ This understanding of revelation considers Christ to be God's gratuitous self-disclosure, given to humankind as an invitation into relationship. In *Dei verbum*, revelation is defined as "the deepest truth about God and human salvation ... made clear to us in Christ, who is the mediator and at the same time the fullness of all Revelation."⁴⁵ Moreover, "Jesus perfected Revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present."⁴⁶ Boeve contends that according to *Fides et ratio*, the truth made present *sacramentally* in Christ is a salvific truth, "a gratuitous gift of God for the salvation of human beings," which, the encyclical notes, is freely accepted by the believer as mystery.⁴⁷ Implicit in this way of reading is the understanding that the author's position in the encyclical is "strongly qualified theologically," and that the document reflects a "*particularized teaching*" that posits truth as something "lived existentially in the option of faith."⁴⁸

According to Boeve, the encyclical's qualification of the mystery of Christ reminds Christians of the apophatic nature of the Christian truth-claim: our knowledge of the mystery of God's revelation is "always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding."⁴⁹ According to the encyclical, believers "can make no claim upon this truth which comes to them as gift and which, set within the context of interpersonal communication, urges reason to be open to it and to embrace

⁴³ On the notion of truth to be understood as "the truth of faith," Boeve writes: "*Fides et ratio* insists that there is only one truth; but, since its fullness is linked to revelation, this truth is at once a mystery. Thus, it is inaccessible outside the faith, and it can only be given form sacramentally." *FR* must therefore be understood as a document written from the point of view of the faith for the faithful. On the development of tradition, Boeve observes that while the Magisterium is openly critical of the "(post-Christian) Western European context," in *FR*, its support for the role of context in tradition development is spelled out implicitly. He notes, for example, the Pope's recognition of the richness of the Asian cultures and his call for the "enculturation," or recontextualisation, of the Christian faith within these cultures (so that "something new grows out of the encounter"), as well as JP II's positive reference to Aquinas' dialogue with "the critical consciousness of his day," which saw Aquinas refer to "non-Christian philosophy" in the development of his theological treatise. "SDDD," 134-35. Boeve cites *FR*, 70-72. I take up these insights in further detail, below.

⁴⁴ "SDDD," 126.

⁴⁵ Vatican II Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei verbum* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 2.

⁴⁶ *DV*, 4.

⁴⁷ *FR*, 13; Boeve, "SDDD," 126.

⁴⁸ "SDDD," 124, 125, emphasis original.

⁴⁹ *FR*, 13.

its profound meaning.”⁵⁰ In Boeve’s reading of the document, the truth of revelation can only be understood (but never fully grasped) in faith, and this faith has a specific and particular—sacramental and Christological—character.⁵¹ He contends that the particular character of the Christian truth-claim, therefore, is that the incarnation “remain[s] the central point for understanding the puzzle of human existence, creation and Godself.”⁵²

Boeve’s recognition of the particularity of the encyclical as a document of faith for the faithful allows him to consider more positively the Magisterium’s rejection of philosophical trends that contradict the truth of faith, while at the same time maintaining that philosophy and theology are autonomous disciplines.⁵³ As we will see in the second case study, the recognition of particularity in a theology of interruption allows for the affirmation of the boundaries of different discourses while also allowing for the mutual interruption of each discourse as a result of open dialogue, so that each partner in the dialogue is able to come to a deeper understanding of their own perspective. To express this differently, only as particular discourses can theology and philosophy offer something new, so that each discourse interrupts the narrative of the other and propels its recontextualisation. According to Boeve, the particularity of the discourses of faith and reason is affirmed in the encyclical when John Paul II affirms the contention of the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei filius*: that a “rational and hence ultimately philosophical knowledge [is necessary] for the understanding of faith” and that the disciplines of faith (theology) and reason (philosophy) are at the same time inseparable and distinct.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *FR*, 13.

⁵¹ Boeve, “SDDD,” 126.

⁵² “SDDD,” 128. In an earlier paper, Boeve argues that the particularity of the Christian tradition—rooted in the incarnation—reflects the radical hermeneutical process of coming to understand Jesus of Nazareth to be the God of salvation history and that in the inescapable particularity of this narrative of Jesus of Nazareth, we see a “witness to the universality of grace,” which is signified in a definitive way in the person of Christ, but not exhausted and, “as such, [it] can never be articulated.” See Boeve, “NTTH,” 11.

⁵³ “SDDD,” 124-26. On the autonomy of faith and reason, see *FR* 16, 45, 48. The following statement from *FR* perhaps captures this intention most clearly: “This is why I make this strong and insistent appeal—not, I trust, untimely—that faith and philosophy recover the profound unity which allows them to stand in harmony with their nature without compromising their mutual autonomy. The *parrhesia* of faith must be matched by the boldness of reason.” *FR* 48. On the Magisterium’s intervention, see my earlier discussion on *recta ratio*, and also the following statements in *FR*: “It is neither the task nor the competence of the Magisterium to intervene in order to make good the lacunas of deficient philosophical discourse. Rather, it is the Magisterium’s duty to respond clearly and strongly when controversial philosophical opinions threaten right understanding of what has been revealed, and when false and partial theories which sow the seed of serious error, confusing the pure and simple faith of the People of God, begin to spread more widely.” *FR* 49. JP II continues: “In the light of faith, therefore, the Church’s Magisterium can and must authoritatively exercise a critical discernment of opinions and philosophies which contradict Christian doctrine. It is the task of the Magisterium in the first place to indicate which philosophical presuppositions and conclusions are incompatible with revealed truth, thus articulating the demands which faith’s point of view makes of philosophy. Moreover, as philosophical learning has developed, different schools of thought have emerged. This pluralism also imposes upon the Magisterium the responsibility of expressing a judgement as to whether or not the basic tenets of these different schools are compatible with the demands of the word of God and theological enquiry.” *FR* 50.

⁵⁴ *FR*, 53; “SDDD,” 129.

The relationship between faith and reason is further reflected in John Paul II's contention that between the two poles of revelation and the human spirit, "reason has its own specific field in which it can enquire and understand, restricted only by its finiteness before the infinite mystery of God."⁵⁵ Therefore, the free assent of faith is what allows for a recognition of the depths of the mysterious signs of revelation in history. He writes,

To assist reason in its effort to understand the mystery there are the signs which Revelation itself presents. These [signs] serve to lead the search for truth to new depths, enabling the mind in its autonomous exploration to penetrate within the mystery by use of reason's own methods. ... Yet these signs also urge reason to look beyond their status as signs in order to grasp the deeper meaning which they bear. They contain a hidden truth to which the mind is drawn (*FR* 13).

John Paul II presents reason as a partner in the understanding of faith but notes that only through the assent of faith do the signs reveal—sacramentally—the depths of the mystery. According to Boeve, the truth of revelation, then, is understood through faith and "the truth of faith has a eucharistic character [in that] it becomes 'truly present' without being 'ontologically available.'"⁵⁶ In other words, in faith, Christians can come to a deeper understanding of truth while recognising that the truth will always escape their grasp. As Boeve writes, "in the Eucharist and in the mystery of the incarnation, the believer has access to the truth of the faith, respecting the mysterious character thereof."⁵⁷ Moreover, he argues that "all speech concerning this truth ... necessarily maintains a sacramental character, and only from this sacramental perspective is it understood as absolute, universal and even objective."⁵⁸ It is in relation to the ultimate mystery of Christ that Boeve considers the relationship between the universal and the particular, a notion that we will take up below when we come to the third case study.

In the first approach to reading *Fides et ratio*, using the metaphor of the swan, Boeve highlights aspects of the encyclical that include the subordination of reason to faith and paternalistic tendencies that effectively "[clip] the wings" of reason on matters relating to faith, as well as noting criticisms that have been directed at the encyclical in light of this reading. Boeve argues that the encyclical's use of the phrases *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (philosophy as the handmaiden, or servant, to theology) and philosophy as *preparatio fidei* (preparation for faith) are used as evidence

⁵⁵ *FR*, 14.

⁵⁶ Boeve, "SDDD," 127. Boeve cites *FR*, 13, noting that "the sign of the Eucharist ... reiterates the mystery of the incarnation in Jesus Christ." He quotes: "[In the sacramental character of] the Eucharist, ... the indissoluble unity between the signifier and signified makes it possible to grasp the depths of the mystery. In the Eucharist, Christ is truly present and alive, working through his Spirit; yet, as Saint Thomas said so well, 'What you neither see nor grasp, faith confirms for you, leaving nature far behind; a sign it is that now appears, hiding in mystery realities sublime.'" John Paul II quotes Thomas, "*Sequence* for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord."

⁵⁷ "SDDD," 128. Boeve cites *FR*, 12: "In the Incarnation of the Son of God we see forged the enduring and definitive synthesis which the human mind of itself could not even have imagined: the Eternal enters time, the Whole lies hidden in the part, God takes on a human face."

⁵⁸ "SDDD," 128.

in support of such a reading. However, by using the second reading trajectory, and approaching the text with the recognition that it functions as “particularized teaching”—a particular discourse of faith for the faithful—Boeve contends that these phrases are relativised.⁵⁹ He considers, for example, the following excerpts, from *Fides et ratio*:

... from the Patristic period onwards, philosophy was called the *ancilla theologiae*. The title was not intended to indicate philosophy's servile submission or purely functional role with regard to theology. Rather, it was used in the sense in which Aristotle had spoken of the experimental sciences as “ancillary” to “*prima philosophia*.” The term can scarcely be used today, given the principle of autonomy to which we have referred, but it has served throughout history to indicate the necessity of the link between the two sciences and the impossibility of their separation (*FR* 77).

The Church remains profoundly convinced that faith and reason “mutually support each other”; each influences the other, as they offer to each other a purifying critique and a stimulus to pursue the search for deeper understanding (*FR* 100).⁶⁰

In these examples, Boeve argues that theology and philosophy are presented as autonomous disciplines—two separate orders of knowledge, seeking different *objects* of knowledge—while at the same time working in a dialogical partnership so that each discipline is able to critique, strengthen and deepen the knowledge of the other.⁶¹ On this reading, philosophical concepts, schemes, and patterns of thought are seen as leading to new theological insights and deepening theological questions. In turn, philosophy is enriched because theology (faith) opens new horizons, deepens the *philosophical* questions, and causes new questions to be asked in the search for truth.⁶² Boeve contends that in the dialogue between theology and philosophy the autonomy of each discipline is maintained because the concepts and schemes adopted from philosophy by theology are subsequently qualified *theologically* and taken into theological discourse. To use terms I have discussed elsewhere in the present work, philosophy *interrupts* theology (and vice versa) and causes its recontextualisation, but in doing so, the two disciplines remain separate orders of knowledge.⁶³

By highlighting the particularity of the encyclical, Boeve notes that the document operates at “the level of an *internal discourse*” that teaches “from the mystery of faith.”⁶⁴ At the same time, it reflects an inherent kataphatic-apophatic movement that qualifies the propositional statements within the text. According to Boeve, while the internal discourse “appears to be a propositional teaching,” when read through the lens of the first approach, the second way of reading opens the hermeneutic and allows for the recognition that these propositional statements are qualified by the

⁵⁹ “SDDD,” 129-30.

⁶⁰ JP II cites *Dei filius*, IV.

⁶¹ Boeve, “SDDD,” 121. See also, *FR* 73.

⁶² “SDDD,” 121.

⁶³ “SDDD,” 130.

⁶⁴ “SDDD,” 125-26.

understanding of revelation presented in *Dei verbum*.⁶⁵ For Boeve, this affirms his contention that the genre of the encyclical is “symbolic-sacramental” and that in the encyclical, the notion of truth is to be understood sacramentally.”⁶⁶ As we will see in the third case study, this insight becomes important in Boeve’s consideration of the Chalcedonian Christological formula.

Deconstruction

I noted earlier that Boeve does not explicitly use the term “interruption” in his exegesis of *Fides et ratio*; however, he does refer to the understanding of reality presented by the Church as “(inter)rupted immanence.”⁶⁷ He argues that when we consider the particularised teaching of the Church as the mediation of a “sacramental concept of truth” (a truth made present in faith and lived existentially), we can understand this notion of “(inter)rupted immanence” as the way in which, with the free gift of faith that can be understood more deeply through the insights of reason, God interrupts human understanding and agency within the world.⁶⁸ On my reading of Boeve’s approach, it is conceivable that the second way of reading presents its own kind of dogmatic understanding of truth and the relationship between faith and reason in the search for truth. However, the recognition of the sacramental and relational character of truth (which Boeve argues is presented in the encyclical itself) opens up the discourse so that it no longer functions simply to present dogmatic statements and magisterial propositions, but instead invites the reader into dialogue.

One of the ways in which Boeve engages in dialogue with *Fides et ratio* is through the use of the tools of deconstruction. Kevin Hart’s definition of deconstruction is useful for our purposes here, although Boeve does not engage explicitly with Hart in the text under discussion. Hart writes: “To deconstruct a discourse is to show, by reference to its own assumptions, that it depends upon prior differences which prevent that discourse from being totalised.”⁶⁹ In effect, Boeve brings to the fore the document’s inherent assumptions as a document of faith for the faithful—assumptions that relate to both the author and the reader of the text, as well as to the context in which the text is received—and he uses the ambiguities within the text to open up an otherwise closed reading.⁷⁰ Through his explication of the second way of reading the text, Boeve demonstrates that while John Paul II may have been seeking, on one level, to assert the status of theology over philosophy, the recognition of the faith position of the author as well the function of the encyclical as a letter to the faithful serves to qualify the propositions and open them onto the possibility of deeper insights gleaned from the dialogue with philosophy.

⁶⁵ “SDDD,” 126.

⁶⁶ “SDDD,” 126, 134.

⁶⁷ “SDDD,” 125.

⁶⁸ “SDDD,” 125-26.

⁶⁹ Hart, *Trespass*, 67.

⁷⁰ See n. 43, above, for more on these assumptions.

As a case in point, Boeve considers the following excerpts, which soften the otherwise dramatic presentation of the separation between theology and philosophy in modernity, which John Paul II addresses in *FR* 45-47 (a theme that Boeve notes is strongly criticised by those who take the perspective of the first trajectory). Immediately following a discussion of “-isms” associated with modern philosophy (idealism, rationalism, atheistic humanism), John Paul II offers the following:

This rapid survey of the history of philosophy, then, reveals a growing separation between faith and philosophical reason. Yet closer scrutiny shows that even in the philosophical thinking of those who helped drive faith and reason further apart *there are found at times precious and seminal insights* which, if pursued and developed with mind and heart rightly tuned, can lead to the discovery of truth’s way. Such insights are found, for instance, in penetrating analyses of perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history. The theme of death as well can become for all thinkers an incisive appeal to seek within themselves the true meaning of their own life. But this does not mean that the link between faith and reason as it now stands does not need to be carefully examined, because each without the other is impoverished and enfeebled (*FR* 48).⁷¹

Here, we can see that John Paul II’s discussion of the “drama of the separation of faith and reason” is not an affirmation of such a separation, towards the goal of theology, but an affirmation of the need for a mutually enriching dialogue between theology and philosophy.⁷² Later, he affirms the fruits of such a dialogue, noting that alongside the Thomistic revival in modern theology, Catholic philosophers had adopted “more recent currents of thought” and, in full autonomy, “produced philosophical works of great influence and lasting value.”⁷³ He continues,

Some devised syntheses so remarkable that they stood comparison with the great systems of idealism. Others established the epistemological foundations for a new consideration of faith in the light of a renewed understanding of moral consciousness; others again produced a philosophy which, starting with an analysis of immanence, opened the way to the transcendent; and there were finally those who sought to combine the demands of faith with the perspective of phenomenological method. From different quarters, then, modes of philosophical speculation have continued to emerge and have sought to keep alive the great tradition of Christian thought which unites faith and reason (*FR* 59).

Following this line of thought, Boeve argues that the reflective critical consciousness of postmodern theology “is more than a by-product—to be rejected—of the ‘fatal’ modern schism between faith and reason,” a conclusion that might be drawn from the encyclical if it is read through the lens of the first approach.⁷⁴ When considered through the second lens, the recognition of the diversity of cultures with which the Church enters into dialogue (expressed in *FR* 72), along with the philosophical questions and insights present in these cultures, can be affirmed as sources of

⁷¹ Emphasis mine.

⁷² *FR*, 45.

⁷³ *FR*, 59.

⁷⁴ Boeve, “SDDD,” 135.

enrichment.⁷⁵ Moreover, the affirmation of Aquinas as a model for theology in the encyclical (especially at *FR* 78), reflects the recognition that non-Christian philosophies (to which Thomas was indebted in his own day) can indeed serve as dialogue partners for theology.⁷⁶

While Boeve's deconstruction of *Fides et ratio* aims to demonstrate that the encyclical illustrates the important role of philosophy in the dialogue between context and tradition, his exegesis achieves an important sub-function: by illuminating a way of reading that exemplifies a postmodern critical consciousness, he demonstrates that the encyclical itself deconstructs (and interrupts) the first lens through which it might be read.⁷⁷ In other words, not only does the document operate on the level of an internal discourse (because it reflects the many hands that have been involved in its development), it seems also to pre-empt the direction taken in terms of its reception.⁷⁸ By drawing out a second way of reading the text, which subverts and undermines the otherwise overtly propositional and dogmatic tone of the encyclical, Boeve juxtaposes modern and post-modern sensibilities. Using the first approach, we can see the Magisterium's support for the metaphysical and ontological categories of classical (philosophical) theology, while in the second approach, we, as readers, are called to bring to the task of understanding a postmodern sensibility for difference. As I have discussed throughout the present work, Boeve argues that in witnessing to difference (the event of heterogeneity: *le différend*), we remain open to the possibility of the interruption of God, who breaks open closed narratives and pushes us towards a deeper understanding of the world and our place within it.

Performativity

In an earlier version of the "The Swan or the Dove?," Boeve notes that his reading of *Fides et ratio* "provide[s] an insight into the standpoint of the one giving the report."⁷⁹ I have noted the implicit undercurrent of interruption in Boeve's exegesis (a notion that runs through his broader project) and I have discussed his use of postmodern philosophical sensibilities, which assists him to approach and

⁷⁵ "The Church of the future, who will judge herself enriched by all that comes from today's engagement with Eastern cultures and will find in this inheritance fresh cues for fruitful dialogue with the cultures which will emerge as humanity moves into the future." *FR* 72.

⁷⁶ For Boeve, this insight stands against JP II's statement in *FR* 91: "the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention. According to some of them, the time of certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral. In their destructive critique of every certitude, several authors have failed to make crucial distinctions and have called into question the certitudes of faith." See also *FR*, 45-48 and 55-56.

⁷⁷ In an earlier version of this paper, Boeve explicitly mentions this subtext in his abstract: "The second trajectory, from the perspective of an inner-theological reading, understands the encyclical's aspirations as *fides quaerens intellectum*. In developing a sacramental concept of truth, the encyclical bears within itself the deconstruction of the defensive, anti-modern position of the first trajectory. A theology, which takes account of the actual, post-modern critical consciousness will be able to find in *Fides et ratio* a basis for further reflection." Boeve, "SDTK," abstract.

⁷⁸ "SDTK," 3.

⁷⁹ "SDTK," 4.

understand the text from a theological perspective. Boeve's reading of the encyclical thus enacts (or performs) his thesis that the dialogue between theology and contemporary philosophy can prove fruitful not only for coming to a deeper understanding of faith but also for providing a means by which the communication of such faith can be achieved. While in his closing remarks, he laments the lack of explicit discussion of plurality in *Fides et ratio*, Boeve nevertheless demonstrates some of the ways in which this plurality is given voice. He challenges the Magisterium in this regard, towards "a theological elaboration of an explicit, extra-theological evaluation of the current context of plurality," which would see it "[take] seriously the plurality to which contemporary philosophy witnesses."⁸⁰

When taken from the perspective of a postmodern understanding of text and the way text functions, what seems to be a dogmatic argument about the limits of philosophy (reason) and its subordinate relationship to theology (faith) is nuanced and framed so that the open, dialogical, element is underlined and brought to the fore. The result highlights the reflexive relationship between theology and philosophy, not only because of the way of reading the text that effectively brings this out in the document but also because of the very approach Boeve takes, that is, in his *performative* analysis of the text.⁸¹ In his exegesis, he demonstrates performatively the fruitfulness of the dialogue between philosophy and theology in search of the truth of human experience. The result is the interruption of a particular (modern) way of reading the text and the illumination of the nuanced argument presented within it, as well as the potential interruption of the reception of the document, through the recognition that it must be understood in light of its particular genre and task. In this way, Boeve illustrates that the theological hermeneutical category of interruption functions not only as a means by which to understand the text, but by using this approach, the text itself potentially becomes interruptive: we are compelled to re-read the texts with a contemporary critical consciousness and to reflect on the implications of the texts for our understanding of both context and tradition.

Case Study 2: "Narratives of Creation and Flood: A Contest between Science and Christian Faith?"

In 2005, Boeve was asked by the Department of Geology at KU Leuven to contribute to a discussion on the relationship between Christian faith and science, as it is reflected in debates about

⁸⁰ "SDDD," 135.

⁸¹ I refer here to the notion of a "performative sentence," defined by J. L. Austin for his 1955 Lecture Series. A "performative sentence" is one in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action." For example, to utter the words, "I do," in a marriage ceremony is to *enact* the union between two people in marriage, or to bequeath a gift to someone in a will, we simply need to write, "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother." In each of these examples, Austin explains, "to state that I am doing it ... is to do it." J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 5-7. We see this also, of course, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, when the Priest utters the words of consecration to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

creationism, evolution and intelligent design, and it is to this contribution that we now turn.⁸² In his response, “Narratives of Creation and Flood: A Contest Between Science and Christian Faith?,” which constitutes chapter 6 of *God Interrupts History*, Boeve demonstrates just how the notion of “thinking in terms of difference,” rather than in terms of harmony on the one hand, or conflict and opposition on the other, can prove fruitful for the development of our understanding of God and the relationship between God and the world.⁸³ In this piece, Boeve argues for an explicit understanding of the nature of the two discourses—faith and science—as particular and irreducible “language registers.”⁸⁴ While these “language registers serve different ends and are determined by different points of reference,” Boeve argues that when they are engaged in an “open dialogue” the recognition of the differences between the discourses constitutes the dialogue.⁸⁵ Rather than creating the conditions for an impasse, or an “unbridgeable void,” the recognition of differences allows for an account of the boundaries of each discourse and for the potential recontextualisation of each discourse. In this way, the dialogue potentially interrupts any tendencies towards hegemony and propels a deeper understanding of knowledge within each discipline.⁸⁶

In the discussion below, after briefly exploring Boeve’s overview of the various approaches to the consideration of the relationship between faith and science, I will outline the moves he makes in his own response. In doing so, I will add to the insights I have gleaned from the first case study in an effort to identify the specific conceptual and performative approaches that underpin a theology of interruption.

⁸² The Department of Geology at KUL had organised an exhibition titled “Life in Stone,” which included “a display of fossils varying from four billion to ten thousand years old, ... [and] told the story of life on our planet.” Boeve, *GIH*, 111, n. 2.

⁸³ *GIH*, 111.

⁸⁴ *GIH*, 123.

⁸⁵ *GIH*, 123.

⁸⁶ *GIH*, 123, 129, 123. In the discussion of Boeve’s exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, above, I noted the important place Boeve gives to the recognition of the autonomy of theology and philosophy, and I discussed his contention that this argument was reflected in the encyclical. In that article (“SDDD,” esp. at 121) the recognition of theology and philosophy as two different orders of knowledge allows Boeve to argue for a dialogue between the two that is mutually beneficial. On this point in his exegesis, he writes: “*Fides et ratio* insists that there is only one truth; but, since its fullness is linked to revelation, this truth is at once a mystery. Thus, it is inaccessible outside the faith, and it can only be given form sacramentally. Therefore, there are two orders of knowledge: one (reason as a manner of thinking, which is active outside the premises of the Christian symbolic universe) that can lead us to the edges of the mystery, and one that can embrace the mystery in faith without neutralizing it thereby as mystery. This implies that we can no longer assume an overly facile continuity between truly autonomous reason (which is perhaps the *intellectus fidei* of another symbolic universe) and theological discourse. At the very least, this means that truth is a multifaceted concept and that—in the context of Christian faith—it would be better to speak of the truth of faith. Making a clear distinction between philosophical and theological discourses, together with the recognition of their different particular points of departure and hermeneutical circles, can eliminate many misunderstandings in advance. This implies that today, in line with the second reading trajectory, from the perspective of faith, one must take more stock of the discontinuity between the two orders of knowledge. In contrast to what is often assumed, this need not stand in the way of a far-reaching dialogue between faith and reason.” “SDDD,” 134. As we will see, Boeve’s argument in the second case study, “Narratives of Creation and Flood,” runs along similar lines.

Boeve begins his piece on the relationship between faith and science by canvassing the models that have prevailed historically, before presenting his own approach.⁸⁷ In this case, he considers those approaches that aim at harmony, those that result in conflict, and those that seek to recognise differences.⁸⁸ In his exploration of the models that aim at *harmony*, he begins with a discussion of the “metaphor of the two books,” which was prevalent throughout the Middle Ages. In this model, God is understood to be “the author of ‘both the book of nature and the Sacred Scriptures,’ therefore, there is no possibility of conflict or contradiction.”⁸⁹ The aim of this approach, Boeve explains, was to affirm a synthesis between science and faith, where nature was understood to point to and affirm the creative activity of God. However, he notes that the beginning of a conflict soon emerged when it was discovered that the earth revolved around the sun (rather than the other way around). When this occurred, the classical understanding of the relationship between God and humanity was put under pressure.⁹⁰ Around this time, Galileo (1564-1642) affirmed the metaphor of the two books but also affirmed the normativity of science over revelation when contradictions became apparent. The beginning of a recognition that nature and scripture function to reveal God in different ways emerged. As Boeve explains, Galileo asserted “that the bible was not in the first instance about ‘the course of the heavens,’ but rather about ‘how one gets into heaven.’”⁹¹

Soon after, driven by the Enlightenment, the notion that God could be arrived at by reason alone (Deism) emerged. Boeve argues that at this point, the harmony model, which holds a recognition of revelation as two books—nature and sacred scripture—continued to prevail; however, instead of beginning with faith to arrive at a deeper understanding of natural science, Enlightenment thinkers began with the insights of nature and sought to fit belief in God into their new scientific understandings.⁹² Here, we are reminded of Boeve’s critique of the modern correlation models in contextual theology, which seek harmony between faith and context but result in a reduction of the

⁸⁷ I noted earlier that parallels can be drawn between Boeve’s argument in relation to the dialogue between faith and science, and his approach to interreligious dialogue. In Ch. 8 of *God Interrupts History*, “Jesus both God and Human,” he canvasses similar approaches to interreligious dialogue that we see here, approaches that he describes, respectively, as models of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. He goes on to argue in that chapter for a “different type of inclusivism,” one that holds in tension the particularity and universality of the Christian truth claim. See *GIH*, 166-72; 172-78, at 173. This will become a central theme in Ch. 8.

⁸⁸ This approach has become somewhat of a signature structure for Boeve. See, for example, “BRD.”; and “BCS.” This structure also mimics Boeve’s argument on the move from modern to postmodern theology. In “The Interruption of Political Theology,” for example, he argues that the theological fruits of the correlation strategies of modernity have lost their plausibility due to pluralisation and detraditionalisation, and that this loss of plausibility now propels a recontextualisation of the tradition so that it might begin to take seriously the diversity of discourses in the contemporary context.

⁸⁹ Boeve contends that this model developed under the influence of Bonaventure, and was taken up by Thomas Aquinas, particularly in his notion of God as *causa prima*/ Unmoved Mover. *GIH*, 117.

⁹⁰ *GIH*, 120.

⁹¹ *GIH*, 120.

⁹² *GIH*, 120.

particularity of discourses.⁹³ By seeking to affirm the existence of God as Creator, the Deists de-personalised God and relegated God to the heavens: faith was “made to fit” into the new context.⁹⁴

As we have seen in relation to the correlation models, the hegemonic tendencies and transgression of boundaries between dialogue partners (in this case, faith and science) led to conflict. The discourse of faith was accused of “cross[ing] the boundary” and “intrud[ing] on the domain of science” and, at the extreme, the primacy of reason which was affirmed in scientific methods led to the exclusion of the insights of faith. Boeve notes, “faith crossed the boundary ... in an effort to explain the physical world on the basis of its own traditions” and, in turn, science “frequently crossed the boundaries of [its own] domain in order to adopt ideological positions against specifically religious truth claims.”⁹⁵ This resulted in a mutual exclusion between faith and science—the *conflict* model—whereby neither discourse was permitted to tread into the other’s territory.⁹⁶ Of course, this led to further conflict as each side took issue with what they deemed to be an “incorrect assessment of [their] domain, scope and truth claim” on the part of the other.⁹⁷

Boeve explains that insights about the nature of language, which developed in the later work of Wittgenstein, led to a desire to avoid conflict between practitioners of faith and science, respectively, through the recognition that religious language functions in a different register from its scientific counterpart.⁹⁸ In this approach—what Boeve calls the “difference model”—each discourse was considered to have a different intent: “science provided cognitive information about reality as it is; religion made no claim to being cognitive, rather it dealt with our *experience* of reality and our existence therein.”⁹⁹ A recognition of the particularity of each domain emerged, and the desire from each side to reconcile or dispute the position of the other in light of their own position was reduced. At its extreme, this recognition led to a functional rupture between faith and science. “The difference between religion and science [was considered to be] a deep and unbridgeable void, making interaction, let alone conflict, between both impossible (and thus also undesirable),” Boeve writes.¹⁰⁰ In this *rupture* model, religion and science were expected simply to stay in their own domains: for

⁹³ See Ch. 3.

⁹⁴ Boeve, *GIH*, 120.

⁹⁵ *GIH*, 121.

⁹⁶ Boeve cites the early work of Wittgenstein: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over into silence.” L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus: Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1961), 151, n. 6.53 & 7), in Boeve *GIH*, 123.

⁹⁷ *GIH*, 123.

⁹⁸ *GIH*, 123. Boeve cites J. van der Veken’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in Van der Veken, *Een kosmos*, 28. For the most up to date translation of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [Philosophische Untersuchungen], trans. G.E.M Anscombe, P.M.S Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), orig. pub. 1953.

⁹⁹ In other words, “Religious language has to do with evoking profound human emotions rather than with descriptions.” *GIH*, 123. Recall the discussion in Ch. 3, on Boeve’s engagement with Schillebeeckx, and Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the centrality of experience in faith.

¹⁰⁰ *GIH*, 124.

science to observe reality while religion provided a praxis for living, and for science to solve problems while religion concerned itself with “respecting a mystery.”¹⁰¹

While Boeve affirms the insights of the difference model to the extent that it recognises the specificity of each discourse, he is critical of its extreme application (as rupture). He contends that the rupture model is “too radical” in its recognition of difference for three reasons: it fails to take into account that both “language registers” (that of religion and science) seek to know and explain “the same reality”; it fails to recognise the mutually beneficial relationship that has been enjoyed historically between science and Christian faith; and the assessment of religion as simply about praxis fails to take into account religion’s desire to come to an understanding of “the place of human beings, history and society in this world, in the cosmos.”¹⁰² Moreover, he argues that from the perspective of a postmodern critical consciousness, the strict separation between religion/faith and science fails to recognise the mutual benefits of plurality and heterogeneity for the advancement of knowledge.¹⁰³

A “Nuanced Difference Model”¹⁰⁴

If the harmony models sought to correlate the insights of faith and science, aiming for a continuity between the discourses, and the conflict and rupture models affirmed the separation and discontinuity between them, Boeve’s model, which he calls a “nuanced difference model,” seeks to take differences seriously while at the same time recognising the important role that dialogue can play between the two discourses (that is, it recognises *both* a continuity and discontinuity between the discourses).¹⁰⁵ In his own model, Boeve argues for the recognition of a “constitutive difference,” whereby faith and science are considered to be partners in an open dialogue and where the particular and specific insights of each discourse, with its own particular “language register,” can serve to interrupt its partner.¹⁰⁶ As Boeve notes, when dialogue between faith and science is approached in this way, “Science is neither an enemy nor a competitor [to theology], nor something alien that is completely irrelevant to Christian faith. Science is a partner in the endeavour to better understand humanity and the world.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ *GIH*, 124.

¹⁰² *GIH*, 124.

¹⁰³ *GIH*, 124.

¹⁰⁴ *GIH*, 130.

¹⁰⁵ *GIH*, 127, 130. As Boeve defines it: “a nuanced difference model ... is able to situate the independence of both language registers while seeking structural affinities, ... [thus] avoiding futile conflict and forced unity.” *GIH*, 130.

¹⁰⁶ *GIH*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ “... in spite of the fact that science and faith speak a different language and the results of the scientific endeavour belong to a different language register.” *GIH*, 127.

Posing the question of how such an open dialogue might take place, which allows for the recognition of the “constitutive difference between science and faith,” Boeve posits four steps.¹⁰⁸ While these steps are framed from the perspective of the particular questions of science and faith, they point to those paths which could be taken when considering Christian faith in dialogue with other religious traditions and worldviews, that is, they reflect an approach to dialogue that begins from the standpoint of an “open Christian narrative.”¹⁰⁹ The four steps, which I paraphrase, are:

- i) Critical reflection: considering what Christians already know, and need to be aware of with regards to prior knowledge;
- ii) Reflexive praxis: being aware of tendencies to unify (through the conflation of narratives), and the tendency to insert one’s own narrative as a stopgap where there are unknown elements in the other’s theory;
- iii) Critical praxis: giving due regard to the particularity of each discourse and maintaining the tensive difference between each narrative, that is, calling into question the other’s tendencies towards hegemony and recognising the limitations, contingency and historicity of each discourse;
- iv) Openness and receptivity: allowing the other to interrupt one’s understanding at the point at which one’s own narratives close; being open to the possibility that new knowledge may be brought to light as a result of the dialogue.¹¹⁰ It is here, in this final step, that the mutually interruptive partnership between faith and science can be recognised.

In the “Narratives of Creation and Flood,” Boeve performs these steps twice: the first time to explore a contemporary, postmodern approach to the dialogue between faith and science, and the second time to develop a way of thinking about the meaning of the creation and flood narratives “in the language register of the Christian faith” today.¹¹¹

In the first instance, in his consideration of the relationship between faith and science and the nature of dialogue between them, Boeve notes that the believer should first become aware of the “results of scientific research” (in relation to questions of the beginning) and he or she should consider critically the “traces of earlier dialogues with (older forms of) science” that can be found in his or her own faith narrative.¹¹² Second, the believer “should resist the temptation to identify what science refers to as unpredictability and accident with God’s plan,” as this too easily posits a metanarrative (or, in Boeve’s words, a “master narrative,” a narrative aimed at universalising a

¹⁰⁸ *GIH*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ See Ch. 2, where we explored Boeve’s arrival at an “open Christian narrative” as a way of approaching dialogue with other religious traditions and worldviews in a context of plurality and heterogeneity.

¹¹⁰ Boeve, *GIH*, 129-30.

¹¹¹ *GIH*, 131.

¹¹² *GIH*, 129.

particular truth claim, while relativising and subsuming differences) and puts an end to fruitful dialogue.¹¹³ Third, the believer should “point out where scientists themselves are inclined to go beyond the boundaries of their own language register ... trespassing on the religious or ideological domain,” and provide a “theological criticism” of any discourses outside science (for example, atheist or materialist) that appeal to science in order to support their ideological claims.¹¹⁴ Finally, he calls for Christians to approach the dialogue (between faith and science) with curiosity. He notes that the “sense of amazement ... that characterises both faith and science” reflects “a fundamental passivity, openness [and] receptivity” in the search for understanding.¹¹⁵ This mutual sense of amazement is the very element that drives the search for knowledge and understanding in each discourse, Boeve contends, and “evokes a kind of unity in tension” between the two discourses.¹¹⁶ In short, by their very natures, each discourse requires that the practitioner be open to the interruption of the new.

In chapter 4, I highlighted Boeve’s contention that an approach to dialogue which reflects an open Christian narrative is the condition of possibility for contemporary theology; when theology allows itself to be challenged by the new (by the “other”) it allows for the possibility of God (as the “Other” of the narrative) to break open and interrupt understanding and to propel the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as a result of the new insights.¹¹⁷ The four steps outlined here (reflection, reflexivity, praxis and openness) provide a way in which this attitude and approach might be achieved. In the present case, the impasse that divided faith and science, which was evident in the rupture model, is opened, and the insights of each discourse are able to serve the dialogue *interruptively*. In a theology of interruption, it is here (in the *witness* to these interruptions) that God is potentially made known to the believer today.¹¹⁸

From the four steps I outlined above, we can discern important and distinctive conceptual approaches that constitute elements of a theology of interruption. I have noted Boeve’s desire to *recognise the particularity* of each discourse, and we can see this move exemplified in the first and, to some extent, third steps above. Step (ii) points to the need for *reflexivity* when approaching dialogue between diverse discourses and step (iv) points to the role of *apophysis* in the Christian narrative. In my discussion of Boeve’s second application of his four steps, below, which considers how we might be able to think about the creation and flood narratives (Gen 1-9) from the perspective of the particular “language register of the Christian faith,” I will highlight the ways in

¹¹³ *GIH*, 129. Boeve contends that while Christians invariably associate a “sense of amazement” and wonder with God, we must “avoid the temptation to transform [the] Creator God into a factor of, or agent in the scientific discourse.” *GIH*, 130.

¹¹⁴ *GIH*, 129.

¹¹⁵ *GIH*, 130.

¹¹⁶ *GIH*, 130.

¹¹⁷ See especially pp. 102-106 in the present work.

¹¹⁸ Recall the quotation I used earlier from *GIH* 176, in which Boeve contends that the truth of the incarnation is that “every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God’s manifestation.” See n. 3, above.

which these conceptual approaches function as performative elements in a theology of interruption.¹¹⁹

Reflexivity and particularity

Boeve begins his second application by considering what can be known about the narratives. He reminds the reader that due to the advancement of knowledge in both science and philosophy we cannot consider the Judeo-Christian narratives of Gen 1-9 to be a literal account of how the world came to be. However, Boeve argues that we can know something of the cultural and religious context which gave rise to the composition of the narratives and, in doing so, we can come to understand something about the function of ancient societies and their particular relationships, both sacred and profane. To this effect, he highlights the traces of older narratives which can be found in the biblical account (citing, for example, a Babylonian narrative—likely the Epic of Atrahasis—which dates back to c.1650 BCE, and the Epic of Gilgamesh, from around 1200 BCE), and he notes that these narratives were “supplemented and enriched with new elements and interpretations” by the author(s) of the biblical account.¹²⁰ Boeve argues that in Genesis 1-9 we see evidence of a reflexive relationship between old and new interpretations of revelation. As traces of the earlier narratives can still be found in the newer text, the latter reflects not an easy conflation of the different narratives as the people came to a deeper understanding of their relationship with God, but a continuity and discontinuity that reflects the development of the tradition.¹²¹ Expressing this differently, the context of the day interrupted the people’s understanding of the ancient narratives and compelled them to recontextualise their understanding. In the same way, through his recontextualisation of the creation and flood narratives, Boeve seeks to offer an understanding of the narratives that brings older interpretations into dialogue with a contemporary religious consciousness. The new consciousness is not intended as a stopgap that responds to the unanswered questions left by other interpretations of the narratives, but instead enables the development of a contemporary Christian understanding of the texts.

Boeve argues that in the case of the biblical narrative of the flood, it is in the distinctiveness (or particularity) of the narrative that a deeper understanding can be developed. The narrative proceeds from the perspective of faith and seeks not to provide a scientific understanding of the world, but to narrate a process of revelation. For Boeve, the narrative is first and foremost about the “quality of the personal relationship between God and humankind.”¹²² When compared with other

¹¹⁹ Boeve, *GIH*, 131.

¹²⁰ *GIH*, 133. The Epic of Atrahasis is thought to have been written between 1647 and 1926 BCE. Biblical exegetes date the earliest narrative in Genesis c. 950BCE (the Yahwist tradition), with the addition of a younger source c.550BCE (Priestly tradition) and a later redactor.

¹²¹ Recall the discussion of this theme in Chs. 3 and 4.

¹²² Boeve, *GIH*, 134.

narratives of the time, this distinctiveness is further illustrated. He explains, for example, that in the earliest Babylonian narrative (as I noted, he is likely referring to the Epic of Atrahasis), the reason given for the gods sending the flood amounts to their frustration with the noise and clamour of humanity and their desire to restore the world back to quieter times. However, in the biblical account, the sins of humankind had grieved God, leading to a “serious disruption in the relationship between humankind and God” and, Boeve contends, the flood was sent in order to cleanse and restore this relationship.¹²³ The implications of the recognition of particularity in a theology of interruption are exemplified here: the insights of other narratives (social, cultural, scientific and philosophical) can serve to challenge and deepen our understanding of God.

Apophasis

The use of apophatics in the consideration of the dialogue between faith and science allows Boeve to demonstrate the ways in which the recontextualised understanding of the narrative at which he has arrived remains open to the interruption of the new. Moreover, its use here refers to the recognition that God cannot be contained in the words of particular narratives. As I discussed in chapter 4, the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis* calls Christians to be open to the “traces of God” that may be revealed outside the narrative.¹²⁴ If we consider the creation and flood narratives as a reflection of “the unique relationship between God and humankind,” Boeve contends, we can understand more deeply that the God of the Old Testament is revealed “as a God of human beings, concerned with human history and human society.”¹²⁵ The God of the Old Testament is not a divine watchmaker who simply sets things in motion and stands back to observe the drama unfold, but a God who is ever involved in the ongoing creation of human history and who is always desiring a deeply personal relationship with humankind. As we will see in the third case study, Boeve argues that for Christians, this understanding is reflected explicitly in the incarnation: the culmination of God’s “fidelity and promise” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth who, according to Boeve, is the paradigm of the open narrative.¹²⁶

In line with Boeve’s four steps for a recognition of the constitutive difference between particular narratives, which I outlined above, his consideration of the narratives of creation and flood avoids providing theological answers to scientific questions. Boeve acknowledges that he approaches the discourse from within his own particular “language register” of faith and, in this light, he is careful not to subsume into theology the unanswered questions of science. Instead, as we can see in his second application, Boeve remains open to the possibility of new insights about the relationship between God and the world that arise from the dialogue and offers a recontextualised understanding

¹²³ *GIH*, 134.

¹²⁴ See p. 94 of the present work. Also, Ch. 4, n. 106.

¹²⁵ Boeve, *GIH*, 134.

¹²⁶ *GIH*, 135. Recall my explication of Boeve’s argument to this effect in Ch. 4.

of the creation and flood narratives that is intended to speak to today's religious and philosophical critical consciousnesses.

A further insight is worth noting at this stage, because it points to a central theme that I will develop in my analysis of the third case study. When Boeve considers the biblical account of the flood in light of the early Babylonian account, the recognition of the differences between the accounts leads him to a deeper understanding of the biblical narrative. However, the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis* reminds Christians that God is not manifest in the biblical account itself, nor in the meaning attributed to it in this analysis, but in the event of difference (*le différénd*) that is experienced when the two narratives are brought into dialogue. This event is the experience of something ungraspable that eludes us and evades articulation, and yet cannot be ignored. As I have argued throughout the present work, and as we will see in the analysis of the next case study, in a theology of interruption, Boeve considers this elusive moment potentially to be a moment of grace.

While the four steps we have just explored are exemplified here in Boeve's approach to the dialogue between faith and science, the philosophical-conceptual approaches and dispositions he engages serve to explicate his broader program, which relates to the consideration of the relationship between Christian faith and the detraditionalising and pluralising context of today. In light of the insights gleaned from the current case study, we can consider Boeve's theology of interruption as a "nuanced difference model" that can be engaged in the reflection on contemporary theological questions. In chapter 8, when I consider through the lens of a theology of interruption the doctrine of the Trinity and its relation to Christian life, I will explore the implications of this "nuanced difference model" for approaching interreligious and, indeed, intra-religious dialogue, as well as for the development of a critical-dialogical relationship between Christian faith and the secularising world.¹²⁷ In the detraditionalising and pluralising context the recognition of differences in the dialogue between Christian faith and context becomes a necessary consideration in the deepening of faith and relationship with God. As we will see, Boeve's contention that God has revealed Godself as "the Other of history, qualified by the constitutive difference between God and humanity," proves indispensable in our task of thinking God as Trinity today.¹²⁸

Case Study 3: "Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology"

In the present chapter, I have discussed the way in which Boeve juxtaposes a closed and an open reading of a Christian text (in this case, an encyclical) to explore its nuances and to interrupt a propositional reading, and I have examined his juxtaposition of faith and science in order to demonstrate the mutually beneficial dialogue that can take place between very different discourses when the particularity of each discourse is maintained. In doing so, I have highlighted some of the

¹²⁷ *GIH*, 129.

¹²⁸ *GIH*, 154.

ways that a theology of interruption can function as a lens through which theological questions are considered. In my analysis of the third case study, “Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology,” I explore the implications of a theology of interruption for the consideration of Christian doctrine. While the philosophical-conceptual approaches Boeve engages in this case largely mirror those I discussed above, their application in this example serves to illustrate the broader implications of Boeve’s work. Moreover, they provide an insight into how we might engage these approaches as lenses through which to consider the doctrine of the Trinity and its relation to Christian life (the task of chapter 8).

In “Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology,” Boeve proposes a way of thinking about the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon that reflects the religious and philosophical critical consciousnesses of today. He brings to the task contemporary questions about the Christian understanding of Christ as universal and considers how this might be understood in a pluralising context. As per the second case study, Boeve’s argument in “Christus Postmodernus” has implications not only for the way in which theology might proceed today, but also for the participation of Christian faith in dialogue with other traditions.

I have argued that as a postmodern contextual theologian, Boeve brings a postmodern philosophical critical consciousness to his theology and uses it to interrupt the unifying and totalitarian positions of modern theology. In the third case study, Boeve brings this critical lens to the question of how Christ “fulfil[s] his role of being ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14:6).”¹²⁹ He argues that this question has fallen prey to both the absolutising and relativising tendencies of modernity and that responses to the question on these grounds become unsettled when considered through the lens of a postmodern philosophical critical consciousness.¹³⁰ To this effect, he contends that the “old answers” to the universal claim of Christ—a claim that he argues has become central to the “self-perception of Christianity”—now “appear to be inadequate” and that a new approach that considers the centrality of Christ in Christian faith must reflect the model of an open Christian narrative.¹³¹

In addition, Boeve argues that the doctrinal formula that arose from the deliberations of the Council of Chalcedon (the doctrine that came to be known as the hypostatic union: that Christ is one person [*prosopon/hypostasis*] in two natures [*physeis*], both fully human and fully divine) has lost its plausibility, as it represents a moment in time in the development of Christology and this moment reflects to a large extent the prevalence of metaphysical constructs to describe reality.¹³² Terms such as substance (*ousios*), nature (*physis*) and person (*prosopon/hypostasis*), which are used in the

¹²⁹ “CP,” 577.

¹³⁰ “CP,” 577-78.

¹³¹ “CP,” 578.

¹³² Boeve notes that the term “hypostatic union” was not officially attributed to the doctrine until II Constantinople in 553CE. “CP,” 587, n.18).

formula and its qualifications, reflect this reliance on metaphysics. Boeve contends that the postmodern shift towards the unsettling of the totalising claims of metaphysics, together with the process of detraditionalisation, has meant that the terms used to construct the doctrine no longer function to elucidate the mystery that the Council intended to capture metaphorically: the mystery at the heart of Christ.¹³³ Therefore, Boeve argues that with a new critical consciousness comes “new patterns of thought” that must be brought to theology, particularly if theology takes seriously its task of *fides quaerens intellectum*. In short, Boeve contends that in Christ, Christians are confronted with an unavoidable paradox: we testify to “*deus semper major*”—that God is simply greater than any attempt to encapsulate God in something that is knowable and graspable—but at the same time, we testify that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God became incarnate in history and furnished us with the fullness of revelation.¹³⁴ This paradox is precisely the issue that Boeve confronts in his “Christus Postmodernus,” as he undertakes to recontextualise the Chalcedonian formula.¹³⁵

Boeve argues that the “patterns of thought” in postmodern philosophy serve postmodern theology, too, as they seek to recognise the event of heterogeneity in language, narrative and discourse. As I discussed in chapter 2, through his dialogue with Lyotard, Boeve highlights in postmodern philosophy a critique of metanarratives that seek to encompass truth, and he points to the awareness of particularity and contingency in postmodern philosophy. In “Christus

¹³³ “CP,” 582. For a discussion of the postmodern critique of metaphysics, see Ch. 6 of the present work. On the formulation of the Christological doctrine as metaphor, Boeve writes: “this formula is a—professed—dogmatical and doctrinal statement which was meant to conclude (but, as history shows, reopened) a conflictual process of reflection. The formula is a doctrinal expression, belonging to theological discourse. In the context of the time, the council fathers intended to bear witness to the mysterious reality of faith with which they were confronted in faith, profession, and preaching. Therefore, they used in a creative way the reflexive patterns of the time which were available to them. This creative process of recontextualization resulted in a *metaphorical statement*, allowing them to refer to that which had not been put into words before, that for which no one had a language; at least no language which offered, in the context of their time, in light of the reigning reflexive framework, enough doctrinal stability to express the specificity of the historical human being Jesus, called in faith the Christ, the Son of God, Logos-incarnate. This was done in such a way that, against monophysitism and Nestorianism, both Jesus’ historical humanity and his professed divinity were really acknowledged. And this metaphorical statement worked (historically), to a certain degree. It succeeded in signifying in a contextually plausible way the mystery of Jesus Christ as perceived in faith—in other words: it was a striking evocation of the religious sensibility of the Christians (i.e., theologians) of the time” (582, emphasis mine). He goes on to say that in the current context the tension that was evoked in the formula at the time in which it was developed has disappeared, and “only dated meaningless language remains.” Such language, he says, “no longer evokes the religious sensibility for the distinctive status of Jesus Christ, but becomes mere[ly] a disengaged definition.” “CP,” 584.

¹³⁴ “CP,” 580.

¹³⁵ As we will see, it is this contention that allows Boeve to argue for a more explicit recognition of the hermeneutical impetus of Christian faith. “Christus Postmodernus” constitutes but one article of many on Boeve’s consideration of how to think Christ in a contemporary (philosophical and theological) context (he has published 5 articles and chapters devoted to this specific question, and of course he refers to this question and answers it in part in many other places). I have previously referred to Ch. 8 of *God Interrupts History*, “Jesus as Both God and Human: Incarnation as a Stumbling Block of Cornerstone for Interreligious Dialogue?,” in which Boeve discusses the nature of the incarnation and its implications for interreligious dialogue. In that chapter, Boeve undertakes a contextual interruption from the perspective of the doctrine of the Incarnation, while here, in “Christus Postmodernus,” he attempts a *theological* interruption of what he conceives to be inadequate modern interpretations of the doctrine.

Postmodernus,” Boeve explicitly engages Lyotard’s notion of *le différend* and notes that in light of *le différend*, “no one can have access to the Truth-as-such ... [as] the space for Truth-as-such is left empty.”¹³⁶ In philosophical terms, he explains, *le différend* functions as an “event,” a “happening of difference” that interrupts a particular discourse. Boeve writes,

With this term [*le différend*], Lyotard points to the experience of a breach caused by the paradoxical situation in which one feels unable to express the full richness of Truth with a word, a phrase, a narrative, and senses at the same time the urgency to testify to it. After/through the event, one can not not-speak, even if one is conscious that words necessarily fail.¹³⁷

I referred to this notion, above, in the discussion of the apophatics implied in Boeve’s consideration of the biblical narrative of the flood. There, I referred to *le différend* as the experience of something ungraspable that eludes us and evades articulation, and yet cannot be ignored. Here, Boeve contends that although the event is something that comes from outside the discourse, we are compelled to witness to it within the discourse itself.¹³⁸ However, as event, it cannot be contained within the discourse. It points to an excess, or an ungraspable moment where we recognise that there is more to say and yet we are incapable of saying it all. From the perspective of a postmodern critical consciousness, the event of difference points to the recognition that any discourse is merely one particular discourse among many.

For Boeve, this understanding has profound implications for the self-understanding of the Christian tradition in a context of plurality. If “Truth-as-such” cannot be grasped, how is the Christian tradition to understand itself in relation to the other? According to Boeve, the key lies in the recognition that while we cannot take hold of the truth, we can nevertheless “remain in it, or relate to it.”¹³⁹ In other words, truth is “relational”; we cannot acquire or come to know the truth, but we can stand in relation to it, refer to it, witness to it, and interrupt attempts to encapsulate it.¹⁴⁰ When the event of difference interrupts the Christian narrative, Christians become conscious of the knowledge that the whole truth escapes us, and yet we are compelled to continue to witness to the truth. Boeve contends that for Christians, such an event is not simply a “happening of difference,” but potentially a “happening of grace”: in the event of grace, “the ungraspability of God is revealed [and] the Christian narrative is challenged to open itself” in order to bear witness to the knowledge that in our narrative/s, we are constantly seeking to express what cannot fully be expressed.¹⁴¹

In the following sections, I will discuss the various conceptual-philosophical approaches that Boeve engages in his recontextualisation of the doctrine of Chalcedon. As I have noted, these

¹³⁶ Boeve, “CP,” 579.

¹³⁷ “CP,” 579.

¹³⁸ “CP,” 579.

¹³⁹ “CP,” 579.

¹⁴⁰ “CP,” 579.

¹⁴¹ “CP,” 580.

conceptual approaches do not amount to steps in a method, as such, but constitute a series of attitudes or dispositions that serve to interrupt interpretations of the Christian narrative (in this case, as the narrative is reflected in Christological doctrine) that Boeve considers no longer plausible in the contemporary context.

Paradox and ambiguity: a move away from hegemonic truth claims

Boeve begins “Christus Postmodernus” with a consideration of the hermeneutical impetus of Christian faith, particularly in light of the tradition of apophatic theology. He argues that the Chalcedonian formula is not a defining and determining dogma, as some contend. Rather, it is a *creedal* formula that points beyond itself by way of the internal paradox contained in its words and in the four adverbs used in its qualification: the two natures of Christ—humanity and divinity—are simultaneously unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible and inseparable.¹⁴² According to Boeve, while in contemporary language the words “divinity and humanity” are “considered to be opposites,” in this creedal formula they are “affirmed of the same Jesus Christ, without lifting the irreconcilability” between the terms.¹⁴³ Boeve argues that because of its paradoxical construction, the formula refers to and witnesses to the Logos (Word) without containing the Logos in the words. He writes,

In his own person, Jesus Christ signifies what we have called the relation between Word (Logos) and word—the mutually being related of Word (Logos) and word. The Logos incarnated in the word, becomes signified in the word, but does not identify itself with the word. The word ‘evokes,’ thereby determining the indeterminable Logos, and precisely in this determining distinguishes itself from the Logos. The word never becomes Logos, but is the way to the Logos.¹⁴⁴

Recall, here, the discussion of Marion’s de-nomination of God in chapter 4. As I will explain in further detail below, Boeve undertakes a similar exercise with regards to Christ. In short, in “Christus Postmodernus,” Boeve argues that the affirmation of Christ as fully human and fully divine leads to the recognition that statements about Christ can only “be approached in a radical hermeneutical way.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² See n.132.

¹⁴³ Boeve, “CP,” 585. Boeve’s use of the word “irreconcilability” in his description of the formula is striking. He cites W. Pfüller’s discussion on the notion of “‘aporia’ in theological discourse,” but notes that he “does not assent to all of the claims defended in [Pfüller’s] article.” “CP,” 585, n.14. He cites W. Pfüller, “Plädoyer für eine ‘nach-klassische’ Christologie,” in *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 39 (1992), 130-154, at 137.

¹⁴⁴ “CP,” 589. He cites Schaeffler’s “considerations about the religious word as phenomenon, both unveiling and veiling God’s divinity” (n.23). See Schaeffler, *Religion*, 31-37.

¹⁴⁵ “To affirm that Jesus Christ is both God and human means proclaiming that in person, life, speech, and deeds, [Christ] was *the definitive hermeneutics of God* [and] *that he—himself being God—[can only] be approached in a radical-hermeneutical way.*” Boeve, “CP,” 589, emphasis original.

Performativity

Central to Boeve's consideration of the doctrine of Chalcedon is his understanding of the formula as performative: "it attempts to *express* what, as a formula, it *does*."¹⁴⁶ In other words, "it attempts to be an expression of both the method and content of the Christian narrative."¹⁴⁷ As narrative, the Christian tradition gives expression to the reflexive nature of its religious critical consciousness, a consciousness that it is both "world- and self-critical, and while it bears witness to God, it can never be absolutised as God escapes full articulation in the narrative."¹⁴⁸ Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 on the influence of Richard Schaeffler in Boeve's work. There, I noted Schaeffler's contention that a religious critical consciousness is characterised by the "tension between revelation and concealment" and that while God "becomes known in phenomena, ... the phenomena, as such, are not to be identified with God."¹⁴⁹ Here, in the Christological formula, with the affirmation that Christ's humanity and divinity are "unconfused but not separated," the Council has attempted to articulate the paradox that Jesus of Nazareth, the man who lived 2000 years ago, is the incarnation of the Divine Logos.¹⁵⁰ Boeve writes of the Chalcedonian formula: "precisely in examining the proper conditions—the non-identity between world and God—religious discourse bears witness to God. In this way, the Christological dogma expresses not only the relation between God and world (language), and thus the nature of our speaking about God, but [it] is also already a bearing witness to the inexpressible God."¹⁵¹

Recognition of particularity: awareness of the context

In "Christus Postmodernus," Boeve notes that an understanding of the relationship between the particular and the universal has a central place in the articulation of what it means to say that Christ is fully human and fully divine. Beginning from the standpoint of universality, the Council Fathers were concerned with the question of how one can "say of the universal God, the Son – 'through whom all things came to be'—that He is at the same time a particular human being," Boeve explains.¹⁵² The formula seeks to "[relate] particularity to universality" so that neither is subsumed by the other. However, in the current context we are confronted with an inversion of this relationship whereby, as a result of the low Christologies of modernity (see the examples I provide in chapter 6), together with the recognition of the "plurality of narratives" in today's context, the question that compels the contemporary consideration of Christology is no longer 'how did God become human'

¹⁴⁶ "CP," 585. See n.81, above, for a definition of Austin's "performative sentence."

¹⁴⁷ "CP," 586.

¹⁴⁸ Boeve calls this the "being phenomenon, the being-not-God of the world and religion." "CP," 585.

¹⁴⁹ See Ch. 2, p. 21ff. Also "TRCCC," 461; Schaeffler, *Religion*, 154-60.

¹⁵⁰ Boeve, "CP," 586.

¹⁵¹ "CP," 586.

¹⁵² "CP," 587.

(that is, ‘how did the universal become particular?’), but ‘how is it that Christians can proclaim that the person, Jesus of Nazareth, is God’ (‘how can the particular be conceived as universal?’).¹⁵³ In the excerpt cited above (at note 144), Boeve articulates his recontextualisation of the doctrine of Christ: as both human and divine, Christ signifies the mutual relationship “between Word (Logos) and word.”¹⁵⁴ Therefore, the doctrine (the word) “evokes,” “determines” and “distinguishes” itself from the Logos; “the word never becomes Logos, but is the way to the Logos,” Boeve argues, in the same way that the tradition evokes, determines and distinguishes itself from God.¹⁵⁵ The paradox of the formula reveals the tension between the universal and the particular. As Boeve explains, God’s overflowing love “has been revealed in a particular life story that does not exhaust this love, but nevertheless signifies it in a definitive way. As a particular life story, Jesus’s narrative, entangled by particularity, bears witness to the universality of grace, which as such can never be articulated.”¹⁵⁶ In other words, in Christ’s particularity, he bears witness (as event/ interruption) to the “universality of grace.” As such, Christ signifies grace (makes it present definitively) while also pointing to an excess that can never be articulated. It is here that we see Boeve’s theology exemplify his contention that the Christian narrative is an open narrative. He argues that because “Jesus Christ, in person, expresses the relationship between word and Word (Logos), ... [he is] the paradigm of the ‘open narrative.’”¹⁵⁷ In other words, “[t]he dynamic of the ‘open narrative’ between word and Word (Logos) took flesh in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁸ Witnessing to the truth of the Chalcedonian formula, therefore, requires a basic attitude of contemplative openness, so that the “event”—as the “happening of grace”—might be revealed in the open space that is created.¹⁵⁹

Kataphasis—apophasis—hyperphasis (a third way)

Key to Boeve’s recontextualisation of the Chalcedonian formula is his use of apophatic theology. I have discussed his use of apophatics to highlight the paradoxical nature of the formula, but there is more to be said in this regard. At the beginning of my discussion of this article, I noted Boeve’s concern to move away from a metaphysical construction of the doctrine of Christ, particularly as metaphysics has lost its plausibility in the postmodern philosophical critical consciousness. At the very least, the metaphysical terms *ousios*, *physis* and *prosopon/ hypostasis*, even as defined in English as “substance,” “nature,” and “person,” have lost their plausibility and potency in pointing to the mystery that is Jesus of Nazareth, whose disciples came to believe is the self-revelation of God. Throughout the present work, I have discussed Boeve’s engagement with “thinkers of difference,”

¹⁵³ “CP,” 588.

¹⁵⁴ “CP,” 589.

¹⁵⁵ “CP,” 589.

¹⁵⁶ “CP,” 589.

¹⁵⁷ “CP,” 590.

¹⁵⁸ “CP,” 591.

¹⁵⁹ “CP,” 580, 584.

particularly Lyotard, Derrida and Marion, who use apophatics as a way of unsettling the totalising claims of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy, and Boeve's engagement with these thinkers is clear in "Christus Postmodernus." He writes,

Philosophers of difference use the apophatic method to stress the non-foundational, non-groundable nature of our thinking and to emphasize the ever-withdrawing, ungraspable character of the irreducible remainder of difference, or otherness at the borders of our thinking, preventing this thinking from coming to absolute truth, from realizing full presence.¹⁶⁰

Apophatic philosophy provides a way of recognising the limits of language and opening up a discourse so that it refers to, without accounting for, what cannot be expressed. In chapter 2, I noted Boeve's criticism of the apophatics of Derrida and Marion, and his argument that they take the apophatic movement too far, leading to indifference and relativising the particular to such an extent that all specificity is lost. In Boeve's recontextualisation of the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ, we see that both kataphasis (affirmation) and apophasis (negation) are "structurally present" in the hermeneutics of the doctrine.¹⁶¹ The incarnation of the Word (Logos) necessitates both kataphasis and apophasis in order to express the Word's inexpressibility in word, and apophasis functions here as the necessary condition of all kataphasis. Boeve contends that in the relationship that is expressed between word and Word, kataphatic theology and apophatic theology are held in tension, so that neither a "metaphysics of presence" nor a "metaphysics of absence" is involved.¹⁶² We are reminded of earlier discussions on the "third way" (*hyperphasis*). Here, this "third way" results in a recognition of "present absence," whereby the kataphatic (predicative) is "de-nominat[ed]" and becomes "present by its withdrawal."¹⁶³ For Boeve, the "de-nomination" (of Christ, by way of the use of

¹⁶⁰ "CP," 591.

¹⁶¹ "CP," 592.

¹⁶² "CP," 592.

¹⁶³ "CP," 592. Recall the discussion in Ch. 4 on the way in which Marion *de-nominates* "God" in order to point beyond the name, and my reference in the same section to Denys the Areopagite, who used the image of "divine darkness" to refer to the way in which God "transcends and surpasses" the contradiction contained in the words. Boeve here conflates Marion's 'de-nomination' with Derrida's 'dénégation' but explains the latter elsewhere in this way: "Derrida points out that in the very act of negating God one actually negates one's negation of God. Derrida calls this a 'dénégation': even the most negative discourse always contains a predicative moment, one which qualifies the trace of the other. From the perspective of deconstruction, negation here cannot hide or conceal—on the contrary it reveals—the fact that there is always an alterity which precedes speech and makes speech possible, but which at the same time can only appear in language as 'named.'" "GPH," 317. Derrida, in his own explanation of *dénégation*, defines it as "a negation that denies itself." Derrida, "Denials," 95. Thus, it refers to a refusal to admit that a predicative has even been named. He explains: "There is a secret of denial and a denial of the secret. The secret as such, *as secret*, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It de-negates itself. This *dénégation* does not happen to it by accident; it is essential and originary. And in the *as such* of the secret that denies itself because it appears to itself in order to be what it is, this de-negation gives no chance to dialectic. ... I refer first of all to the secret shared *within itself*, its partition 'proper,' which divides the essence of a secret that cannot even appear to one alone except in starting to be lost, to divulge itself, hence to dissimulate itself, as secret, in showing itself: dissimulating its dissimulation. There is no secret *as such*; I deny it." "Denials," 95. Similarly, Marion seeks a de-nomination of the name in order to overcome the inability of the predicate to point beyond itself. See Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 46-7, 71, 95. He defines it more explicitly in his "In the Name," 139: "In its

“Logos”) furnishes the Christological formula with the ability to overcome both affirmation and negation, and allows the doctrine to hold in one word (“Logos”) the tension in the relationship between the two (word and Word).¹⁶⁴ In this way, the words “no longer function propositionally but pragmatically,” Boeve explains.¹⁶⁵ The words are intricately relational, as they function to elucidate what cannot be expressed and, in doing so, they point to the relationship between the universal and the particular. In short, Boeve argues that the words point to “the relational dimension of truth,” where neither hegemonic truth-claims nor “relativist dismissals” can be realised.¹⁶⁶

With his reference to contemporary apophatic thinkers, Boeve provides a way of thinking about the doctrine of Chalcedon that highlights its mysterious and open character. By interrupting the metaphysical construction of the doctrine through the use of a postmodern critical consciousness, Boeve’s recontextualisation recognises the particular nature of the Christian narrative and, at the same time, takes seriously the *kataphatic-apophatic-hyperphatic* nature of the narrative.¹⁶⁷

Some Conclusions: The Philosophical-Conceptual Approaches of a Theology of Interruption

Now at the end of a broad discussion of Boeve’s work, which has filled chapters 2 to 5, I have come to delineate the specific (although often implicit) conceptual approaches that Boeve engages when he performs his theology of interruption. In my choice of case studies used to explore these approaches, I have contained discussion to Boeve’s use of interruption as a theological hermeneutical category in order to explore his application of a *theology* of interruption. In part II of the present work (particularly in chapter 8), I will consider the implications of a theology of interruption when it is engaged as a lens through which to explore the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today.

From the discussion and analysis that I have presented throughout this chapter, I consider the following broad philosophical-conceptual categories to be instrumental for the use of a theology of interruption as a way of engaging in theological reflection:

1. A recognition of the particularity of discourses;
2. Theological apophatics, in dialogue with philosophical apophatics;
3. Reflexivity; and

ambiguity, de-nomination bears the twofold function of saying (affirming negatively) and undoing this saying of the name. It concerns a form of speech that no longer says something (or a name of someone) but which denies all relevance to predication, rejects the nominative function of names and suspends the rule of truth’s two values.” Indeed, Boeve’s intention with the use of these terms is to offer a way of thinking about the tense relationship between language and the limits of human understanding.

¹⁶⁴ Boeve, “CP,” 592.

¹⁶⁵ “CP,” 592.

¹⁶⁶ “CP,” 592.

¹⁶⁷ Recall the discussion to this effect in Chs. 2 and 4.

4. Performativity.

The concepts in this list function as overarching categories, which draw together a number of smaller, more particular conceptual approaches that can be used to different effect depending on the context in which a theology of interruption is engaged. Additionally, the list provided here is by no means intended to constitute a hierarchy of concepts, nor does it rank the concepts in order of their prevalence in Boeve's work. Instead, they reflect a desire to consider the theology of interruption not as a method, but as a series of philosophical-conceptual approaches that can be engaged when conducting theological reflection today. In what follows, I will summarise how Boeve engages these philosophical-conceptual approaches in his application of a theology of interruption, and I will offer some final reflections on the implications of a theology of interruption for contemporary theology.

1. Recognition of Particularity

In undertaking the task of *fides quaerens intellectum* in light of a postmodern critical consciousness, Boeve engages a recognition of particularity in his consideration of Christian texts. In his exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, he demonstrates that the Magisterium is concerned to elucidate the role of faith in the qualification and illumination of its arguments and perspectives. When he considers the dialogue between faith and science and recontextualises the narratives of creation and flood, Boeve navigates the boundaries of each discourse, offering his perspective from within the discourse of faith while remaining open to any new insights that might arise from the dialogue with science. In his recontextualisation of the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ, he argues that in Christ's very particularity, as Jesus of Nazareth, he bears witness to (signifies) the universality of grace. All the while, in his application of a theology of interruption, Boeve juxtaposes differing approaches and considers them in light of a postmodern sensibility for difference. He then posits an approach that considers difference as constitutive of the discourse: the recognition of difference found in the particular discourses serve to interrupt prior theological assumptions and approaches and move the believer towards a deeper understanding of Christian faith. In summary, the recognition of particularity functions in two ways in Boeve's theology of interruption: first, it reminds theologians of the central task of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, thus affirming the role of faith in the qualification and illumination of Christian discourse; and second, it reminds Christians of the boundaries of our discourses: we cannot subsume other faith traditions into our own, but we can be open to new insights that arise for us as a result of dialogue with other traditions.

2. Apophatics

Through a retrieval of theological apophatics from the tradition of Denys the Areopagite, Aquinas and the scholastics (recall the discussion in chapter 4), Boeve reminds Christians that even in

discourse which affirms knowledge of God, we must at the same time attend to the understanding that God is ultimate mystery and always remains beyond our grasp. Through this retrieval, Boeve is able to make explicit the kataphatic and apophatic moves inherent in the texts under consideration, particularly as they are exemplified in the textual use of paradox and ambiguity, and he points to a “third way” (*hyperphasis*) by which paradoxes might remain open in a text. In doing so, Boeve demonstrates the ways in which the use of apophatics can serve to interrupt otherwise closed, hegemonic discourses about God’s self-revelation in the world.

In his use of language pragmatics to point to textual ambiguities and paradoxes, Boeve brings theological apophatics explicitly into dialogue with contemporary “thinkers of difference” (particularly Lyotard, Derrida and Marion). His recognition of *le différénd* allows him to consider what might be *unsaid* in the narrative, referred to by way of qualification or negation of the statements therein. It allows him to consider the plurality (or heterogeneity) that accompanies the discourse, and to use this as a way of opening the discourse so that it allows for the recognition of something new.¹⁶⁸ In the case of *Fides et ratio*, Boeve’s contention that the encyclical bears the marks of many hands (in the documents which informed its authorship, as well as in the completion of the document itself) affirms that attention to what remains unsaid is perhaps as important as what is made explicit in the text.¹⁶⁹ In Boeve’s theology of interruption, attention to *le différénd* interrupts the discourse, opening it onto the possibility of new and deeper insights.

In addition to his use of Lyotard’s work, we see the marks of Derrida’s deconstruction, particularly with its critical consciousness of difference both within and outside the text, and with its critical awareness of the traces of meaning present but unrepresented in Christian discourse. In Boeve’s exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, he demonstrates that the inherent assumptions and internal ambiguities of the encyclical work to subvert opposing interpretations, and he highlights the internal ambiguities that effectively open up the propositional statements made in the text. In his consideration of the doctrine of Chalcedon, Boeve again draws on the insights of philosophical apophatics, this time Marion’s *de-nomination*, in order to point beyond the language to the theological mystery the Church Fathers were trying to convey.¹⁷⁰ In this move, Boeve attempts to show that the use of a contemporary philosophical critical consciousness for the consideration of Christian texts can not only prove fruitful for contemporary theology, but can also serve to highlight the implicit religious critical consciousness that is already present in the Christian tradition.

In light of the discussion here, together with the discussion in chapter 4, we can summarise in three ways the function of apophatics in a theology of interruption. First, apophatics underpins a hermeneutical approach that points beyond the ontological ground of kataphasis and apophasis,

¹⁶⁸ For an extended discussion on this theme, see Boeve, “BW,” 370; and “CCPC.”

¹⁶⁹ See “SDTK,” 3.

¹⁷⁰ See n. 163.

towards a third way—a *hyperphasis*—that refers to the excess of meaning that cannot be captured in the narrative.¹⁷¹ This hermeneutical approach reminds the theologian that the language used to refer to God in the Christian narrative is metaphorical: in naming God, God is revealed in the predicate, and yet withdraws from the predicate, exceeding the meaning that the name connotes. Second, the use of apophatics allows the theologian to consider the textual ambiguities that subvert an otherwise propositional approach and to leave open the tension between inherent paradoxes so that the excess to which a paradox refers can serve an interruptive function. Third, by highlighting the apophatic impetus of the Christian narrative, Christian truth is considered not as propositional or dogmatic, but as enigmatic and pragmatic; it refers both to concrete history and to transcendence, and in its mystery, it enlivens Christian life and praxis.

3. Reflexivity

As we can see from the discussion in the present chapter, as well as in chapter 4, the notion of reflexivity also functions in a number of interrelated ways in Boeve’s theology of interruption. First, it allows for a critical hermeneutical engagement with text and context, bringing together the old and the new, holding continuity and discontinuity in tension and allowing this tension to propel the process of recontextualisation. Second, it allows the hermeneut to bear witness to the interruptive event that otherwise remains silent in a text (or discourse, or experience), not only as a way of opening up the discourse in and of itself but also as a way of opening it onto the possibility of new interruptions. Third, it allows for the recognition of the role of the Christian narrative in shaping and determining Christian identity as well as the recognition of the interruptive role that the contemporary critical consciousness can play in assisting Christians to understand their identity more deeply.

In his recontextualisation of the biblical creation and flood narratives, Boeve brings earlier interpretations into dialogue with a contemporary religious critical consciousness in order to posit a new and deeper understanding. In doing so, he effectively continues the tradition of theology that is exemplified in the scriptures (recall the discussion in chapter 4 about the ways in which the narratives in the Old Testament serve to interrupt each other and, therefore, reflect the people’s developing understanding and qualification of God’s revelation throughout history). As a reflexive critical consciousness, a theology of interruption seeks continually to consider the old in light of the new. In this way, it holds continuity and discontinuity in constant tension.

Additionally—and this is where the notion of reflexivity comes to the fore as an indispensable conceptual approach in a theology of interruption—a theology of interruption demands reflexivity on the part of the believer; it compels a deeper understanding of the self (and,

¹⁷¹ When I refer to the apophatics of a theology of interruption, I am referring to the process of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis* (which I discussed at length in Ch. 4). See esp. pp. 94-102, and Ch. 4, n. 49, 52.

performatively, the other) in relation to God. In *Lyotard and Theology*, Boeve refers to the notion of reflexivity as “constitutive of an open narrative” as it entails self-criticism.¹⁷² In an open narrative, “reflexivity points to the breach in every narrative itself, produced by, and revealed in, the challenge to determine what is indeterminable,” Boeve writes.¹⁷³ In a theology of interruption, reflexivity denotes a critical self-awareness, an active process of reflecting on one’s own narrative when confronted with the challenge of difference. Boeve argues that Christ, as the “paradigm of interruption,” exemplifies the (interruptive) reflexive moment of the Christian narrative.¹⁷⁴ Recall, for example, the discussion in chapter 4 of the narrative of the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30).¹⁷⁵ There, just as the woman makes herself vulnerable to Christ, Christ *himself* becomes vulnerable as a result of her interaction with him, and his own narrative is interrupted. “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” says the unnamed woman (Mt 7:28). According to Boeve, in this narrative, even Jesus’ understanding of revelation shifts; he comes to see that God is “manifest outside the boundaries of Israel.”¹⁷⁶

In Boeve’s theology of interruption, the notion of Christian identity is founded on three insights: a) that God interrupted history in the person of Christ and that Christ, in his incarnation, ministry and resurrection, exemplified and embodied the “open narrative”; b) that our words (our Christian narratives) can only ever *refer* to the Word (Logos) of God and cannot ever contain or absolutise the Word; and c) that Christ holds in tension the universal and the particular without subsuming one into the other (the doctrine of Christ’s two natures, fully human and fully divine). Thus, Christian faith demands a reflexive and—as we will see when we come to the next concept—a performative critical praxis. It compels Christians to bear witness to the interruptive event of Christ and to engage in a reflexive critical praxis of interruption that aims at opening discourses (including one’s own) that suppress or subsume differences and particularities.

4. Performativity

Boeve’s approach, which draws on postmodern philosophical sensibilities to assist him to understand Christian texts and doctrine and to *interrupt* these texts in light of such sensibilities, is reminiscent of J.L. Austin’s notion of a “performative sentence,” whereby “the issuing of [an] utterance is the performing of an action.”¹⁷⁷ In his exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, Boeve demonstrates—performatively—the fruitfulness of the dialogue between philosophy and theology in search of the truth of human

¹⁷² Boeve, *LT*, 91.

¹⁷³ *LT*, 91.

¹⁷⁴ *GIH*, 46.

¹⁷⁵ See p. 93.

¹⁷⁶ Boeve, *GIH*, 206. See also, Ch. 4, n. 33 of the present work, where I note Boeve’s contention that the Spirit (in the Syrophenician woman) moves Jesus to understand that the Spirit is at work in the other.

¹⁷⁷ Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5-7. See n. 81, above, for further discussion on Austin’s definition of a “performative sentence.”

experience. Here, he aims to nuance what seems to be a dogmatic argument in the encyclical about the limits of philosophy (reason) and its subordinate relationship to theology (faith), so that the open, dialogical, element within the encyclical is underlined and brought to the fore. His analysis potentially serves to interrupt a modern (propositional) way of reading the text and to highlight the nuanced argument presented within the document so that it might speak more adequately to a contemporary critical consciousness. In his consideration of the doctrine of Chalcedon, he demonstrates how the doctrine itself works performatively to refer to the mystery of Christ without seeking to contain or absolutise the mystery, and he performs his theology of interruption to open hegemonic, totalitarian understandings of the doctrine.¹⁷⁸ In this way, Boeve demonstrates that just as a theology of interruption functions as a means by which to understand Christian texts and doctrine, it becomes itself interruptive: it leads to a performative critical praxis (in chapter 8, I will explore the implications of this insight with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity).

Considering the three case studies together, we can see that the performativity of a theology of interruption is not only intra-theological, but also *political*. In my discussion of case study two, I explored the implications of considering the “constitutive differences” between narratives.¹⁷⁹ I noted Boeve’s argument that when Christians are engaged in an “open dialogue,” the recognition of differences allows for the partners in dialogue to affirm the boundaries of their own discourses, while allowing for a deepening of their own identities by being open to the interruption of the other’s worldview. According to Boeve, the theological mandate for such an approach to dialogue comes from the dialectics between word and Word in the doctrine of Christ. The dynamic interrelationship between word (human words, the Christian narrative) and the Word (the Logos) leads to the recognition that no (human) word that refers to Christ can be taken hegemonically. To express this differently, because the Christian narrative is continuously interrupted by God, Christians are compelled to *maintain* the tensive differences between particular narratives and to call into question their own and others’ tendencies to conflate narratives, relativise differences or posit totalising truth claims.

Towards Thinking Trinity Through the Lens of a Theology of Interruption

Having drawn out the conceptual approaches central to a theology of interruption, I now turn to the doctrine of the Trinity in order to apply and critically evaluate this theological approach. In part II, after canvassing some modern and postmodern approaches to trinitarian theology and considering their limitations from the perspective of a postmodern philosophical and contextual critical consciousness (chapters 6 and 7, respectively), I will consider the doctrine of the Trinity through the

¹⁷⁸ Recall the discussion, earlier, on Boeve’s contention that the Christological doctrine “attempts to *express* what, as a formula, it *does*,” that is, “it attempts to be an expression of both the method and content of the Christian narrative.” Boeve, “CP,” 585, 86.

¹⁷⁹ “NCF,” 127.

lens of a theology of interruption in an effort to answer the question, “How does a theology of interruption help us to understand the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today?” (the subject of chapter 8). In doing so, I will aim to replicate to the extent possible the moves that Boeve makes when he performs his theology of interruption in the hope that such an endeavour might assist us to think more deeply about this central question for Christian faith.

It perhaps goes without saying that in today’s context a systematic theology that fails to take into account the critical impulses and ideas of contemporary philosophy and culture, as reflected in the living tradition (*intellectus fidelium*), will cease to speak to the context in any meaningful way; hence Boeve’s theology of interruption promises to be a helpful partner. In today’s context, which moves between indifference and fundamentalism, and (at least in the West) is characterised by processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative must take into account the tension between the plurality of worldviews that we find in our context and the role of the Christian tradition in shaping and determining Christian identity in such a context. Like Boeve, it seems to me that if we take seriously the Classical tradition of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*—with its recognition that knowledge of God is “always inadequate and provisory ... enclosed in time and context”—and if we bring to the task of theology a recognition of, and sensibility for, difference and alterity, we can perhaps consider more adequately the tension between the universality and the particularity of the Christian narrative in the contemporary Western world.¹⁸⁰

The recognition of the issues facing the context today leads me to ask the questions, ‘How do we understand God as Trinity?’ and ‘What does faith in the Trinity mean for Christian life?’ In this light, the present work does not seek to offer a recontextualised understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, as such, but to offer a recontextualised way of considering the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today. To this effect, in the present work I do not aim to interrupt a *particular* reading or expression of Trinitarian doctrine (for example, a feminist reading or an ecological reading) but, ultimately, to elucidate a way of thinking about the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for contemporary concerns. As we will see in this endeavour, Boeve’s treatment of the doctrine of Chalcedon plays an important role.

¹⁸⁰ “Tradition, (De)Canonization, and the Challenge of Plurality,” in *Canonization and Decanonization: Papers Presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), Held at Leiden 9-10 January 1997*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, Studies in the History of Religions: Numen Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 380.

Part II. The Trinity and Christian Life

Chapter 6. The Trinity and Christian Life in Modernity

The aim of the present work is to consider how a *theology of interruption* might assist us to understand the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today. As I noted previously, while Boeve has discussed a theology of interruption as an approach to theology which takes seriously a postmodern critical consciousness and the contemporary pluralising and detraditionalising context, he has not been explicit about the ways in which he considers theological questions through its lens. To this end, part I of the present work has been devoted to an exploration and analysis of Boeve's work in order to articulate the philosophical-conceptual approaches and dispositions that underpin a theology of interruption. In the current context, the recognition of difference has come to the fore as the means by which the development of diverse commitments (religious and otherwise) can take place and, at the same time, the means by which the Christian tradition can continue to develop its critical consciousness. In my analysis of Boeve's work, I have discussed his contention that the Christian narrative is an *open* narrative, open to the interruption of God and to potential recontextualisation when it encounters difference. At the risk of functionalising trinitarian theology, it seems to me that the doctrine of the Trinity, which highlights the nature of God as "difference-in-unity," provides a potentially fruitful way of understanding how the interruption of difference can be considered from both a theological and a contextual perspective.¹ Therefore, in part II, after exploring a number of modern and postmodern conceptions of the relationship between Christian life and trinitarian faith (chapters 6 and 7), I consider this theme through the lens of a theology of interruption (chapter 8). In doing so, I critically evaluate Boeve's approach and offer a potential way to address its limitations.

In this chapter, I consider the postmodern criticism of modern theology as it relates to the articulation of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. I examine the trinitarian theology of Karl Rahner and critique it through the lens of a postmodern critical consciousness, and I consider some of the ways that the political and social implications of the doctrine of the Trinity are expressed in the work of Jürgen Moltmann. As we have discussed, Boeve's contextual theological approach has been largely influenced by the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz. Metz was a student and friend of Rahner and was heavily influenced by his turn towards experience in theological method. Highly affirming of Rahner's work, Metz extended Rahner's approach to take into account the specific historical-contextual circumstances of the Christian communities who were

¹ The understanding of God as "difference-in-unity" comes from the work of Denys the Areopagite. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, II, 4, 641B. For a useful discussion of this notion in Denys' work, see Werner Beierwaltes and Douglas Hedley, "Unity and Trinity in Dionysius and Eriugena," *Hermathena*, no. 157 (1994): 7, 5-9. Beierwaltes and Hedley cite Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*, II 4; 127, 7 and II 1, 123, 9; 124, 10, in Beate Regina Suchla: *Corpus Dionysiacum I: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita De Divinis Nominibus* (Berlin: Patristische Texte und Studien Bd. 33, 1991). See p. 248 of the present work.

seeking to interpret their faith and to make their faith present in daily life.² However, Metz never elaborated a theology of the Trinity, as such, nor did he offer any discussion on the trinitarian implications of his work.³ Moltmann's approach holds many similarities to that of Metz, particularly in relation to what he considers to be the political-theological implications of the experience of suffering.⁴ His trinitarian approach, which is grounded firmly in salvation history and human experience, provides an insight into how a consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption might be both continuous and discontinuous with modern political *trinitarian* theologies.⁵

Modern and Postmodern Considerations

In modernity, especially as it came to be defined post-Enlightenment, the desire to present a rational account of the existence of God and to add theological weight to the modern search for knowledge became a central task of theology.⁶ A new emphasis on systematics arose, which aimed to affirm the continuing importance of the inherited tradition and the continuity of such a tradition with the modern world. Theologians considered the broad topics of God, revelation, Christ, soteriology, anthropology and eschatology in order to demonstrate the internal coherence of the tradition and to underscore its logic and rationality. The new historical awareness reflected in modern philosophy became important for theology, and the concomitant rise of hermeneutics allowed for a re-examination (and even criticism) of the Christian heritage. In addition, as David F. Ford writes, the "preoccupation with subjectivity and immediate experience" in modern philosophy led to a renewed emphasis in theology on Christian life and on the relationship between the Church and the world.⁷ The concern for the recognition of experience challenged theologians to reflect on the urgent issues facing the world, such as poverty, oppression, war, and issues of gender and race relations.⁸ By providing a rational account of how these issues might be considered through a Christian lens,

² For Metz's appraisal of Rahner's trinitarian theology, see Metz, *FH*, 223-27.

³ See James Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 194.

⁴ In the preface to a collection of essays by Metz and Moltmann, published by the editors of *Concilium*, Metz writes, "The new political theology, as I have sought to develop over the years—precisely in conversation with Jürgen Moltmann—has a recognizable 'guiding thread.' ... [I]ts governing category is a *memoria passionis*, which includes, and emphasizes, the sufferings of the stranger-other, thereupon to take them into consideration in determining one's own behaviour. ... [Theology] is, first and foremost, a theology sensitive to suffering." Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, Concilium Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), Preface, vii-viii.

⁵ Recall the discussion in Ch. 3 on Boeve's interruption of Metz's political theology (see p. 80).

⁶ For a helpful overview of the hallmarks of modern theology, see David F. Ford, "Introduction to Modern Christian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Williston: Wiley, 2012), 1-14. Referring to the work of Troeltsch, Ford notes that "the Enlightenment, not the Reformation, [was] the genesis of modernity." "Modern Christian Theology," 11.

⁷ "Modern Christian Theology," 4.

⁸ "Modern Christian Theology," 5.

modern theologians presented the Christian tradition as having something to offer to the modern world.

The achievements of modern theologians towards the renewal of the relationship between Christian faith and the world have been immense. In a time when religion was pushed to the margins and scientific pursuits of knowledge were raised to prominence, modern Christian theologians were concerned to demonstrate the coherence, relevance and rational nature of Christian faith and they offered a way of thinking about Christian faith that reflected its indispensability for a consideration of the problems facing the world. However, the ideals (or grand narratives) of modernity—progress, development, advancement, coherence and the search for meaning—have come under criticism from postmodern thinkers. Graham Ward argues that in postmodern philosophy, these terms, with all of their pretensions towards order and certainty, are replaced by terms such as “dissemination, indeterminacy, deferral, [and] *aporia*.”⁹ Where the modern (social and religious) concern for eschatology and emancipation has led to the positing of grand narratives that seek to overcome oppression, postmodern thinkers argue that the narratives actually function to exclude and suppress rather than liberate.

In chapter 2, I examined the definitions of the postmodern offered by Welsch, Rorty and Lyotard. In short, Welsch described the postmodern as a conscious recognition of plurality, Rorty as the recognition of particularity and contingency, and Lyotard as attention to the event where heterogeneity is witnessed. As the postmodern criticism of modernity will underpin a discussion of the trinitarian theologies in the present chapter, it is perhaps worth elaborating on what exactly it is that postmodern philosophy seeks to interrupt in modern theology. I have noted that Lyotard defines the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”¹⁰ It is a “nascent” and “recurrent” state, a state that grows out of modernity and continues to open up modern narratives when they pre-emptively foreclose.¹¹ Lyotard writes,

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations—not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.¹²

Lyotard calls for a “war on totality,” for discourses to “attest to the unrepresentable” and to recognise the otherwise suppressed differences in play in any given discourse.¹³

⁹ Graham Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Williston: Wiley, 2012), 322.

¹⁰ Lyotard, *PC*, xxiii. See Ch. 2, n. 163, in the present work.

¹¹ *PE*, 13.

¹² *PE*, 15.

¹³ *PE*, 16.

In line with Lyotard's definition, Ward explains that postmodernism is "not an epoch at the end of modernism, ... [but] a moment within modernism; the moment modernism pushes into its margins and represses in order to construct its circles of development, its linear progressions, and its harmonies of part and whole. ... It is the repressed 'other' of modernism."¹⁴ To this effect, he outlines three theological "horizons" that are "opened up by postmodern thinking":

First, the role of the unsayable and unrepresentable as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented. *Secondly*, the self as divided, multiple, or even abyssal, and therefore never self-enclosed but always open onto that which transcends its own self-understanding (rather than simply being an agent and a *cogito*). *Thirdly*, the movement of desire initiated and fostered by the other, that which lies outside and for future possession, the other which is also prior and cannot be gathered into the rational folds of present consciousness.¹⁵

I will return to these theological horizons as I explore the (modern) trinitarian approaches of Rahner and Moltmann, but first, a word on the basis of these horizons. Underpinning them is the postmodern concern to criticise and unsettle the universal pretensions of metaphysics, and to undermine tendencies towards ontotheology. Merold Westphal has defined metaphysics as the pursuit of a "substantive a priori knowledge."¹⁶ It is concerned with knowledge of the "sensible world" (nature) and "what ought to be" (ethics), using concepts found in the material world and categorising them in order to posit an all-encompassing narrative of being (ontology).¹⁷ Martin Heidegger notes that the name "metaphysics" is derived from the Greek *meta ta physika*, and has come to be interpreted as "characterizing the inquiry, the meta or trans extending out 'over' beings as such."¹⁸ For Heidegger, the term refers to the task of interrogating and *representing* the whole of reality and, as such, it "belongs to the 'nature of man.'"¹⁹ He writes,

Metaphysics is not some discipline of knowledge in which we interrogate a restricted field of objects in a particular respect with the aid of some technique of thinking. ... [It is] a fundamental occurrence within human Dasein. Its fundamental concepts are indeed concepts, yet these—according to logic—place something before us [*sind Vorstellungen*] whereby we represent to ourselves something universal or something in general, something with respect to the universal that many things have in common with one another. On the basis of such representation of the universal, we are in a position to determine individual items that stand before us, e.g., to determine this thing as a lectern, that thing as a house. The concept is thus something like a determinative representation.²⁰

¹⁴ Ward, "Postmodern Theology," 324.

¹⁵ "Postmodern Theology," 325, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Merold Westphal, "The Importance of Overcoming Metaphysics for the Life of Faith," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 254.

¹⁷ "OM," 254.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 105.

¹⁹ "WM," 109.

²⁰ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines *Dasein* as the being for whom being is an issue. See *Being and Time*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, trans. Joan Stambaugh,

According to Heidegger, “science exists on the basis of metaphysics,” and, as such, science is able to “advance further in its essential task, which is ... to disclose in ever-renewed fashion the entire region of truth in nature and history.”²¹ Metaphysics is therefore fundamentally connected with ontology (the study of being), which takes as its task the explanation of “Being itself,” with the aim “to set in relief the being of beings.”²² For Heidegger, the question of being is “the encompassing question of metaphysics.”²³ In metaphysics, knowledge is defined as credible on the basis of its objectivity, rationality, certainty and universality, but both Kant and Heidegger bring these notions into question.²⁴

As we will see in the discussion of modern approaches to trinitarian theology, below, a metaphysics of being underpins the consideration of the relationship between God and the world in modern theology. According to Westphal, when the metaphysical definition of knowledge is used to consider theological questions, it becomes problematic because it confines knowledge to the material world and ignores insights about the “supersensible world” that can be derived from intuitive content.²⁵ In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant famously said that he “had to annul knowledge [the *claim* to knowledge] in order to make room for faith.”²⁶ According to Westphal, Kant argues that while the scientific pursuit of knowledge in relation to the sensible (a metaphysics of experience) was possible, metaphysics would need to move “beyond experience” to the “supersensible” in order to be able to claim a priori knowledge.²⁷ Westphal reports that on this basis, Kant contends that the claim to certainty and universality of metaphysics is impossible, unnecessary and even dangerous.²⁸

Kant’s argument concerning the impossibility of metaphysics relates to its pretensions towards the universal. As Westphal writes, according to Kant “we simply don’t have the cognitive resources to make it happen.”²⁹ Moreover, it is unnecessary because by virtue of the impossibility of

Contemporary Continental Philosophy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 10 (4). Text in parentheses refers to section number in original.

²¹ “WM,” 108.

²² BT, 24 (7). “Science ... the name for metaphysics ... is the systematic development of knowledge, the Being of beings knows itself as this knowledge, and thus it is in truth. The schoolmen’s name which during the transition from the medieval to the modern period emerges for the science of Being, that is, for the science of beings as such in general, is ontosophy or ontology.” *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 54.

²³ “WM,” 107.

²⁴ My discussion in this section, on the work of Kant and Heidegger, is in part distilled from Westphal’s very useful summaries of the problems of metaphysics, in Westphal, “OM.”; and *Overcoming Onto-theology*, ed. John D. Caputo, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1-28.

²⁵ “OM,” 254.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Unified ed. (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), 31 (B xxx). Parentheses refer to original publications (A: 1781; B: 1787). In the translator’s note, *aufheben* is best translated as “annul” rather than as the usual “deny.”

²⁷ Westphal, “OM,” 254.

²⁸ “OM,” 254, 257.

²⁹ “OM,” 254.

metaphysics, reason must “at least make room” for speculation, but at the same time it must recognise that the priority given to rationality implies that rational insight does not require (indeed, could not supply) the additional burden of proof.³⁰ Finally, when the real (or rational) is narrowly defined as those concepts that can be sensed objectively in the material world, anything to do with the supernatural is effectively disregarded or erased. This leads to a dangerous “dogmatism,” whereby philosophical schools come to exhibit a “dogmatic and despotic monology” over truth and knowledge.³¹ Any objections to the knowledge presented are silenced because the objections are defined by the narrative of metaphysics as irrational.³² In short, Kant argues that metaphysics must be deprived of its “pretensions to transcendent insight” because

in order to reach God, freedom, and immortality, [it] must use principles that in fact extend merely to objects of possible experience; and when these principles are nonetheless applied to something that cannot be an object of experience, they actually do always transform it into an appearance, and thus they declare all practical expansion of reason to be impossible.³³

Heidegger’s criticism of metaphysics has further import for theology. He argues that when metaphysics investigates the question of Being (in its task of interrogating and representing the whole of reality), it thinks being not only as the ground of beings, but also as Being itself. In *Being and Time*, he writes, “[t]he being of beings ‘is’ itself not a being”: we cannot “determine beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being—as if being had the character of a possible being.”³⁴ He argues that the forgetfulness of Being leads metaphysics to seek the ground of beings as though this ground were somehow ontologically prior to it.³⁵ In other words, metaphysics posits Being as the ground upon which an understanding of the world proceeds. This leads Heidegger to argue that Christian dogma (from the time of the Scholastics) has posited *God* as the ground of beings (*ens nihilo fit—ens creatum*) without considering the difficulty that this poses.³⁶

³⁰ “OM,” 255. Kant writes, “when we follow this kind of procedure [the use of practical reason], still speculative reason has at least provided us with room for such an expansion (of our cognition), even if it had to leave that room empty.” Moreover, “our reason is thus in possession (of legitimate practical presuppositions); it does not need to prove (theoretically) the possession’s legitimacy, nor would it in fact be able to conduct that proof.” Kant, *Critique*, 25 (B xxii); 714 (B 804).

³¹ Westphal, “OM,” 257.

³² “OM,” 258.

³³ He continues, “the true source of all the lack of faith which conflicts with morality—and is always highly dogmatic—is dogmatism in metaphysics, i.e., the prejudice according to which we can make progress in metaphysics without a (prior) critique of pure reason.” Kant, *Critique*, 31 (B xxx).

³⁴ Heidegger, *BT*, 5 (2). Parentheses refer to sections in original text.

³⁵ *BT*, 10–11 (4).

³⁶ “WM,” 106. “Ancient metaphysics conceives the nothing in the sense of nonbeing, that is, unformed matter, matter which cannot take form as an informed being that would offer an outward appearance or aspect (eidos). ... Christian dogma denies the truth of the proposition *ex nihilo nihil fit* and thereby bestows on the nothing a transformed significance, the sense of the complete absence of beings apart from God: *ex nihilo fit—ens creatum* [From nothing comes-created being]. Now the nothing becomes the counterconcept to being proper, the *summum ens*, God as *ens increatum*. Here too the interpretation of the nothing designates the

Having defined metaphysics as “representation of the universal,” in 1929, Heidegger disparagingly defines theology in 1957 as “the science of God” — “statements of representational thinking about God” — because of its reliance on metaphysics.³⁷ He argues that ontology and *theology* “are ‘logics’ inasmuch as they provide the ground of beings as such and account for them within the whole.”³⁸ The “fundamental character” of metaphysics is therefore “onto-theo-logic.”³⁹ In Heidegger’s assessment, theology posits God as the Highest Being — “key to the meaning of the whole of being” — and this has the effect of grounding its logic in God.⁴⁰ He writes,

Because Being appears as the ground, beings are what is grounded; the highest being, however, is what accounts in the sense of giving the first cause. When metaphysics thinks of beings with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic.⁴¹

In the discussion of Kant’s criticism of the use of metaphysics in theology, above, I noted his concern to highlight the dangers of metaphysics. Westphal explains that, for Kant, when metaphysics enters the discourse of theology, it has the effect of distortion: the supersensible is treated as sensible, “the infinite as finite, the unconditioned as conditioned.”⁴² He continues, “substantively speaking, metaphysics is dangerous [for theology] because when God has been reshaped to fit the Procrustean bed by which it defines rationality, what remains is both different from and less than the God of faith.”⁴³ In other words, the recourse to metaphysics in theology results in an attempt to make God fit into the horizon of human (sensible) experience. Extending this criticism, Heidegger argues that the use of metaphysics in theology ignores the ontological difference between being and existence, and (to borrow Westphal’s summary) “in thinking beings, including the Highest Being, it fails to carry out philosophy’s essential task of thinking being.”⁴⁴ In other words, onto-*theology* is the result of theology’s reliance on metaphysics: theology cannot think that which has no ground in Being. More importantly, Westphal notes, the “representational thinking” of metaphysics “seeks to have the whole of reality at our disposal.”⁴⁵ For Heidegger, this results in a loss of mystery.⁴⁶ The “god” of metaphysics (the First Cause) is not the God of Revelation.⁴⁷ Instead of theology, we have *theology*.⁴⁸

basic conception of beings. But the metaphysical discussion of beings stays on the same level as the question of the nothing.”

³⁷ *Fundamental Concepts*, 9; *ID*, 54.

³⁸ *ID*, 59.

³⁹ *ID*, 59.

⁴⁰ Westphal, “OM,” 261.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *ID*, 70.

⁴² Westphal, “OM,” 258.

⁴³ “OM,” 259.

⁴⁴ “OM,” 261. See Heidegger, *ID*, 69-72.

⁴⁵ Westphal, “OM,” 263.

⁴⁶ “Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God can, for representational thinking, lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance.” Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, NY: Harper & Row,

In my critical engagement with Rahner's and Moltmann's approaches to the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, below, I will explore some of the implications for theology if we are to take seriously Heidegger's criticisms of metaphysics. In chapter 8, I will consider Conor Sweeney's argument against the "total" rejection of the use of metaphysics for theology by those who follow Heidegger's thought (and his criticism of Boeve in this regard).⁴⁹ For now, by way of an introduction to what is to follow in part II, let us briefly articulate the doctrine of the Trinity as it is defined in the councils of Nicaea I and Constantinople, and examine how the doctrine came to be understood in relation to the world after the Second Vatican Council.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

For Christians, the God of Abram, Isaac and Jacob, whose revelation to the Hebrews is narrated in the Old Testament, is also the triune God revealed in the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the man from Nazareth who had such a profound relationship with God that his disciples professed him to be "Lord," "Christ," "Son of God" and (later) the "*Logos*" (the Word of God). To use the words attributed to St Paul, the trinitarian God is profoundly personal: God is "not far from each one of us. For in [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). So vehemently have Christians defended the distinctive and particular belief in the Trinity that Gerald O'Collins calls it the "faith of martyrs."⁵⁰ Theologically speaking, professing God to be triune means that God is understood to subsist in three eternal, co-equal 'persons' (*hypostases*), who are distinct, yet are mutually indwelling (*perichoresis*) in the one Godhead, so that while each "person" is wholly and fully God—the same substance or nature (*homoousios*) as God—they exist distinctly in divine communion

1977), 26, cited in "OM," 263. "The deity enters into philosophy through the perdurance of which we think at first as the approach to the active nature of the difference between Being and beings. The difference constitutes the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics. The perdurance results in and gives Being as the generative ground. This ground itself needs to be properly accounted for by that for which it accounts, that is, by the causation through the supremely original matter—and that is the cause as *causa sui*. This is the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god." Heidegger, *ID*, 71-72.

⁴⁷ Westphal, "OM," 263.

⁴⁸ Kevin Hart's discussion of metaphysics and ontotheology with reference to Heidegger helpfully distinguishes theology from *theiology*. He writes: "Metaphysics in Heidegger's view is the study of both beings in general, the *on he on*, which is known as ontology, and the study of the ground of beings as a whole, and as the highest ground is called the *theion*, it is known as theology. Thus when Heidegger and Derrida talk of metaphysics as theology, or about the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics, they are making claims about philosophy's internal logic and historical destiny, not about its relations—historical or conceptual, overt or covert—with religion. Given all this, it would be helpful to distinguish between *theiology*, the study of highest grounds, and *theology*, the study of God. The one necessarily passes through a metaphysics of presence, while the other, at least in theory, is not obliged to do so." Hart, *Trespass*, 282, last two emphases mine.

⁴⁹ Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence*, 176-223, at 182.

⁵⁰ Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York/ Marwah NJ: Paulist, 1999), 6.

(*koinonia*).⁵¹ In the classical Latin (Western) explication, the Father is the eternal source, who generates the Son and shares everything with the Son except being Father, and together Father and Son mutually share in the procession (*spiration*) of the Spirit.⁵² The distinction of the Son and the Spirit refers to their missions (or, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, their “operations”) in the created order.⁵³ While the Father is the source of creation, the Son (Word) is sent forth by (or proceeds from) the Father in the Incarnation, as “the visible image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) and the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son (in the Western Church) or *through* the Son (in the East) in loving gift (grace), in order to bring humankind into union with the incarnate Word, who, through his death and resurrection, brings all of creation into union with God.⁵⁴ So, the God we meet in the incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) is God’s very self. Through the Son and in the Holy Spirit we see God’s self-revelation—God’s self-gift—to humankind.⁵⁵

This articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is the product of a slow development in understanding about the ways in which God is revealed in human history. Grounded in scripture, but by no means fully articulated there, the doctrine is born of the disciples’ experience of the resurrection. It points to the very personal way in which the transcendent God is encountered in the life of the believer and it reflects the experience of a community coming to terms with the paradoxical belief in one God who is revealed as three persons. Moreover, as we have come to articulate it today, the doctrine reflects the many discussions and arguments had between many great thinkers over the course of the tradition; it was the cause of much controversy (even some excommunications) in the lead up to the councils of Nicaea I (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE).⁵⁶

⁵¹ The term *homoousios* was affirmed in the First Council of Nicaea, 325CE, through the influence of Alexander and Athanasius; The Cappadocian Fathers [Basil of Caesarea (330-79), Gregory of Nazianzus (330-89), and Gregory of Nyssa (330-95)] are credited with the use of the terms, *hypostasis* and *koinonia*; and John of Damascus introduced the term *perichoresis* in the 8th century. For a useful discussion on the development of these terms, see Alister E. McGrath, “The Trinity,” in *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 303-06.

⁵² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5.15, cited in Anne Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 21. In the East, particularly exemplified in the work of Gregory of Nyssa, the Spirit is said to proceed from the Father, but *through* the Son. As Plantinga Jr explains, according to Gregory, “the Father is the fount, source, or cause of the deity and hence is ‘properly God’ while Son and Spirit are ‘of’ or ‘from’ [the Father] as [the Father’s] ‘effects.’ Thus the Father is ‘the cause,’ the Son is ‘of the cause,’ indeed directly so, while the Spirit is ‘through the one who is directly from the first.’” Cornelius Plantinga Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa and the Social Analogy of the Trinity,” *Thomist: a Speculative Quarterly Review* 50, no. 3 (1986): 330, citing Gregory of Nyssa, *Tres Dei* (Gregorii Nysseni Opera, ed. Werner Jaeger, vol 3.1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957-72), 25, 56). In the West, Augustine’s discussion of the procession of the Spirit as *from* both the Father *and* the Son led, in some way, to the later inclusion of “and the Son” (the *filioque*) in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, a move which contributed in large part to the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches.

⁵³ *Tres Dei* (Jaeger, 3.1, 42-6) as cited in Plantinga Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa,” 336. As Hunt explains, St. Augustine noted that “the missions are the processions revealed in time.” Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus*, 18.

⁵⁴ This last point comes from Karl Rahner’s work, which I take up in detail in this chapter. See Rahner, *Trinity*.

⁵⁵ *Trinity*, 72-98.

⁵⁶ Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7th rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Alba House, 2001), Chapter ID. It is beyond the scope of the present work to provide a detailed explication of the major developments and key figures in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity; I will deal with important texts and figures as they arise.

With its use of terms such as *hypostases*, *homoousios* and *spiration*, the classical definition of the doctrine of the Trinity has fallen prey to the same concerns that Boeve described of the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon: the terms are far removed from the language of today, no longer pointing to the mystery that the Church fathers sought to express.⁵⁷ In addition, in the early Church, the names designated of the three “persons” (“Father,” “Son” and “Spirit”) were used metaphorically to refer to the ways in which God was revealed in history, to God’s characteristics and attributes, actions and activity, and the nearness and yet radical transcendence of God. Over time, this largely masculine metaphorical language has crystallised, and the metaphorical designations have become almost exclusive *names* for the divine hypostases of the triune God. In contemporary times, the classical articulation of the doctrine has met with criticism from thinkers who are concerned variously with issues of suffering, equality, liberation, emancipation and the recognition of difference. Moreover, while this fundamental doctrine of Christian faith is said to be integral to Christian life, for many Christians today, it is simply too abstract or too theoretical to have any real impact on the way in which they live their lives.

The Second Vatican Council, with its deliberations framed by questions of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, marked a turning point in Catholic theology, and particularly in trinitarian theology. Concerned to open the windows of the Church to the world, the Council eschewed the neo-scholastic tendencies of the early twentieth century and presented, instead, a vision of the Church and its faith as profoundly central to human life.⁵⁸ Alongside this were movements towards the rediscovery of the origins of the Church in the mystery of the Trinity.⁵⁹ This renewed awareness of the trinitarian roots of the Church’s mission led to an important renewal in trinitarian theology to the extent that the primacy of reason and abstraction (so prevalent in post-Enlightenment theology) gave way to a more grounded, “earthed” sense of the relationship between God and the world. Fred Sanders explains that in this period, abstract questions related to the nature of God as three-in-one (God *in se*, the

⁵⁷ See Boeve, “CP.” See, also, my discussion of this text in Ch. 5 (p. 138ff). Karl Rahner makes a similar point in relation to the use of “substance” and “essence” to designate the persons of the Trinity. He argues that the key to understanding these two terms is in the recognition of the difference between a “logical” and an “ontic” explanation: “insofar as these concepts belong to the *dogma* of the Church, they intend to be only a logical, not an ontic explanation.” Rahner, *Trinity*, 54. In Rahner’s sense, “logical” points to the development of the terms (substance and essence) in the history of the tradition (from scripture to the pre-Nicene tradition and to later doctrinal pronouncements), while “ontic” refers to a concept that stands in and of itself, without needing to refer back to prior statements in order to provide explanation—it already “takes another state of affairs into account.” *Trinity*, 53. The terms “substance” and “essence,” then, as “logical explanations” in Rahner’s sense do not “directly represent the thing that is meant” (this would be *ontic*), but “refer us to the dark mystery of God.” *Trinity*, 54.

⁵⁸ One need only read the opening lines of *Gaudium et spes* to see this point clearly made: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” *GS*, 1-2.

⁵⁹ See Anne Hunt, “The Trinitarian Depths of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2013): 3. This rediscovery, Hunt argues, permeates and shapes the Council’s major documents, leitmotifs, themes and ecclesial vision.

“immanent” Trinity) yielded to questions about the revelation of the Trinity in salvation history (God-*for-us*, the “economic” Trinity), and about the implications of trinitarian belief for the everyday life of the Christian.⁶⁰

While this understanding of the impact of Vatican II on theology and the life of faith reflects a positive view of the role of dialogue between the Church and the world, expressions of this relationship took two distinct directions following the Council. Tracy Rowland explains that these directions are reflected in the publications of the two different theological journals: *Concilium*, founded by Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz, which began publication in 1965, and *Communio*, founded by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger and Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, which was first published in 1972 and which grew out of a reaction to the approach taken by the *Concilium* trio.⁶¹ In her overview of Catholic theology since the Second Vatican Council, Rowland discusses the differences between these two journals and the approaches to theology that they espouse. She explains that where *Concilium* stood for “spirit of the Council” and an “openness to new ideas,” and understood the task of theology as bringing the insights of the modern context into dialogue with the tradition, *Communio* called for a “hermeneutic of reform” and a continuity with tradition, taking a negative view of the context and re-expressing the central doctrines of Christian faith in line with the intellectual history of the Church.⁶² The central difference between the two, Rowland contends, stems from the Council’s exhortation to read “the signs of the times.” She writes,

The typical *Communio* scholar wants to read the Second Vatican Council as an event that emphasised the importance of Christocentrism and therefore the renewal of theological anthropology and Trinitarian theology. The typical *Concilium* scholar wants to read the Second Vatican Council as an event that exhorted Catholics to be aware of the signs of the times and to enter into dialogue with the world on the world’s terms.⁶³

While this comparison is oversimplified and betrays Rowland’s distinct theological prejudices, it attempts to signal the starting points of the theological methods espoused by scholars of each approach. For *Communio* scholars, the word of God and the history of its expression in the tradition of the Church becomes the point of departure for theology, while for *Concilium* scholars, the context

⁶⁰ For a concise discussion on this shift and its influence on the work of Rahner, Moltmann and Pannenburg, see Fred Sanders, “Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology,” *Dialog* 40, no. 3 (2001): 175-82.

⁶¹ For a more detailed discussion, see Tracey Rowland, *Catholic Theology*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 91-166. Boeve, too, notes the distinction between the two journals and Ratzinger’s involvement in the publication of *Communio*. According to Boeve, Ratzinger argued that “*Concilium* wanted to form a second magisterium and as such had become sectarian.” Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader: Mapping a Theological Journey* (London/New York: Continuum, 2010), 3, n.10. Boeve cites Joseph Ratzinger and V. Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 18. See also Lieven Boeve, “Europe in Crisis: A Question of Belief or Unbelief? Perspectives from the Vatican,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 207-8.

⁶² Rowland, *Catholic Theology*, 93.

⁶³ *Catholic Theology*, 94.

of the day becomes an important consideration in reflection on the word.⁶⁴ As we will see below, however, this by no means reflects a desire in the *Concilium* school to eschew the doctrines of the faith in order to think God anew; rather, it affirms the important role of the context in the ongoing task of faith seeking understanding.

In chapter 3, I articulated Boeve's intention to offer a "cultural-theological approach" to Christian theology that draws from the strengths of modern correlation theologies while at the same time interrupting them from the perspective of a postmodern critical consciousness. In that chapter, I discussed the influence of modern contextual theologies on Boeve's work, particularly those concerned with questions of experience, anthropology and praxis (for example, in the work of Schillebeeckx, Rahner and Metz), and I noted Boeve's rejection of modern theological approaches that take a negative view of the context (for example, in "countercultural" or "confessional" models of theology, such as the Radical Orthodoxy of John Milbank, and reflected in the *Communio* school briefly discussed above).⁶⁵ With this in mind, in choosing among the many modern approaches to trinitarian theology for the purpose of discussion in the present chapter, I have chosen two that align with the *Concilium* school—two approaches that reflect positively a concern for the relationship between theology, context, experience and praxis.⁶⁶

Karl Rahner on the Trinity

Karl Rahner's 1967 work, *The Trinity*, was one of the most influential texts on trinitarian theology in the twentieth century.⁶⁷ In this text, Rahner laments the halted state of development in trinitarian theology since the scholastics and takes up the (albeit implicit) challenge posed by the Second Vatican Council to renew trinitarian theology in light of salvation history.⁶⁸ He takes as his starting point the revelation of God in scripture and the experience of the Christian community from the evangelists through to the defining councils. In doing so, he offers an approach to trinitarian theology that is consistent with the tradition in terms of the development of doctrine but also marks a radical

⁶⁴ *Catholic Theology*, 95.

⁶⁵ Boeve has specialised in Ratzinger's theology; he is co-editor of the *Ratzinger Reader*, with Gerard Mannion. While Boeve acknowledges Ratzinger's theological achievement, he is also critical of his approach. For an insight into his reading of Ratzinger, and why he thinks Ratzinger resigned as pope, see chapter 10 of Boeve, *TC*, 221-34.

⁶⁶ Moltmann joined the board of directors of *Concilium* in 1979. See Metz and Moltmann, *Faith and the Future*, ix.

⁶⁷ Rahner, *Trinity*. In her introduction to the 30th edition of Rahner's treatise, Catherine Mowry LaCugna writes: "Rahner's book launched one of the most significant theological developments of the last few decades: the restoration of the doctrine of the Trinity to its rightful place at the centre of Christian faith. His thesis on the identity of 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinity continues to inspire scholars to articulate the implications of thinking together the doctrine of God and the doctrine of salvation." Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Introduction" in Rahner, *Trinity*, xxi.

⁶⁸ See *Trinity*, 10. On this point, Rahner simply writes: "In the theology of the Second Vatican Council the Trinity is mentioned within the context of salvation history—this being due ... to the 'biblicism' of the conciliar statement." Anne Hunt offers an extensive reading of the trinitarian themes in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. See Hunt, "Trinitarian Depths," 3-19.

re-thinking of theological methodology as it is used to explicate and understand the Trinity. Anne Hunt contends that Rahner's work led a shift in modern trinitarian theology away from Augustine's psychological analogy—where the inner-trinitarian relations were likened to the human mind: the mind is at the same time aware of itself (memory), knows itself (intellect) and loves itself (will)—towards an understanding of the Trinity “as a mystery of salvation.”⁶⁹ Through his theological project, Rahner paved the way for a more contextual understanding of the Trinity in Christian experience.⁷⁰

Rahner begins his treatise on the Trinity with a criticism of trinitarian theology in the neo-scholastic school, which, he says, has focused on the interiority of the three divine persons in the Godhead to the detriment of a robust understanding of the centrality of the doctrine in the life of the Christian. He argues that while focus on the “immanent” Trinity (the intra-personal life of the triune God) has led to strong developments in the areas of anthropology (largely due to the legacy of Augustine, who, as we just noted, recognised an image of the Trinity in the human mind), it has also led to tendencies in Christian practice which reflect the theology of “mere monotheists.”⁷¹ Rahner famously asserted that “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”⁷² He criticises Aquinas for separating his discussions of God and the Trinity, a move which, Rahner argues, led to the “pious speculations” of neo-scholastics about the inner trinitarian life but which “[tell] us nothing, either about the Trinity itself or about created reality [that] we did not already know from other sources.”⁷³ Moreover, Rahner contends that the functional differentiation of God, Trinity and the created world in theology tells us “explicitly” that we (humankind) “have nothing to do with the mystery of the Holy Trinity except to know something ‘about it’ through revelation.”⁷⁴ He argues that in contemporary theology, the doctrine of the Trinity has become “isolated” from the day-to-day living and spiritual life of the Christian, and he calls for a renewed focus on the Trinity as the *locus* of systematic theology.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 21. See Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus*, 36.

⁷⁰ With his focus on experience as the necessary starting point for theology, Rahner's work has influenced theological thinking in such broad areas as Christology, revelation, faith, ecclesiology, ministry, eschatology, ecumenism and comparative theology, and his influence can be seen in the work of political and liberation theologians and feminist theologians. Interestingly, Rahner's influence on the proceedings at the Second Vatican Council can be discerned in many of its texts. His view on revelation, not as a deposit of faith but as the divine *self*-communication of God as experienced in Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit certainly underpins the spirit of *Dei verbum*, however, as Declan Marmion reports, Rahner considered the treatment of the historical mediation of revelation to be insufficient in *Dei verbum*. For a discussion on Rahner's influence on the proceedings of Vatican II, see Declan Marmion, “Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and the Shape of the Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2017). For an extensive survey and discussion of Rahner's work, see Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷¹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 10. Rahner is here referring to the anathemas defined by the First Council of Nicaea, which argued against those who would subsume the three persons of the Trinity into one another to the extent that there was no distinction between them.

⁷² *Trinity*, 11.

⁷³ *Trinity*, 13-14.

⁷⁴ *Trinity*, 14.

⁷⁵ *Trinity*, 10-15.

Through a retrieval of pre-Augustinian Greek theology along with a renewed focus on experience (with a re-reading of scripture, creeds and liturgical practices), Rahner contends that it is God's revelation as triune that constitutes salvation history and that in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*), the inner-trinitarian mystery of God is revealed. "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity," he says, where "economic Trinity" refers to the presence and activity of the Triune God—particularly in the missions of the Son and Spirit—in the economy of salvation.⁷⁶ For Rahner, the mystery of God as triune is "identical with the mystery of the self-communication of God to us in Christ and in the Spirit."⁷⁷ In her introduction to Rahner's monograph on the Trinity, Catherine Mowry LaCugna explains that "the identity of 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinity means that God truly gives God's self to the creature without remainder, and what is given in the economy of salvation *is* God as such. ... God truly is as God reveals Godself to be."⁷⁸

Central to Rahner's identification of the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity is his understanding of the missions of the Son and the Spirit as the *one* self-communication of God.⁷⁹ In Rahner's taxonomy, the Father is the "Unoriginate," "invisible," incomprehensible Origin, the Word (Logos) is the Father's "utterance into history" and the Spirit is "the opening up of history into the immediacy of its fatherly origin and end," the one who "brings about the acceptance [of God's self-revelation] by the world (as creation)."⁸⁰ According to Rahner, the *one* self-communication of God occurs in "absolute self-utterance and as absolute donation of love."⁸¹ The doctrines of Christology and grace are therefore interconnected: as Trinity, God *communicates* God's very self and *gives* God's very self to the world.⁸²

This understanding is developed in Rahner's work through his explication of four "double-aspects," or pairs of features, that denote God's (trinitarian) self-communication to the human subject: "a) Origin-Future; b) History-Transcendence; c) Invitation-Acceptance; and d) Knowledge-Love."⁸³ This schema is to be understood in two ways: first, as distinct pairs, then, as if presented one

⁷⁶ *Trinity*, 22. This phrase came to be known as "Rahner's axiom." With this axiom, Rahner argues that "no adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation" (24). Since the publication of Rahner's treatise, calls have been made for the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity to be abandoned. For a discussion and critique of this suggestion, but through the criticism of Catherine Mowry LaCugna's work, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 129-36.

⁷⁷ Rahner, *Trinity*, 46.

⁷⁸ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Introduction," in *The Trinity*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Crossroad, 1997), xiv. LaCugna goes on to clarify that "both the distinction and the identity between the economic and immanent Trinity are conceptual, not ontological" (xiv).

⁷⁹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 84-5, 87.

⁸⁰ *Trinity*, 29, 47, 47, 86.

⁸¹ *Trinity*, 36.

⁸² "The two mysteries, that of our grace and that of God in [God]self, constitutes one and the same abysmal mystery." *Trinity*, 39.

⁸³ *Trinity*, 91-94.

under another in table form, with the first terms in each pair considered together and contrasted with the second. A discussion of this schema will assist us to illuminate Rahner's particular contribution to Christology, anthropology and the doctrine of grace.

By its very nature, the notion of communication implies an addressor and an addressee.⁸⁴ Thus, in Rahner's first pair of features, "origin" refers to the creation of the human person as the condition of possibility for divine self-communication and "future" refers to the ultimate destiny of the human person, as the locus of the "total communication of God."⁸⁵ The creation of the world and of the human person are distinct moments in salvation history that are willed by God as the condition for self-communication: "The self-communication of the free personal God who gives himself as a person (in the modern sense of the word!) presupposes a personal recipient. ... If God wishes to step freely out of himself, he must create man."⁸⁶

Rahner's notions of "obediential potency" and the "supernatural existential" play an important role in his anthropology and are helpful for the discussion here (although he refers only briefly to the first of these terms in his monograph on the Trinity).⁸⁷ He contends that in the nature of the human person as creature, there is an "obediential potency" that enables the person to be open to the reception of the Creator's self-communication.⁸⁸ A notion that was developed in the work of Thomas Aquinas, this "obediential potency" is understood to be present in the human person prior to God's offer in grace.⁸⁹ While the "obediential potency" is natural to the human person and refers to the human (natural) capacity to be open to fulfillment in God's self-communication, the "supernatural existential" refers to the state of human existence after God's offer of grace but prior to its acceptance.⁹⁰ David Coffey explains that it is an element of human existence that is "a

⁸⁴ See *Trinity*, 88-9.

⁸⁵ *Trinity*, 91.

⁸⁶ *Trinity*, 89. For Rahner, creation could still be considered as a moment in God's self-communication "even if, 'in itself,' creation might have occurred without such a self-communication." Of course, to posit that God "must" do anything is problematic; I take this up shortly. Note, I have chosen to keep the exclusive language in some quoted material for easier reading.

⁸⁷ See *Trinity*, 90.

⁸⁸ For Rahner's detailed treatment of "obediential potency" and the "supernatural existential," see "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in *God, Christ, Mary and Grace*, Theological Investigations, Vol I (Limerick, Ireland: University of Limerick Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, 2004), 297-317.

⁸⁹ While space does not permit a detailed discussion of the background to Rahner's argument here, it is worth noting that Rahner enters the theological debate on nature and grace. While the neo-scholastic school would argue that grace is imposed extrinsically on the human person, those opposing this school (such as Henri de Lubac) argue that a natural desire for God exists intrinsically in the human person. Against both approaches, Rahner suggests that the human person is a "spiritual-personal being" who is open to the reception of God's grace. *Trinity*, 90.

⁹⁰ Rahner contends, "It is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience." *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 127. He argues that due to its obediential potency, human nature would still be a good, even if grace was not offered by God: Human nature "has an openness for this supernatural existential without thereby of itself demanding it unconditionally ... there is no reason why [human nature] could not retain its meaning and necessity even without grace, if on the one hand one can learn to see it as the indispensable transcendental condition of the possibility of a spiritual life at all; and on the other hand if this spiritual life,

consequence of God's universal saving will."⁹¹ In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner argues that the supernatural existential is part of human existence but independent of any particular experience.⁹² It orients the person towards God, alters the reception of particular experience (enabling a response in freedom) and establishes the person's relationship to grace.⁹³ Therefore, in the schema Rahner offers in *The Trinity*, the "future" orientation of the human person towards the "total communication of God" refers not merely to "that which is still to come," but also to the consummation of salvation history in God.⁹⁴

Rahner suggests that the notions of "origin" and "future" are "separated by a real history of freedom" ("the freedom of the communication and the historicity of the addressee").⁹⁵ This leads him to posit the second pair of features of God's self-communication: "history-transcendence." In this pair, "history" refers to the concrete historical circumstances through which God reveals Godself to the human subject and "transcendence" refers to the human desire (by virtue of "obediential potency") to reach beyond history towards the "horizon."⁹⁶ For Rahner, God is the horizon of transcendence: "Transcendence and its whereunto have their history in the object itself," he writes, "and it is the unity of these two elements, as it brings about distinction, which refers to God."⁹⁷ As the origin of humankind, God gave Godself in concrete history, "wholly and immediately unto salvation" in the person of Christ.⁹⁸ Christ is therefore the "unifying duality of history and transcendence" and signifies the ontological relationship between the two horizons.⁹⁹

Rahner's Christology reflects his conception of the identity of the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity. In line with Augustine, he contends that only the second person of the Trinity could become incarnate because each of the divine persons possess a "perfection" that differentiates them.¹⁰⁰ Their "hypostatic function 'outwards' [in the economy of salvation] is the corresponding divine hypostasis."¹⁰¹ For Rahner, the Logos is "really as he appears in revelation."¹⁰² He is "*the one*

although in comparison with the beatific vision it remains eternally *in umbris et imaginibus*, can at any rate be shown to be neither meaningless nor harsh but can always be seen as a positive, though finite, good which God could bestow even when he has not called man immediately before his face." "Nature and Grace," 315-16.

⁹¹ David Coffey, "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," *Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2004): 96.

⁹² Rahner, *Foundations*, 128.

⁹³ *Foundations*, 129-33.

⁹⁴ *Trinity*, 96-7.

⁹⁵ *Trinity*, 91.

⁹⁶ *Trinity*, 91-92.

⁹⁷ *Trinity*, 92.

⁹⁸ *Trinity*, 91.

⁹⁹ *Trinity*, 92.

¹⁰⁰ To suggest otherwise would be to suggest "that 'hypostasis' is in God a univocal concept with respect to the three divine persons." *Trinity*, 29.

¹⁰¹ *Trinity*, 29, n. 25. "To deduce anything for another hypostasis, based on the function of *this* hypostasis" would be a contradiction to the identity of the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity.

¹⁰² *Trinity*, 30.

who reveals to us ... the triune God"; he is "the Father's Logos."¹⁰³ The self-communication of God to humankind occurs through the incarnation of the Word in Christ, as fully human and fully divine.

The difference that this concrete self-communication of Transcendence in history makes for the human person is that it effects a "becoming" of the human person in knowledge and freedom.¹⁰⁴ As Coffey explains, "in Rahner's epistemology both the object and the horizon play essential roles in the human act of knowing (and loving, or choosing)."¹⁰⁵ On this point, Rahner writes,

The difference (in knowledge and action) between the concrete object and the "horizon" within which this object comes to stand, between the *apriori* and the *aposteriori* of knowledge and freedom, between the way in which knowledge and activity reach the well-determined here and now (*so* and *not* otherwise) and the open range which knowledge and action anticipate, from whose vantage point by limiting themselves, they establish the "object," while ever again discovering its contingency.¹⁰⁶

In other words, knowledge and action together establish the object (of knowledge) and the recognition of its contingency, and in doing so, bring about the horizon by which the object (in this case, the human person) comes to be defined.¹⁰⁷

The notion of freedom is underscored in Rahner's third pair of features in the self-communication of God as Trinity, "offer-acceptance." He explains, "the very acceptance of a divine self-communication through the power and act of freedom is one more moment of the self-communication of God, who gives himself in such a way that his self-donation is accepted in freedom."¹⁰⁸ Rahner argues that if humankind is "one duality" of origin and future, and history into transcendence, and this duality affirms both the freedom of God and the freedom of the person, then God's self-communication is also characterised by the free offer of God and the free acceptance by the person. Again, his Christology plays a central role. In Christ, the unity of offer and acceptance is given to the human person as the addressee of God's self-communication. As the fullness of God's self-revelation in history and the fullness of the acceptance of this revelation, Christ acts as both speaker and hearer of divine self-communication.¹⁰⁹ In Christ, human and divine freedom are so close

¹⁰³ *Trinity*, 30.

¹⁰⁴ *Trinity*, 91-92.

¹⁰⁵ David Coffey, "Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 106.

¹⁰⁶ Rahner, *Trinity*, 92.

¹⁰⁷ I will return to this notion in my discussion of the limitations of Rahner's approach.

¹⁰⁸ Rahner, *Trinity*, 92-93.

¹⁰⁹ Earlier in *The Trinity*, Rahner qualifies the relationship of the Word to the Father: "Word" is to be "interpreted with all the fullness of the meaning in the Old Testament, hence as the powerful creative Word of God that acts and decides, in which the Father expresses himself, in which he is present and active." *Trinity*, 37, n. 37. And elsewhere: "the Father is by definition the Unoriginate, the one who is in principle "invisible," who reveals himself and appears precisely by sending his *Word* into the world. The Word is, by definition, immanent in the divinity and active in the world, and as such the Father's revelation. A *revelation of the Father without the Logos and his incarnation would be like speaking without words.*" *Trinity*, 29, emphasis mine. Michael Purcell offers a helpful explanation of Rahner's identification of speaker and hearer as one in Christ: "[T]he very notion of "hearer" presupposes one who is addressed by another who speaks first. ... The nominative of

that they become one. By sending along with the gift of divine self-communication the gift of human freedom to accept (both of which are united in the person of Christ), God's incomprehensible mystery is affirmed as well as the absolute freedom of the human subject who is the recipient of this gift.¹¹⁰ Rahner explains:

Insofar as the self-communication must be understood as *absolutely* willed by God it must carry its acceptance with it. If we are not to downgrade this communication to the level of a human *a priori* and thus do away with it, the acceptance must be brought about by the self-communicating God himself. The freedom of the acceptance as a power *and* also as an act must be conceived as posited by God's creative power, without in any way impairing the nature of freedom.¹¹¹

Rahner's identification of the immanent Trinity with the economic Trinity is reflected in his schema. While the economic Trinity reveals the nearness of God to humankind, God nevertheless remains "absolute mystery."¹¹² For Rahner, the mystery of the Trinity is not simply affirmed because of the inability of human faculties to comprehend the doctrine, but the mystery of God is "essentially identical with the mystery of the self-communication of God to us in Christ and in the Spirit."¹¹³ The identity of the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity refers to the paradoxical interconnectedness between a recognition of the mystery of God and the radically personal nature of God's revelation in history. Rahner contends that "the incomprehensible, primordial, and forever mysterious unity of transcendence through history and of history into transcendence holds its ultimate depths and most profound roots in the Trinity."¹¹⁴

The fourth pair in Rahner's schema, "knowledge-love," characterises God's self-communication as "the actuation of truth and the actuation of love."¹¹⁵ To understand the way in which Rahner considers the first of these terms, it is useful to recall the above discussion on metaphysics. In Rahner's anthropology, metaphysics is delimited to extend to what can be known in

speaking the question with its immediacy and intransitivity becomes the accusative of hearing which is always mediate and transitive. The solitary subject seeking within itself the transcendental source of its question becomes the one that discovers itself *always and already to be*, prior to its own initiative, the subject of an address. The subjectivization of the subject is always and already a subjection to a prevenient other who, speaking first, enables speaking as response." Michael Purcell, "Rahner Amid Modernity and Post-Modernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 201.

¹¹⁰ Coffey offers a helpful explanation of this point: "Here we confront the impenetrable mystery of the sovereignty of God and [God's] act in the face of human freedom, where neither is diminished by their interaction. If God's self-communication did not carry with it the divine gift of its acceptance, it would be reduced in this interaction to the level of created being, and therefore would not take place at all." Coffey, "Trinity," 106.

¹¹¹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 97.

¹¹² *Trinity*, 50, 46-47.

¹¹³ *Trinity*, 46.

¹¹⁴ *Trinity*, 47.

¹¹⁵ *Trinity*, 93.

all of human experience, both profane and religious. Thomas Sheehan notes that Rahner's argument in this regard can be "stated in two theses":

- 1) Since a transcendental philosophy of human nature establishes the a priori possibilities and limits of all human experience, it also establishes the possibilities and limits of all *religious* experience.
- 2) Just as a transcendental philosophy of human nature is co-extensive with general metaphysics, so likewise, when employed as a theological anthropology, it is co-extensive with all that can be learned in theology.¹¹⁶

As "the actuation of truth," "knowledge" refers to the human person's full knowledge of himself or herself as a result of the self-communication of God in history.¹¹⁷ Earlier in his monograph, Rahner contends that the human person understands himself or herself "only when he has realized that he is the one to whom God communicates himself."¹¹⁸ Therefore, "the mystery of the Trinity is the last mystery of our own reality, and ... it is experienced precisely in this reality."¹¹⁹ This fourth pair refers to the culmination of God's self-communication in history: the knowledge of the fulfillment of the human person in God.

Rahner argues that this "actuation of truth" is "the unity of practical and theoretical knowledge."¹²⁰ In his transcendental anthropology, he takes up a notion from scholastic metaphysics, which posits that "an entity's way of being determines its way of acting."¹²¹ The knowledge to which Rahner refers in his trinitarian schema relates to the subject's recognition that he or she shares in the divine self-communication and as such *acts* with this understanding. "Knowledge" points to the essential relatedness of the human person, at once related to oneself, to one-another and to God. As Rahner explains, this knowledge "consists first in letting our own personal essence come to the fore, positing ourself (sic) without dissimulation, accepting ourself and letting this authentic nature come to the fore in truth. ... Hence truth is first the truth which we *do*, the deed in which we firmly posit ourself for ourself and for others, the deed which waits to see how it will be received."¹²² In other words, the culmination of salvation history is the response of the human subject who receives the gift of divine self-communication in full and *acts* according to the full knowledge of this truth.

¹¹⁶ Further, Sheehan explains, "Rahner approaches metaphysics by (1) studying one particular human operation—predicative knowledge—for the purpose of (2) determining the structure of human being *qua* theoretical knower, for the purpose of (3) establishing the possibility, necessity, and limits of metaphysical experience, for the purpose of (4) delimiting the range of objects available to metaphysical knowledge." Thomas Sheehan, "Rahner's Transcendental Project," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 29-30.

¹¹⁷ God is here understood to be the horizon of human-divine transcendence. As we will see in the next section, this raises a potential concern from a postmodern perspective.

¹¹⁸ Rahner, *Trinity*, 46-7. Postmodern thinkers who consider the notion of subjectivity argue that we cannot know ourselves fully, as the subject can never reach absolute transparency. However, Rahner contends that we can know ourselves as subjects because of Christ. I take up this insight in the next section, in my criticism of Rahner's approach.

¹¹⁹ *Trinity*, 47.

¹²⁰ *Trinity*, 93.

¹²¹ Sheehan, "Rahner's Transcendental," 30.

¹²² Rahner, *Trinity*, 95-96.

With these final two terms, knowledge and love, Rahner affirms the “two basic modalities” of God’s self-communication as Word and as Spirit.¹²³ The collection of terms on the *first* side of each pair—origin, history, offer and knowledge (truth)—highlights the becoming of the human person in God as the effect of God’s self-communication in the Word. With these terms, Rahner contends that “divine self-communication, as a ‘revelation’ of God’s nature, is truth for us. ... [It] becomes definitively established in the concreteness of history. ... [It] turns *into* history.”¹²⁴ The collection of terms on the *other* side of each pair in Rahner’s schema—future, transcendence, acceptance and love—refer to the ultimate destiny of the human subject as unified with the triune God. The second term in this fourth pair refers to divine Love *itself*, “the specifically divine ‘case’ of love”: the Spirit.¹²⁵ For Rahner, this is the “self-communication which wills itself absolutely and creates the possibility of its acceptance”; it is the “freely offered and accepted self-communication of the ‘person’” of the Spirit.¹²⁶ In this way, the missions of the second and third persons of the Trinity come to the fore in Rahner’s schema. God’s (the Father’s) one divine self-communication occurs in the *truth (knowledge)* of the Word incarnate (“the historic manifestation [of] truth”) and in the *love* of the Spirit (“the horizon of transcendence towards God’s absolute future”).¹²⁷ To use Rahner’s words, “the divine self-communication occurs in unity and distinction in history (of the truth) and in the spirit (of love).”¹²⁸ Rahner’s reference to “knowledge” and “love” in the fourth pair reflects the psychological analogy of Augustine, to which we referred earlier. However, his re-imagining of this analogy highlights his contention that the inner trinitarian life of God is revealed in salvation history, a history that culminates in the sanctification of the human person.¹²⁹

Rahner’s conception of God’s self-communication to the human subject has profound implications for Christian anthropology. For Rahner, revelation in Christ is the “absolute self-utterance” and “absolute donation of love” of the triune God to the extent that the human person, through the bestowal and acceptance of this gracious gift, becomes the *created* locus of the indwelling Trinity.¹³⁰ Explaining Rahner’s position on this point, Coffey writes,

The human being who finds God in his or her life does so in an experience that on analysis reveals itself as structured along Trinitarian lines, that is, to be revelatory of God precisely as Trinity. This revelation does not occur merely in words: it is essentially the experience of the self-communication of God, for which words are found only subsequently. Only thus can an

¹²³ *Trinity*, 98.

¹²⁴ *Trinity*, 96, emphasis mine.

¹²⁵ *Trinity*, 98.

¹²⁶ *Trinity*, 98.

¹²⁷ *Trinity*, 98.

¹²⁸ *Trinity*, 99.

¹²⁹ See *Trinity*, 93-94.

¹³⁰ *Trinity*, 36, 100-01.

explicit theology of the Trinity be appreciated as relevant and important to the human person in his or her life.¹³¹

Additionally, when we consider the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life from Rahner's perspective, Christian love for neighbour takes on a deeper significance. In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner contends that the "all-encompassing actualization of existence" that takes place as a result of the person's free acceptance of God's self-communication leads to a new consideration of the commandment of love for neighbour: it ceases to be a legalistic means to salvation and becomes, in "an absolute sense," the "actualization of Christian existence."¹³² By beginning with salvation history, Rahner's trinitarian theology affirms his contention that "the Trinity itself is with us" and is "concretely *experienced* by us."¹³³ The Trinity revealed in salvation history is not merely a reflection of God in Godself; it *is* the Trinity, as such, given in creation to effect the fulfillment of the human person.

By demonstrating the interconnectedness between the doctrines of grace and salvation, Rahner moves trinitarian theology out of the speculative confines of neo-scholasticism and posits it firmly in human experience. As Karen Kilby notes, his work has had far-reaching effects on the discipline of theology:

What is most significant about Rahner ... [is] the way in which he demonstrated the possibility of a theology which is simultaneously faithful and creative, a theology which is genuinely immersed in the tradition and also genuinely open to the difficulties and insights of the contemporary world. Rahner showed that this kind of theology is possible, not by working out in principle how it should be done, but simply in the doing of it, repeatedly, across a vast range of subjects.¹³⁴

In Metz's appraisal of Rahner's work, he notes that it is "different from the comparable theological work of Augustine, Newman or Bonhoeffer," and that this "is one of the great advantages of Rahner's theological work. It makes his theology present and contemporary in a very specific way."¹³⁵

Some Limitations of Rahner's Trinitarian Theology

While Rahner's reception amongst trinitarian theologians has been largely positive, he is not without his critics.¹³⁶ His existential concern puts him at odds with scholars who are concerned with

¹³¹ Coffey, "Trinity," 102.

¹³² Rahner, *Foundations*, 309.

¹³³ *Trinity*, 39, 101, emphasis original.

¹³⁴ Karen Kilby, "Karl Rahner," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Williston: Wiley, 2012), 104.

¹³⁵ Metz, *FH*, 226.

¹³⁶ It is beyond the scope of the present work to deal with each of these criticisms in detail, or to defend Rahner's legacy. I simply wish to mention them here to point to the fact that no matter how seemingly systematic or well-considered a theology of the Trinity may be, ultimately it is merely *one* (limited, inadequate, human) way of describing how the one absolutely mysterious and transcendent God is revealed as triune. For a detailed discussion and rebuttal of these criticisms, see Pugliese, Marc A. Pugliese, "Is Karl Rahner a Modalist?," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2003).

eschatological questions, rather than experiential questions.¹³⁷ According to Rowland, when founding *Communio* Joseph Ratzinger disparagingly labelled the *Concilium* approach as a “hermeneutic of rupture” (rather than one of reform—the approach for which he advocated) and questioned the *Concilium* reading of the Second Vatican Council in this regard.¹³⁸ Marc A. Pugliese discusses the charge of “modalistic Monarchianism” directed at Rahner, due to what his critics say is an “overemphasis on unity in God to the detriment of plurality” in his trinitarian theology.¹³⁹ To these critics, according to Pugliese, Rahner’s “basic axiom” implies that “God’s triune nature is in part constituted by the created order.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, God’s trinitarian “modalities” subsist only in God’s self-communication to humankind in creation. While this charge seems to be somewhat supported by Rahner’s definition of “person” as a “distinct manner of subsisting,” he pre-emptively addresses it in his monograph on the Trinity.¹⁴¹ He notes that it is fitting that God’s self-communication be considered from the point of view of human experience because the human person is the addressee of God’s self-communication and in that communication, God reveals Godself to be precisely as God is.¹⁴² Moreover, considering creation as a “moment of God’s self-communication,” he contends that the “outward” activity of the one God in the missions of the Word and the Spirit is consonant with this self-communication: Christ’s “human nature,” Rahner notes, “is precisely that which comes into being when God’s *Logos* ‘utters’ himself outwards.”¹⁴³ In a further criticism, Coffey argues that Rahner’s concept of “person” leads him to deny the possibility of mutual love between Father and Son, which is traditionally associated with the Spirit in the classical tradition, and he asserts that Rahner’s pneumatology in general is “rather weak.”¹⁴⁴ Marmion and Hines add two more criticisms to this list: they note Hans Küng’s criticism of Rahner’s desire to demonstrate continuity between his theology and that of ‘orthodox’ tradition, without recognising that there may be times when the Church might “admit mistakes,” and they note Balthasar’s criticism that Rahner’s approach is too “human-centred,” effectively “evacuat[ing] Christianity of its categorical content in favour of a relationship with God not essentially mediated by the concrete content of faith.”¹⁴⁵

¹³⁷ See Coffey, “Whole Rahner,” 97.

¹³⁸ Rowland, *Catholic Theology*, 93.

¹³⁹ Pugliese, “Is Rahner Modalist?,” 230. Jürgen Moltmann was particularly vocal on this point. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 144-48.

¹⁴⁰ Pugliese, “Is Rahner Modalist?,” 231.

¹⁴¹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 109-113.

¹⁴² *Trinity*, 88-9.

¹⁴³ *Trinity*, 89.

¹⁴⁴ Coffey, “Trinity,” 109-10. For Rahner’s argument on the mutual love between Father and Son, see Rahner, *Trinity*, 106.

¹⁴⁵ Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

When we consider Rahner's work from a postmodern perspective, we can discern some further limitations. Here, we return to the three theological horizons that Ward presents as emerging from the dialogue between theology and postmodern thinking: i) "the role of the unsayable and unrepresentable as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented"; ii) "the self as ... never self-enclosed but always open onto that which transcends its own self-understanding"; and iii) "the movement of desire initiated and fostered by the other, that which lies outside and for future possession, the other which is also prior and cannot be gathered into the rational folds of present consciousness."¹⁴⁶ Taking the second and third horizons first, I begin with a discussion of Rahner's metaphysics of the subject and its relation to the Other, and then move backwards to a critique of the universalising tendencies of his approach.

Rahner's turn to the subject and his use of metaphysics to posit God as the horizon of human experience (or, better, the horizon of human-divine transcendence), reflects a thoroughly "modern" philosophical approach.¹⁴⁷ The interplay between subjectivity, metaphysics and ontology in his work can be seen in the following excerpt from *Foundations of Christian Faith*. Discussing the efficient causality of creation—God's establishment of what is other than God—Rahner argues that creation is the presupposition that makes God's self-communication in Christ possible. He writes:

Such a creative, efficient causality of God must be understood only as a modality or as a deficient mode of that absolute and enormous possibility of God which consists in the fact that he who is *agape* in person, and who is by himself the absolutely blessed and fulfilled subject, can precisely for this reason communicate himself to another.

If being is being-present-to-self, if the essence of an existent insofar as it has being is personal self-possession and inner luminosity, if every lesser degree of existence can only be understood as a deficient, delimited and reduced mode of the presence of being, then the ontological self-communication of God to a creature is by definition a communication for the sake of immediate knowledge and love. And conversely of course the parallel is also true: the true and immediate knowledge and love of God in God's own self necessarily implies this most real self-communication of God.¹⁴⁸

The purpose of salvation history is understood by Rahner to be the creation of the human person and the realisation of his or her consummation in God (through God's trinitarian self-communication in grace). He argues that "[a] person knows explicitly what is meant by 'God' only insofar as he allows his transcendence beyond everything objectively identifiable to enter into his consciousness, accepts

¹⁴⁶ Ward, "Postmodern Theology," 325. See p. 160.

¹⁴⁷ Rahner, *Foundations*, 122. It seems that Lieven Boeve would agree with my assessment of Rahner as "modern." See Lieven Boeve, "Thinking Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: A Playground for Theological Renewal," in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context: Fundamental Theological Perspectives*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Lambert Leijssen, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (Leuven; Sterling, Va.: Leuven University Press; Peeters, 2001), esp. 10. However, Purcell offers a compelling argument against this contention, asserting that Rahner in fact could be read as *postmodern*. See Purcell, "Rahner," 195-210.

¹⁴⁸ Rahner, *Foundations*, 122.

it, and objectifies in reflection what is already present in his transcendentalty.”¹⁴⁹ Here, the human subject is at the centre of theology, and the thinking of God is predicated on the thinking of being. For Rahner, God is absolute Being; in God’s self-communication (“for the sake of immediate knowledge and love”), God becomes present to humankind and we become aware of God as our horizon.¹⁵⁰ The question of whether or not Rahner potentially posits an *ontotheology* aside, my concern here is with his conception of the subject.

As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, “the major characteristic of [postmodern] thought is the putting into question of the instance of the ‘subject,’ according to the structure, the meaning, and the value subsumed under this term in modern thought.”¹⁵¹ Nancy contends that the “transference of the thinking of Being to the thinking of life, or of the Other, or of language, ... have all involved putting subjectivity on trial.”¹⁵² In the above excerpt, Rahner posits the meaning of being (that is, God) as “being-present-to-self.”¹⁵³ By positing God as the horizon of human-divine transcendence, Rahner implies that the (human) subject can ultimately become present to itself. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that “Dasein is ontically ‘nearest’ to itself, [and yet] ontologically farthest away.”¹⁵⁴ For Heidegger, this determines the limits of *Dasein*: “it cannot hope to provide a complete ontology of Dasein.”¹⁵⁵ Put simply, as the subject cannot be both object and subject, *Dasein*’s understanding of itself will always be incomplete and provisional.¹⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy take up this notion in “Eating Well.” Derrida contends,

It is within ... the living present, that *Urform* of the transcendental experience, that the subject conjoins with nonsubject or that the *ego* is marked, without being able to have the originary and presentative experience of it, by the non-*ego* and especially by the *alter ego*. The *alter ego* cannot present itself, cannot become an originary presence for the *ego*. There is only an analogical a-presentation [*appréhension*] of the *alter ego*. The *alter ego* can never be given ‘in person.’¹⁵⁷

Nancy helpfully summarises Derrida here: “[I]t comes down to emphasizing that there is not, nor has there ever been any presence-to-self that would call into question the *distance* from self that this presence demands.”¹⁵⁸ To this, Derrida adds, “what we call ‘subject’ is not the absolute origin, pure

¹⁴⁹ *Foundations*, 44.

¹⁵⁰ *Foundations*, 122.

¹⁵¹ Nancy, “*Who Comes After*,” 5.

¹⁵² “*Who Comes After*,” 5.

¹⁵³ Rahner, *Foundations*, 122.

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger, *BT*, 14 (5).

¹⁵⁵ *BT*, 15 (5).

¹⁵⁶ *BT*, 15 (5).

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 102.

¹⁵⁸ “Eating Well,” 102.

will, identity to self, or presence to self of consciousness but precisely this noncoincidence with self.”¹⁵⁹

If we take this discussion seriously, it raises potential problems for Rahner’s transcendental anthropology. If the meaning of human-divine transcendence is the realisation of “self-possession” and “inner luminosity,” the very thing that makes human beings such (phenomenologically speaking, *Dasein*) is potentially subsumed into the transcendent. Moreover, by positing Christ as “the absolutely blessed and fulfilled subject,” who, by implication, possesses “inner luminosity,” Rahner potentially denies Jesus’ full humanity.

A further point is worth noting regarding the postmodern criticism of subjectivity. As Nancy writes, “The logic of the *subjectum* is a grammar ... of the subject that re-appropriates to itself, in advance and absolutely, the exteriority and the strangeness of its predicate.”¹⁶⁰ In his transcendental anthropology, Rahner potentially posits God as the predicate of the thinking of (human) being. To this effect, his approach potentially runs the risk of de-mystifying God in order to satisfy the desire of the human subject to know itself. While Rahner’s conception of God’s self-communication as history into transcendence reflects his contention that the human being is open to that which transcends it, his positing of the human person as *realised* in God as a result of God’s self-communication closes the gap between God and person and potentially posits both on the same ontological plane. God potentially becomes the possession of the human person, to be known and appropriated.¹⁶¹

Gabriela Basterra’s work is helpful for our consideration in this regard. She contends that in modern philosophy “the self is depicted as engulfing the other in order to satisfy desire, but also, paradoxically, as needing that very other it supersedes to achieve external recognition of itself as self-conscious being.”¹⁶² In postmodern philosophy, the desire for “self-realisation” over and against the other is criticised for its impact on the subordination and oppression of peoples, and Rahner’s account of the human-Divine relationship could fall prey to this very criticism. In Rahner’s trinitarian anthropology, the human person is dependent on God, as other, for his or her fulfillment to the extent that God is potentially engulfed and subsumed into the very definition of what it means to be human. Basterra contends that “[i]n so far as self-realization is based on the conflicting movement of cancelling the externality of the other through which the other recognizes the self, the other

¹⁵⁹ “Eating Well,” 103.

¹⁶⁰ Nancy, “*Who Comes After*,” 6.

¹⁶¹ I have not gone so far as to say that this leads Rahner to posit an ontotheology, but if Rahner intends to say that as ground of existence, God and the human come to be considered on the same plane (of being), his approach is potentially problematic. Lieven Boeve’s criticism of Rahner is more direct. In *Lyotard and Theology*, he writes: “Rahner’s transcendental theology presents a dynamized and subjectified (or personalized) reflection on the relation between God and humans in a fundamental way, thus opening a place for both the human experience of freedom and the sacramental event. Still, the self-communication of God as grace-filled presence appearing to a fundamental human autonomy must be understood within the framework of a neo-Platonic ontotheology.” Boeve, *LT*, 118.

¹⁶² Basterra, “Tragic,” 67. See in the present work, p. 74.

becomes the ‘most awesome of stumbling blocks in the self’s march to fulfilment,’ a threat that simultaneously constitutes and thwarts the self.”¹⁶³ If the self is understood wholly in its relation to God, as it seems to be in Rahner’s trinitarian anthropology, the difference between God and the human subject is effectively erased.

A final consideration in the criticism of Rahner’s work from the perspective of postmodern philosophy relates to his identification of the mystery of God with God’s full self-communication in knowledge (Christ) and love (Spirit) and to his contention that the human person, through the acceptance of God’s gift of God’s very self, becomes the locus of the indwelling Trinity. This paradoxical relationship leads Rahner to conceive of Christian faith as the universal answer to human existence, which raises questions about the implications of his approach for the consideration of religious plurality.¹⁶⁴ His notion of “anonymous Christianity” testifies to his intentions in this regard.¹⁶⁵ He famously asserted, with recourse to his conception of the supernatural existential, that grace is present in those who, through no fault of their own, do not belong to Christian faith.¹⁶⁶ While Rahner’s intention is towards inclusivity, the paternalistic tendencies of such an approach leads to the positing of the Christian tradition as a metanarrative (vis-à-vis Lyotard’s criticism). On this account, religious traditions other-than-Christian are either excluded as having no basis in truth, or they are subsumed into the Christian metanarrative as holding “partially Christian” truths.¹⁶⁷

These potential issues aside, Rahner’s legacy continues to be seen in the myriad of contextual theologies that have arisen since the second half of the twentieth century. The shift of focus that he achieved—away from speculation about the immanent Trinity (how God *is* in Godself) towards a consideration of the economic Trinity in the intimate relationship between God and the world—brought into sharp focus the question of the adequacy of distinguishing these realities in theological discussion. By bringing discussion of the immanent Trinity together with a concern for the ways in which God is revealed in the economy of salvation, Rahner’s work is said to have “pav[ed] the way for fruitful dialogue between modernity and Catholic theology and open[ed] countless doors

¹⁶³ “Tragic,” 67.

¹⁶⁴ Rahner, *Trinity*, 91.

¹⁶⁵ See “Anonymous Christians,” in *Concerning Vatican Council II*, Theological Investigations, Vol VI (Limerick, Ireland: University of Limerick Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, 2004; reprint, Electronic Edition), 390-98.

¹⁶⁶ Rahner suggested that non-Christians, who have never heard the Gospel but live according to the will of God could be saved through Christ. This idea was reiterated in *Lumen gentium* (LG II, 16) and extended in *Dominus Iesus*, to include non-Christian religious traditions (DI I, 8 and III, 14). See “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Later Writings*, Theological Investigations, Vol V (Limerick, Ireland: University of Limerick Centre for Culture, Technology and Values, 2004; reprint, Electronic Edition), 115-34; “Anonymous Christians,” 390-98; Vatican II Council, LG; Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000).

¹⁶⁷ For a balanced, alternative, view to Rahner’s approach, which considers the notion of the finality of Christ in relation to non-Christian religions, see Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, “The Finality of Christ and the Religious Alternative,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017). I offer my own conception of this theme in Ch. 8.

to further theological enterprises.”¹⁶⁸ The influence of his work can be seen in the development of the political, liberation and feminist theologies of late modernity, and particularly in those models that have come to be known as “social” models of the Trinity. Jürgen Moltmann’s political theology is one such approach, and it is to this that we now turn.

A Political Trinitarian Theology: Jürgen Moltmann

The political, liberation and feminist theologies of late modernity reflect the growing awareness in twentieth-century theology of the need to take into account the experience of the community of believers. I noted above that the experience of the early Church as narrated in scripture became the locus of Rahner’s theological project. Rahner was concerned to bring to the centre of the Christian consciousness the history of salvation and the revelation of the triune God therein, and the historical circumstances of modernity provided the background for his reimagining of Christian experience. As we will see, Moltmann’s consideration of the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and Christian life takes Rahner’s project further, refining and extending it to consider the implications for Christian communities and to explicate the role of communities in realising the goal of salvation history.

Moltmann’s consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life is an example of political theology, but it also falls into the category of “social” trinitarian approaches. Such approaches have risen to prominence since the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the work of those theologians who align with the *Concilium* school. They are based on a “social analogy” of the Trinity, which rests on the premise that human communities reflect in a limited way the relations between the divine persons. The analogy is said to have its roots in the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, although Cornelius Plantinga Jr. contends that the “three-man analogy” of Gregory of Nyssa merely set the direction for a full “social analogy” to be developed.¹⁶⁹ According to Plantinga Jr., this “three-man analogy” refers to Gregory’s theory that “(1) Father, Son, and Spirit are conceived as persons in a full sense of “person,” i.e., as distinct centers of love, will, knowledge, and purposeful action (all of which require consciousness) and (2) ... are conceived as related to each other in some central ways analogous to, even if sublimely surpassing, relations among the members

¹⁶⁸ Gaspar Martinez, “Political and Liberation Theologies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 249.

¹⁶⁹ Plantinga Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa,” 351. Sarah Coakley similarly argues that Gregory of Nyssa was not a “social trinitarian,” as such. She writes, “Gregory’s approach to the Trinity is not ‘social’ in the sense often ascribed to that term today; it does not ‘start’ with the three and proceed to the one. Nor does it attempt to ‘nail’ the meaning of divine *hypostasis* by particular reference to the analogy of three individual men: the analytic discussions here have been misled by an over-concentration on Gregory’s *Ad Ablabium*, as well as by an insufficiently nuanced reading of that text.” Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, ed. Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA/ Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 112.

of a society of three human persons.”¹⁷⁰ As Kathryn Tanner explains, Gregory argued that “the unit of nature among the three persons of the Trinity is something like the common human nature shared by three human beings.”¹⁷¹ She offers the following definition of the “social analogy,” which developed from this:

[T]he personal relations or community that Christians form with one another and with the persons of the Trinity for the sake of the world—for example the way that Christians pray together to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son for help as a community in serving the mission of the triune God within the world—has its foundations in the very life of triune God which is itself something like an interpersonal form of communion.¹⁷²

Tanner surmises that this analogy became “commonplace ... after the late nineteenth century,” due in part to changes in the conception of the term “person.”¹⁷³ In the Latin tradition, and certainly as reflected in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, “person” was used in a technical way to denote the permanent distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit in the Godhead. However, Tanner contends that a contemporary understanding of the term does not simply consider a “person” to be distinct, but also “personal,” a “distinctive centre of consciousness, thought and intentional agency that constitutes one’s human ‘self.’”¹⁷⁴ With recourse to this definition, social trinitarians argue that while human persons are distinct from one another, they exist in relationship with one another; they are inherently social and communal, and develop a sense of identity in relation to other persons. The renewed emphasis on scriptural hermeneutics as a result of the Second Vatican Council’s call for *ressourcement* propelled efforts to affirm the scriptural roots of the doctrine of the Trinity, and social trinitarians drew biblical inspiration for human relationships and communities based on the fellowship between Jesus and the Father (Abba) as narrated in the gospels.¹⁷⁵ In social models of the Trinity, exemplified in Moltmann’s political theology, the analogous relationship between human

¹⁷⁰ Plantinga Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa,” 325, n.1. Plantinga Jr. notes that Gregory does not use the phrase “center of consciousness,” as such, but “he does consistently depict Father, Son and Spirit as distinct actors, knowers, willers, and lovers—what we would call centers of consciousness” (351-52). He offers a slightly more nuanced definition elsewhere: “a strong or social theory of the Trinity ... meets at least the following three conditions: (1) The theory must have Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of knowledge, will, love, and action. Since each of these capacities requires consciousness, it follows that, on this sort of theory, Father, Son, and Spirit would be viewed as distinct centers of consciousness or, in short, as persons in some full sense of that term. (2) Any accompanying sub-theory of divine simplicity must be modest enough to be consistent with condition (1), that is, with the real distinctness of trinitarian persons. ... (3) Father, Son, and Spirit must be regarded as tightly enough related to each other so as to render plausible the judgment that they constitute a particular social unit.” “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *A Reader in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp (London/ New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 68.

¹⁷¹ Kathryn Tanner, “Social Trinitarianism and its Critics,” in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Robert J. Woźniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 368. Tanner cites Gregory of Nyssa, “On Not Three Gods,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 331.

¹⁷² “Social Trinitarianism,” 369-70.

¹⁷³ “Social Trinitarianism,” 368.

¹⁷⁴ “Social Trinitarianism,” 369.

¹⁷⁵ See “Social Trinitarianism,” 369.

communities and trinitarian fellowship holds important implications for human life. Social trinitarians hold that not only is the Trinity radically present in communities who work together in prayer and praxis towards the mission of the Church, but such communities have their very foundations in the life of the Trinity.¹⁷⁶ To put this slightly differently, communities who work towards the completion of salvation history are constituted by the Trinity, which is revealed in their midst.

Born in Hamburg in 1926, Moltmann was placed in the German army as a schoolboy and spent three years in internment camps during the Second World War. Upon returning home, he studied theology in the Reformed tradition and was later influenced by the Marxist notions of political hope reflected in the work of Ernst Bloch.¹⁷⁷ Moltmann's most significant works on Christology and the Trinity include *The Crucified God*; *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*; and *History and The Triune God*. His theology bears the marks of the suffering he experienced and witnessed during the war and is concerned with the themes of eschatological hope and social cohesion. He contends that "a theology which [does] not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have nothing to say" to the "shattered and broken" survivors of the Nazi camps.¹⁷⁸ His understanding of God is as one who suffers (on the cross) and who stands in solidarity with those who are suffering and oppressed; his trinitarian theology is therefore concerned with the consideration of the relationship between God and human life, history and the world.

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann argues that through the dying of the Son and the suffering of the loving Father, suffering becomes God's own and is overcome by God.¹⁷⁹ For Moltmann, "the grief of the Father is ... as important as the death of the Son."¹⁸⁰ Jesus' dying words—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:26)—reflect both Jesus' sense of abandonment on the cross and the Father's grief in giving up his Son.¹⁸¹ For Moltmann, the event of the cross is not only an event between God and humanity but also a divine event between the Son and the Father, which unfolds in trinitarian terms. He writes,

[In] that case one will understand the deadly aspect of the event between the Father who forsakes and the Son who is forsaken, and conversely the living aspect of the event between the Father who loves and the Son who loves. The Son suffers in his love being forsaken by the Father as he dies. The Father suffers in his love the grief of the death of the Son. In that case, whatever proceeds from the event between the Father and the Son must be understood as the spirit of the surrender of the Father and the Son, as the spirit which creates love for forsaken men, as the spirit which brings the dead alive. ... Here we have interpreted the event of the cross in trinitarian terms as an event concerned with a

¹⁷⁶ "Social Trinitarianism," 369-70.

¹⁷⁷ For a brief summary of Moltmann's life and the scope of his theological writings, see Peter McEnhill and George Newlands, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), 161-64.

¹⁷⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 245.

¹⁷⁹ CG, 246.

¹⁸⁰ CG, 243.

¹⁸¹ CG, 146-7.

relationship between persons in which these persons constitute themselves in relationship with each other.¹⁸²

The suffering of the Father and the Son in the event of the cross is overcome by the Spirit of love that flows out of their grief, and this is a “boundless love” that is opened onto the world so that humanity can share in the divine trinitarian love.¹⁸³ In *Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann explains that it is because God loves that God both suffers on the cross and grieves for the one he loves, and this love is “the superabundance and overflowing of [God’s] being” into the world.¹⁸⁴

With his focus on the scriptural witness to the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit, Moltmann takes as given the trinity of persons in God but seeks to identify the ways in which this trinity of persons exist in unity with one another.¹⁸⁵ One of his criticisms of the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Western tradition is that the metaphysical notion of “one substance” (*homoousios*) and the “concept of the identical subject” (“*unus Deus*,” from the Athanasian Creed) proceed from the belief in one God and, in doing so, fail to adequately recognise “the biblical testimony of the triune God, the God who unites others with himself.”¹⁸⁶ For Moltmann, it is imperative that the one-ness of God be “understood as communicable unity and as an open, inviting unity, capable of integration.”¹⁸⁷ Considerations of “substance” and “sameness” are not open onto the world, but imply a closed community.¹⁸⁸ The notion of *perichoresis* proves helpful for Moltmann in this regard. The term was introduced into discussions of the Trinity by John of Damascus in the 8th century, and can be defined as a mutual and dynamic indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity.¹⁸⁹ Explaining Damascene’s definition, Moltmann writes,

An eternal process takes place in the triune God through the exchange of energies. The Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and both of them in the Spirit, just as the Spirit exists in both the Father and the Son. By virtue of their eternal love, they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of most perfect and intense empathy.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸² CG, 245.

¹⁸³ CG, 245.

¹⁸⁴ TK, 23.

¹⁸⁵ TK, 19, 149.

¹⁸⁶ TK, 150. In *History and the Triune God*, Moltmann criticises Fichte’s and Hegel’s replacement of a “metaphysics of substance” with a “metaphysics of subjectivity” and their understanding of God as “the absolute subject.” He writes, “The unity of the triune God then no longer lies just in the homogeneity of the divine substance, but also in the identity of the one, divine subject. From this there follows the formula of the modern doctrine of the Trinity: one divine subject—three different modes of being. This formula, too, gives priority to the unity of God over the threeness of the divine persons.” *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 59. As we will see later, he criticises Rahner’s ‘turn to the subject’ along similar lines.

¹⁸⁷ TK, 149.

¹⁸⁸ TK, 150.

¹⁸⁹ Moltmann couples his definition of *perichoresis* with the term *circumincessio*, which refers to the *dynamic* nature of the relations between the persons. See TK, 174.

¹⁹⁰ TK, 174-75.

For Moltmann, this mutual indwelling centres on an understanding of the three persons as a *communion (koinonia)*, rather than a community. There is no hierarchy of persons, but “the three Persons themselves form their unity, by virtue of their relation to one another and in the eternal perichoresis of their love.”¹⁹¹ As a *communion*, the love of the Trinity flows out into the world in an open and communicable way and invites humanity into itself.¹⁹²

In *History and the Triune God*, Moltmann argues that the communion, or “fellowship” of the triune God “binds the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son.”¹⁹³ It is “a fellowship of a special and incomparable kind, such as is sought only by human beings in their fellowship with one another, guessed at only in their love for one another, and experienced only from afar in moments of mystical union.”¹⁹⁴ However, it is also a fellowship that is “so open and inviting that it is depicted in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit which human beings experience with one another.”¹⁹⁵ In this way, as one commentator notes, Moltmann’s trinitarian theology reflects “a turn from the ‘subject’ to relationality.”¹⁹⁶ The focus of his work is not just how God is revealed in the economic Trinity, but also how human relationships and communities *image* the trinitarian relations.¹⁹⁷ Joy Ann McDougall explains that “Moltmann utilizes the distinctive model of personal relations that constitute trinitarian fellowship as his divine archetype for right relationships in the personal, ecclesial, and political spheres of the Christian life.”¹⁹⁸ To this effect, Moltmann argues that the notion of trinitarian fellowship (*koinonia*) is both descriptive and prescriptive: “True human fellowship is to correspond to the triune God and be [God’s] image on earth. True human fellowship will participate in the inner life of the triune God.”¹⁹⁹ In other words, when human persons live in communion with one another according to the trinitarian relations—when human societies and the relationships between human persons reflect the fellowship (or mutual indwelling) of the Trinity—they become images of the Trinity and lead history to its ultimate end in God. In *Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann connects this eschatological hope with the consummation of trinitarian life. He writes, “The economic Trinity completes and perfects itself to immanent Trinity when the history and experience of salvation are

¹⁹¹ *TK*, 177.

¹⁹² William Hasker offers a compelling criticism of Moltmann’s argument in terms of the emphasis he places on *perichoresis* as the means by which humanity is caught up into the life of the Trinity. See William Hasker, *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God*, ed. Michael C. Rea and Oliver Crisp, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 101-02.

¹⁹³ Moltmann, *HTG*, 60.

¹⁹⁴ *HTG*, 60.

¹⁹⁵ *HTG*, 60.

¹⁹⁶ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Trinitarian Doctrines of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg in the Context of Contemporary Discussion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 224. I take up this shift in further detail, below.

¹⁹⁷ Moltmann, *TK*, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Joy Ann McDougall, “The Return of Trinitarian Praxis? Moltmann on the Trinity and the Christian Life,” *The Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 181.

¹⁹⁹ Moltmann, *HTG*, 60.

completed and perfected. When everything is 'in God' and 'God is in all,' then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity."²⁰⁰

Moltmann's panentheistic approach to the Trinity is evident in his argument that the goal of history is for the union of God and creation.²⁰¹ The image he uses here reflects the words attributed to St Paul, to which we referred earlier: God is "not far from each one of us. For in [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). Arthur Peacocke explains that in Moltmann's theory, the "'in' expresses an intimacy of relation and is clearly not meant in any locative sense. ... It refers, rather, to an ontological relation so that the world is conceived as within the Being of God but, nevertheless, with its own distinct ontology."²⁰² I will return to this notion below, in my discussion of the potentially ontotheological basis of Moltmann's work.

Strengths and Limitations of Moltmann's Trinitarian Theology

It is perhaps clear from my brief explanation of Moltmann's approach to trinitarian theology that he is concerned to address the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity that Rahner identifies and seeks to overcome. Fred Sanders contends that Moltmann has been "fascinated by Rahner's Rule for most of his career ... [and in *The Crucified God*] was looking for a way to establish the cross of Christ, the central event in the history of salvation, as something which also stands in the immanent Trinity."²⁰³ He reimages Rahner's axiom to connect it explicitly with the cross: "The theology of the cross must be the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity must be the theology of the cross."²⁰⁴ However, Moltmann comes to see that not only is the distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity still present in Rahner's axiom, but that his theology also reflects a subordination of the economic Trinity to the immanent Trinity because it is dependent upon Platonic notions of being and becoming.²⁰⁵ In *Trinity and the Kingdom*,

²⁰⁰ TK, 161.

²⁰¹ See also, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 17. There, he writes, "[A]ll relationships which are analogous to God reflect the primal, reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration of the trinitarian perichoresis: God in the world and the world in God; heaven and earth in the kingdom of God, pervaded by his glory; soul and body united in the life-giving Spirit to a human whole; woman and man in the kingdom of unconditional and unconditioned love, freed to be true and complete human beings. ... All living things—each in its own specific way—live in one another and with one another, from one another and for one another." Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen offers a detailed discussion of Moltmann's panentheism. See Kärkkäinen, "Trinitarian Doctrines," esp. 224-29; 235.

²⁰² Philip Clayton and Arthur Robert Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being : Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 145.

²⁰³ Sanders, "Entangled," 178.

²⁰⁴ Moltmann, CG, 243.

²⁰⁵ See Sanders, "Entangled," 178. Sanders explains, according to Moltmann, "As long as the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is maintained at all, ... it will continue to draw theological attention away from the economic Trinity. This is because of the essentially idealist or Platonic cast of traditional theology as a whole, which has never escaped from the assumption of a contrast between a higher realm of being and a lower realm of becoming. When the doctrine of God is pressed into these categories, "God in se" occupies the realm of being while only "God for us" shows up in the world of becoming. The economic Trinity is drastically subordinated to the immanent."

Moltmann seeks to go beyond the axiom, arguing that “the economic Trinity not only reveals the immanent Trinity; it also has a retroactive effect on it.”²⁰⁶ This is an important move for Moltmann because it allows him to conceive of the notion of human suffering as taken up and overcome in the life of the Trinity. Sanders criticises Moltmann’s approach along these lines, arguing that in seeking to shift the focus from God *in se* to God’s self-revelation in history, Moltmann potentially posits salvation history as (at least partially) constitutive of the Trinity.²⁰⁷ Sanders writes,

It might be coherent to argue that the immanent Trinity exists first, then enacts itself economically, making possible a second movement that further (“retroactively”) conditions the original immanent Trinity. If, however, the immanent Trinity itself is only a future culmination of historical events which are yet to be gathered together in a temporal whole, then there is no immanent Trinity to start the process.²⁰⁸

Sanders’ concern here reveals a metaphysical understanding of the relationship between God and the world; however, as we will see in a moment, Daniel Rossi-Keen argues that Moltmann seeks to offer an approach that moves “beyond metaphysics.”²⁰⁹ A question to which we will return is whether or not Moltmann succeeds in this endeavour.

A second and important way that Moltmann extends Rahner’s work is in his criticism of the use of metaphysics for theological discussion. As we just noted, Rossi-Keen argues that Moltmann seeks to move “beyond metaphysics” in his social approach to the Trinity and, in doing so, provides a framework for “a re-statement of the relevance of Christian theology” in a context marked by growing indifference.²¹⁰ In *History and the Triune God*, Moltmann contends that a theology based on a metaphysics of “substance”—presented by Tertullian in the 2nd century and reflected in the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed—and one based on Athanasius’ notion of God as “identical subject” fails to speak to the experience of suffering in the world and fails to consider the eschatological hope reflected in a trinitarian theology of the cross.²¹¹ He argues that Fichte and Hegel’s recourse to subjectivity in modern times cemented the use of metaphysics as a way of positing God as “absolute subject.”²¹² To this effect, he charges Rahner with replacing as his starting point a “metaphysics of substance” with a “metaphysics of subjectivity.”²¹³

Rossi-Keen outlines four reasons for Moltmann’s rejection of Rahner’s “metaphysical methodology”: “1) when using metaphysics to derive one’s doctrine of God, revelation is held captive by natural theology; 2) metaphysics does not always lead one to God in general, and particularly not

²⁰⁶ Moltmann, *TK*, 160.

²⁰⁷ Sanders, “Entangled,” 179. Recall my discussion to this effect in relation to Rahner’s approach, above.

²⁰⁸ “Entangled,” 179.

²⁰⁹ Daniel E. Rossi-Keen, “Jurgen Moltmann’s Doctrine of God: The Trinity Beyond Metaphysics,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 37, no. 3-4 (2008).

²¹⁰ “Moltmann’s Doctrine,” 461.

²¹¹ Tertullian: God is *una substantia-tres personae*.

²¹² Moltmann, *HTG*, 59.

²¹³ *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 321.

to the triune God of scripture; 3) metaphysics provides an unsatisfying basis for theodicy; and 4) metaphysics has less apologetic utility than does Moltmann's trinitarian approach."²¹⁴ Underpinning these reasons for Moltmann's rejection of a "metaphysics of subjectivity" is his contention that the biblical witness to the three persons leads to an account of God as divine communion and provides answers to the problem of suffering that metaphysics cannot achieve. As Rossi-Keen explains, "according to Moltmann, it is only as one rightly understands the suffering of God on the cross of Christ that one can reconcile the being of God with the existence of suffering."²¹⁵ Moreover, according to Rossi-Keen, Moltmann argues that in metaphysical approaches reason is used as a justification for faith and "as a means of establishing common ground between the believer and unbeliever."²¹⁶ For Moltmann, a metaphysical approach is seen to support the aims of modern theologians who attempt to bridge the gap between faith and context by affirming God, through an appeal to reason, as the author of human experience. However, he argues that it is precisely a theology of the cross—a particularly Christian faith—that is relevant for the world.²¹⁷ As we have discussed previously, and as we detail further, below, this approach presents problems in today's context of detraditionalisation and pluralisation because while it recognises the particularity of Christian faith, it posits Christian faith as the universal answer to questions of human experience (in Moltmann's case, to the question of suffering).

Rossi-Keen contends that Moltmann's rejection of a "metaphysics of subjectivity" leads him to offer a theology that is quite distinct from Rahner's approach. He argues that Moltmann's distinctiveness emerges in his understanding of the cross and his concomitant recognition of God as one who suffers, as well as in his recognition of the inescapably trinitarian nature of God who is revealed in the Christian scriptures.²¹⁸ In doing so, Rossi-Keen contends, "Moltmann has self-consciously sought to understand the implications of such thinking in a way that is both unique and deeply instinctive ... [and has] brought to the fore persistent questions concerning the relationship between theological method and philosophical inquiry."²¹⁹

In the discussion of the postmodern criticism of modern theology, above, and particularly in my explanation of three theological horizons outlined by Ward, I discussed the postmodern criticism of metaphysics as ontotheology and the universalising tendencies of modern approaches that are built on such premises.²²⁰ While Moltmann may well aim to overcome a metaphysics of subjectivity, as per Rossi-Keen's argument, he potentially posits a metaphysics of *relationality* in its place. His ontological conception of the relationship between trinitarian *perichoresis* and human communal

²¹⁴ Rossi-Keen, "Moltmann's Doctrine," 455.

²¹⁵ "Moltmann's Doctrine," 454.

²¹⁶ "Moltmann's Doctrine," 454.

²¹⁷ See Moltmann, *CG*, esp. 3.

²¹⁸ Rossi-Keen, "Moltmann's Doctrine," 460.

²¹⁹ "Moltmann's Doctrine," 461.

²²⁰ See p. 160, above.

relations leads to similar issues that we identified in Rahner's approach. In Moltmann's trinitarian theology, God is still presented as the horizon of human experience; however, this time the focus is not on the (individual) subject, but on the transcendence of the community. According to Moltmann, by reflecting the fellowship (or mutual indwelling) of the Trinity, human communities become *imago Trinitas* and participate in trinitarian life.²²¹ In doing so, human communities effect the completion of salvation history. Recall Moltmann's words, quoted earlier: "The economic Trinity completes and perfects itself to immanent Trinity when the history and experience of salvation are completed and perfected. When everything is 'in God' and 'God is in all,' then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity."²²² The ontological grounding of the relationship between God and the world ("a thoroughly historicized ontology," as Sanders writes) flattens and reduces the difference between them, potentially positing God and the human community within the same horizon of experience.²²³ Alan Torrance argues that in doing so, Moltmann compromises the transcendence of God over creation and effectively posits participation in trinitarian life as "a task to be achieved," rather than an "event of grace."²²⁴

In the pluralising context of today, the universal intentions of Moltmann's trinitarian theology, which sees him offer the human community as a potential model of and participant in the Trinity, reflects the positing of the Christian narrative over and against other worldviews and the subsuming of these worldviews into the metanarrative of Christianity. In light of the discussion of Boeve's work in part I, and my presentation of the issues we face in the context of today (chapter 1), I argue that any theology which understands human communities as reflections of the Trinity must grapple with the question of the relationship between Christian and other-than-Christian worldviews. As we will see in chapter 8, Boeve's theology of interruption—with its conception of Christ (the incarnation, death and resurrection) as the paradigmatic event of God's interruption—provides a potentially fruitful way of thinking about this relationship that overcomes the limitations I have just outlined.

These limitations aside, Moltmann's theological articulation of the relationship between Christian faith and praxis led to an explicit recognition of the role of human communities in working together for social development. The premise of his argument—that theology has something to say about the suffering of human beings and that human communities are called to work together to eradicate the suffering of others—can be found in the work of many of his contemporaries, and particularly in the rise of the liberation theologies of the global south (such as in South America, Africa, India, Palestine and South Korea). Peter McEnhill and George Newlands contend that with

²²¹ See discussion, p. 185.

²²² Moltmann, *TK*, 161.

²²³ Sanders, "Entangled," 179.

²²⁴ Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 310-13; cited in McDougall, "Return," 180.

Moltmann's "constant engagement with the political and social dimensions of theology, ... [he] succeeded in demonstrating at an important time that theology can be written with direct application to social and political issues in society."²²⁵

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how the doctrine of the Trinity came to be understood in relation to Christian life, and I have articulated some of the implications of bringing a postmodern critical consciousness to modern reflections on this relationship. In the current context of secularisation, pluralisation and detraditionalisation, the particularly Christian belief in God as Trinity raises important questions for the human person and human communities. As we have seen, in modernity the turn to experience marked a shift in consciousness towards the recognition of the human subject and to the consideration of the role of theology to provide answers to questions related to human experience, particularly when this experience is marked by suffering and subordination. While the theological approaches of Rahner and Moltmann were ground-breaking in their own right, examining them from a postmodern perspective highlights some of their limitations. The postmodern shift towards a recognition of the function of language to exclude or subordinate has led to the criticism of any theology which seeks to subsume differences or universalise Christian theology. In the trinitarian theologies of Rahner and Moltmann, the Christian narrative is presented as the universal answer to the question of truth, and each theologian utilises metaphysical constructions that are no longer plausible in today's (Western) contexts. As I discussed in chapters 2 and 3, Boeve argues that the postmodern critical consciousness must interrupt the universalising tendencies of modern political theology, and he offers a "theology of interruption" as a *postmodern* political theology that is both continuous and discontinuous with its modern counterpart. In my application of his approach in chapter 8, I will consider the extent to which a theology of interruption potentially overcomes the limitations of modern political theologies.

In postmodern theology, we have seen a move away from a focus on social coherence and unity within communities towards a stronger recognition of differences within and between communities, and towards the recognition of the function of language to either include, exclude or relativise differences. In a context that postmodern theologians describe as marked by radical heterogeneity, any trinitarian theology that declares its implications for human life must grapple with some important questions, such as: a) What difference does it make to think God as Trinity today?; b) What might a trinitarian conception of God tell us about how we live in the postmodern context, which reflects the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation?; and c) How might we consider the language used to describe the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, so that it

²²⁵ McEnhill and Newlands, *Key Christian Thinkers*, 164.

reflects contemporary philosophical and political concerns? In the next chapter, I explore two approaches that reflect a postmodern consideration of these questions—the trinitarian approaches of Kathryn Tanner and Sarah Coakley—and I bring their insights into dialogue with the critical impulses of postmodernity.

Chapter 7. Postmodern Approaches to the Trinity and Christian Life

In chapter 6, I brought a postmodern critical consciousness into dialogue with modern conceptions of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. I examined the shifts in the religious critical consciousness of modernity, through Rahner's turn to experience in his transcendental anthropology and trinitarian theology, and through Moltmann's articulation of the salvific power of the revelation of the Trinity in the economy. I noted Moltmann's contention that human communities participate in salvation when they model themselves on trinitarian fellowship: when they criticise social and hierarchical structures and work together for change, they lead history towards its ultimate end in God. A broader survey of modern approaches to the Trinity, to include the work of liberation theologians, such as Leonardo Boff, and feminist theologians, such as Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Elizabeth A. Johnson, would highlight further achievements of modern theology in shifting the religious critical consciousness of Christian faith. In Boff's and LaCugna's work, for example, the recognition of human agency in working towards salvation comes to the fore, and in Johnson's work, we see a recognition that theological language not only potentially reflects the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of society, but also that it can function to perpetuate oppression and violence.¹

Rahner and Moltmann, and the other "modern" theologians mentioned briefly here, consider the Christian tradition somewhat hegemonically: the best image of a community, as presented in their trinitarian approaches, is a community where all individuals image the Trinity in their relationships with each other. In the Western context, while this ideal was plausible in a time when the majority of people within a given community were Christian, today, communities are far more heterogeneous. Not only are communities in Western society now very different from one another (between city, suburb and country, from city to city and from state to state) they also contain within them a diversity of religious beliefs, practices, and worldviews. This heterogeneity has led to an increased awareness in the discipline of theology of the need for a recontextualised Christian narrative that does not simply seek to assert itself over and against other religious traditions and worldviews, but instead recognises the mutually beneficial role of dialogue within this diversity. At the same time, the particular witness of each partner in the dialogue comes to the fore as the condition of possibility for its authenticity. In this light, from the perspective of a postmodern *Christian* critical consciousness, Lieven Boeve argues that theology must hold in tension a strong understanding of the revelation of God as witnessed in the Christian tradition, and a recognition that

¹ See Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2017).

the interruption offered by dialogue with the “other” is the place in which God might be revealed today.

Rahner’s trinitarian theology focuses on the realisation of the freedom of the human subject. For Moltmann, this freedom is realised in fellowship and relationality, a fellowship that defines the relationship between human persons, and ultimately, between God and humankind. In each account, the notion of freedom (emancipation) becomes the guiding principle for theology: it regulates the discourse to the extent that it not only structures a hermeneutical engagement with Christian texts, but also structures Christian language and praxis. In effect, it offers the Christian narrative of emancipation as the universal answer to the social concerns of modernity. In his criticism of modern metanarratives, Jean-François Lyotard explicitly criticises the “Idea of emancipation” for its universal and cognitive pretensions.² He argues that whenever a narrative claims universality, there is always an excess for which the narrative cannot account, and this excess becomes an obstacle for the achievement of its ultimate goal.³ If we take Lyotard’s criticism seriously, we must consider the fact that if freedom and emancipation are considered through a Christian lens as the ultimate goal of human life, the diversity of worldviews present in the pluralising context becomes an obstacle to its achievement. As Lyotard writes, the modern “ideal of absolute freedom” means that “any given reality must be suspected of being an obstacle to freedom,” and any particular act, or in this case, worldview, is potentially judged as “failing to match up to the ideal. ... [N]othing is emancipated enough.”⁴ With this in mind, any postmodern trinitarian theology that draws from the strengths and insights of modern political theologies must consider the potentially interruptive and transformative impact of diversity on the Christian self-understanding.

In Moltmann’s trinitarian approach, we see a developing recognition of the role of language in structuring power. He argues for an understanding of the equality of relations in God, where any notions of hierarchy in God are replaced with the recognition of mutuality and fellowship (in his approach, the Father is not named as such because he is “the Father of the Universe” but because he is “the Father of the Son”).⁵ This shift in the religious critical consciousness of late modernity reflects a much earlier shift in the philosophical critical consciousness, led by thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. By seeking to overturn notions of hierarchy in God, Moltmann posits trinitarian theology as potentially cleansing of human constructions of power and inequality. In doing so, he draws attention to the suffering “other” of theological discourse—the persons and communities whose experiences of God are excluded or ignored in what he considers to be overly philosophical constructions of God. As Moltmann writes, “a theology which [does] not speak of God in the sight of the one who was abandoned and crucified would have nothing to say” to the “shattered and broken”

² See Lyotard, *PE*, 24, 24-25.

³ *PE*, 54.

⁴ *PE*, 54.

⁵ Moltmann, *TK*, 162-63.

survivors of the extermination camps. By extension, nor would a theology that ignores the suffering and exclusion experienced by communities of Christians and non-Christians alike in today's contexts.⁶

As I discussed in chapter 2, in the contemporary philosophical critical consciousness of postmodernity the recognition of the "other," as the voice that is not recognised in a discourse, has come to the fore as the means by which modern metanarratives are broken open and structures of power are subverted. We have seen that Lyotard's notion of *le différend* draws attention to the unspeakable, elusive event where a discourse is open to plurality. *Le différend* points to that moment of indeterminacy or indecision in a sentence, which ends as soon as the next phrase is added.⁷ In Lyotard's words, "the differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be."⁸ In modern metanarratives, the aporia produced by the interruption of the "other" leads not to an open dialogue but to the positing of yet more phrases that perpetuate and reaffirm the Idea that guides and frames the discourse. For Lyotard, "[w]hat is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them."⁹ He continues,

In the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence ... that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognise that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.¹⁰

Attention to *le différend*, therefore, recognises the way in which attention to the very structure of language can subvert structures of power that are contained within a narrative. Moreover, it reflects the recognition of difference as the means by which modern metanarratives are broken open.

In this chapter, I begin with an examination of Maarten Wisse's criticisms of an ontology of participation to the extent that it underpins modern approaches to the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. I then explore the work of two contemporary theologians who each owe something of their theology to the postmodern call to develop new idioms, and consider these in light of Wisse's criticisms. In doing so, I bring these postmodern approaches into dialogue with the three theological horizons that Graham Ward contends are opened up by postmodern thinking (continuing the discussion from chapter 6). Kathryn Tanner, known for her work in cultural and gender studies, presents a theology of the Trinity that aims to recognise and uphold the difference between God and the human person, and between human

⁶ CG, 1.

⁷ For a helpful summary of Lyotard's definition, see Boeve, "BW," 362-379; and "CCPC," 449-468. See also, chapter 2 in *LT*, 11-28.

⁸ Lyotard, *Differend*, 13, n.22.

⁹ *Differend*, 13, n.22.

¹⁰ *Differend*, 13, n. 23.

persons in communities. Her trinitarian theology thereby offers a new way of thinking about the relationship between grace and Christian responsibility. Sarah Coakley, known for her studies in feminist theology, systematic theology and patristic sources, presents an understanding of the Trinity that seeks to move beyond the use of language altogether. Highlighting the necessarily apophatic relationship between faith and theology, Coakley affirms the interconnectedness between contemplative prayer and the development of an expanded theological rationality. Returning to Wisse's criticisms of theological approaches based on an ontology of participation, I will argue that what Tanner and Coakley offer are new ways of thinking about the participation of the human person in God: each of these thinkers demonstrate that the notion of participation need not lead to an elision of the difference between God and the world, nor does Christian life need to be reduced to the mere imitation of God in order to uphold this difference. As we will see, Tanner and Coakley each offer a contemporary approach to trinitarian theology that has thoroughly *practical* implications and significant political import.

Rethinking Participation in the Trinity?

Approaches to the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life since the middle of the twentieth century reflect a number of key movements in the development of contemporary trinitarian theology. These movements, which are helpfully summarised by Maarten Wisse, reflect: the historicisation of God (developed as a result of the work of Rahner and Barth); the functionalisation of trinitarian theology, as a determining factor of all theology; the shift towards a focus on perichoresis, "from substance-ontological thinking to a relational ontology" (for example, in social trinitarianism, and other approaches that draw from the Eastern Tradition); and an increased interest in what Wisse calls "mirror structures," where the doctrine of God is said to be mirrored in other systematic loci.¹¹ Wisse contends that these "modern forms of trinitarian theology are often closely linked to some form of an ontology of participation."¹² He explains that those approaches that tend towards participation argue "against the idea that the world is devoid of God, ... [and instead] describe how the world is part of God's very being, as the world exists *in* God."¹³ In the contemporary theological landscape, Wisse contends that approaches based on an "ontology of participation" are problematic for a number of reasons, both theological and contextual.¹⁴

¹¹ Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine's De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*, 1st ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 3-6, 4, 6. On mirror structures, Wisse offers two examples: God is "relational and a communion of love," so human beings are "relational and directed towards being in communion," and on the theme of ecclesiology, "the being of the Church as communion mirrors the being of God as communion." *TBP*, 6.

¹² *TBP*, 7.

¹³ *TBP*, 9.

¹⁴ Maarten Wisse is a dogmatic theologian, currently based at the Protestant University of Amsterdam. His monograph on Augustine's trinitarian theology, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine's De*

From a theological perspective, Wisse argues that approaches based on an ontology of participation have three inter-related aspects which, when taken together, present theological problems. The first aspect, which in and of itself is unproblematic, relates to “a distinct moment of *negative theology*,” which, Wisse contends, “follows from the identification between God and the philosophical concept of the Absolute.”¹⁵ While he acknowledges the debate about defining what is meant by “the Absolute,” he posits that the most helpful description is that the Absolute “is that which has nothing opposite to it.”¹⁶ In language, affirmations imply disaffirmations (if we say something is “a horse,” for example, the implication is that the creature “is not a dog, or a cat”), however, in the case of the Absolute, this basic premise of language cannot apply because “the Absolute cannot be limited in any sense.”¹⁷ Thus, Wisse explains, “a theology which pursues an ontology of participation ... will always include a moment of negative theology.”¹⁸

In Wisse’s view, this leads to the contention that “if everything that is is something rather than something else, everything exists in that which has nothing opposite to it, because if not it would be opposite to the Absolute, which cannot be the case by definition.”¹⁹ To this effect, a second aspect of modern theologies based on an ontology of participation is that they posit that “*everything that is is in the Absolute*, and, as such, everything makes something visible of the Absolute that, as itself, remains invisible.”²⁰ Moreover, “things that exist in the world ... exist *in* the Absolute but they are not the Absolute itself” because “these things are relative and not Absolute.”²¹ When this aspect is functionalised in the economy of the Trinity, Wisse argues that we end up with a trinitarian formulation that reads something like this: “The moment of the Father is the moment of the Absolute, the moment of the Son is the moment of the *appearance* of the Absolute as something that is rather than is not. The moment of the Spirit is the moment of the *recognition of this appearance* of the Absolute in Being as the Son.”²²

Concerns about such “linear” conceptions of the economy of the Trinity aside, this leads Wisse to posit a third aspect of theological approaches based on an ontology of participation. This third aspect is what he calls the “epistemological flip side of participation and the identification of God with the Absolute”: the “*pan-mediation*” of the world.²³ He writes,

Trinitate and Contemporary Theology, was completed during a six-year postdoctoral fellowship at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) under the direction of Lieven Boeve.

¹⁵ Wisse, *TBP*, 8, emphasis original.

¹⁶ *TBP*, 8.

¹⁷ *TBP*, 8.

¹⁸ *TBP*, 8.

¹⁹ *TBP*, 8.

²⁰ *TBP*, 8, emphasis original.

²¹ *TBP*, 8.

²² *TBP*, 8, emphasis mine.

²³ *TBP*, 8, emphasis original.

If the relationship between the Absolute and the world is one in which the Absolute is transcendent and the world participates in it, then all cognitive access to the Absolute is through the world, and thus partial and mediated by the world. What this means is that *everything* that is reveals something of the Absolute. At the same time, *nothing* that is reveals the Absolute in full, or more than anything else. All knowledge is partial and contextual, but still all knowledge of created things tells something about its origin in the Absolute.²⁴

Wisse argues that modern theologies that favour an ontology of participation reflect all three of these aspects, and, as such, they present problematic ambiguities. While the moment of negation in trinitarian theologies of participation reflects a resistance, for example, of the characterisation of the Father in terms of human categories (because God can never be “equated to our human categories of knowledge and thought”), access to God is at the same time *mediated* by human categories in these approaches and, thus, the problem of projection is unavoidable, Wisse contends.²⁵ In such approaches, negatively, “God never appears ‘as such’,” but positively, “God will *always* appear in human categories of knowledge and thought.”²⁶ He explains that this problem is particularly evident in approaches that highlight “mirror structures” between God and human persons or communities (for example, in approaches that posit the relational nature of human beings as somehow reflective of trinitarian relations—recall the discussion of Moltmann’s work in chapter 6).²⁷ In these approaches, Wisse argues, “[w]hat is presented as a model in which the very being that God is, namely Trinity, is transferred from God to the created realm, is in practice virtually the same as the reverse: ideal forms of human society are transferred and projected upon the way in which God is.”²⁸ The result is the relativisation of the differences between God and world, and the potential positing of God and the human person on the same ontological plane (again, recall the discussion in chapter 6 on this very issue).

From a contextual perspective, one of Wisse’s concerns is that an ontology of participation can tend towards universalism, or at the very least, proffer Christian faith as countercultural. He writes,

If the description [that the world exists *in* God] is not just a general description of a God over and against the world, but of the Trinity itself, that is, the Christian God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, this turns the re-enchantment of the world into a very specific Christian way of speaking about the world we live in, making it clear what sort of difference it makes to believe in God in this way rather than another. Furthermore, the [recourse to] mirror structures ... make the spiritual praxis of the Church into a possible

²⁴ *TBP*, 8-9.

²⁵ *TBP*, 9. Wisse criticises the work of Denys Turner and Graham Ward for their ambiguous emphasis on negative theology, which, he contends, leads to circular reasoning and the positing of what is known about God over and above what is unknown. See *TBP*, 48-49.

²⁶ *TBP*, 9.

²⁷ *TBP*, 9.

²⁸ *TBP*, 9.

countermovement, in which a relational communitarian way of living is counterposed to the individualist and consumerist way of living that is dominant in Western society.²⁹

At the heart of these contextual criticisms is a concern to uphold the particularity of Christian faith in a context marked by religious and cultural plurality (thus, avoiding tendencies towards universal claims to truth), as well as a concern to eschew tendencies towards a wholly negative view of the current Western context. Wisse strongly asserts that Christian faith should be understood as an “option” in the contemporary cultural milieu, as this would “avoid an attempt to turn the Christian faith into an ideological best explanation of everything” and upholds the “freedom of assent” that is so central to a Christian understanding of faith.³⁰

Wisse contends that while trinitarian theology necessarily frames Christian faith and life, it must do so in a different way from the approaches offered to date. For Wisse, faith in Christ renews and restores human beings “according to the image of God in which we have been created,” indeed, transforms “our very being into the image of the Trinity.”³¹ This transformation “has the promise of restoring our relationships with other human beings,” he argues, making us “free to both love others without mastering them and to love ourselves without competing with others.”³² To this effect, Wisse contends that an understanding of the human person in *communion* with God, rather than as participating in God, is a more adequate way of explaining the implications of trinitarian faith for Christian life today.³³ For Wisse, this ensures a recognition that while the “Trinity lives in us through the Spirit, and we abide in it, ... God forever remains the other.”³⁴ He writes,

Communion, while retaining the distinction between the Trinity who God is and us, leaves us a true ‘space’ to live a truly human life. For being able to respect the otherness of the other in the relationship, we as human beings, both in the direction of God and in the direction of other human beings, need a certain realm of our own, where we can find the locus of our own freedom. An egoism that would turn our relationship to God and fellow humans into a competitive relationship, trying to manipulate the other, becomes superfluous because in our relationship with the Most High, we receive our own proper place, under God, a place that is still proper for our human condition. The remaining difference between Creator and creature guarantees this distinct realm for a true humanity.³⁵

Underscoring this passage is not only a concern to recognise the implications of a consideration of the ontological difference between God and the human person when reflecting on the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, but also a concern to avoid the assertion of the Christian

²⁹ *TBP*, 9. Charles Taylor provides a cogent discussion on the “disenchantment” of the world (he borrows Max Weber’s term to describe the modern condition of “secularity”). See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25.

³⁰ Wisse, *TBP*, 13.

³¹ *TBP*, 13.

³² *TBP*, 13.

³³ *TBP*, 313. Wisse undertakes a re-reading of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* in order to support his claim. He cites Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, 5 vols., vol. 1, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City Press, 1991).

³⁴ *TBP*, 313.

³⁵ *TBP*, 313.

narrative as a metanarrative that forgets its inadequacy in expressing the mystery of God. For Wisse, a recognition of the Trinity as “indwelling” need not lead to an ontological equation of God with the human person, nor should it lead to the positing of Christian faith over and against other religious traditions and worldviews. Instead, it leads to an explicit understanding of the mystery of God as Trinity and to a concomitant recognition of the intrinsic good of the human person. According to Wisse, faith in the Trinity renews and restores human beings according to the image of the Trinity, and this renews and restores the relationships that Christians have with others and with the world—it leads to a non-competitive way of being in the world.³⁶ On this account, “goodness takes priority over truth”: “knowledge is power, but justice cannot be so because, if it is power that hurts others, it cannot be justice,” Wisse argues.³⁷ Thus, the appeal of Christian faith in an increasingly pluralising world is not about Christian claims to truth, but about the Christian witness to the good.³⁸ For Wisse, the Tertullian adage, “See, how much they love another,” becomes central to “Christianity’s appeal to the world.”³⁹

In the discussion of Tanner’s and Coakley’s approaches, below, I note that both refer to notions of human participation in God, but, as we will see, they potentially avoid the concerns raised by Wisse.⁴⁰ Tanner, for example, places great emphasis on the ontological difference between God and the world, and offers a compelling understanding of the implications of a recognition of this difference for Christian life. Taking a very different approach, Coakley calls for an expansion of human rationality to recognise the need for the “un-mastery” of knowledge of God so as to come to a “new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge” that leads to a radical attentiveness to the “other.”⁴¹ In doing so, Coakley undermines tendencies to posit all-encompassing claims to truth and proposes that the mystery of God can only be recognised when notions of power are replaced with a true vulnerability in God.⁴²

Kathryn Tanner: A “Constructive” Trinitarian Theology

Kathryn Tanner is recognised as one of the most significant theologians of the past three decades.⁴³ Her disciplinary expertise include ethics, culture, social and political sciences, and gender studies, and she brings this interdisciplinary insight into her approach, which she categorises as “constructive

³⁶ *TBP*, 13, 313-14.

³⁷ *TBP*, 13, 313.

³⁸ *TBP*, 313.

³⁹ *TBP*, 14. See, also, 314. Wisse cites Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39.7.

⁴⁰ Indeed, Wisse posits, “[i]n theory, it would be possible to develop a Trinitarian and relational theology in which the world needs to be ordered along the lines of the Trinitarian character of God, without implying that this world has its ontological status *in* God. *TBP*, 8.

⁴¹ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 43.

⁴² *GSS*, 23.

⁴³ For a recent tribute to Tanner’s work, see Rosemary P. Carbine and Hilda P. Koster, eds., *The Gift of Theology: The Contribution of Kathryn Tanner* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015).

theology.”⁴⁴ By her own account, her concerns are similar to those of modern political and feminist theologians, but her approach differs from them in the ways in which it draws from history to “rework[-] Christian ideas and symbols to meet present challenges.”⁴⁵ Her task, as she sees it, is to discern “the various ways Christian beliefs and symbols ... function in the particulars of people's lives so as to direct and provide support for the shape of social life and the course of social action.”⁴⁶ Her approach moves beyond the methodological concerns of modern correlation theologies in that it recognises the myriad ways in which Christians understand and live their faith in the world.⁴⁷ Constructive theology, Tanner contends, requires “a willingness to make constructive claims of a substantive sort through the critical reworking of Christian ideas and symbols to address the challenges of today's world, a willingness to venture a new Christian account of the world and our place in it with special attention to the most pressing problems and issues of contemporary life.”⁴⁸ She explains that in her approach, “the premodern, the popular, the global and the ecumenical are put to use to shake up, reorient and expand what one would have thought one could do with the Christian symbol system, in the effort to figure out what it is proper for Christians to think and do in today's world.”⁴⁹ Put simply, Tanner uses an interdisciplinary approach, which includes socio-political theory, to recast the Christian symbol system so that it can better respond to contemporary issues.⁵⁰

Tanner's work reflects a postmodern philosophical lens, particularly in relation to her understanding of culture and her recognition of the influence of the diversity of cultures (both between and within communities) on the development of contemporary Christian worldviews and

⁴⁴ Kathryn Tanner, “Christian Claims: How My Mind Has Changed,” *The Christian Century* 127, no. 4 (2010): 41. Constructive theology defies definition to some extent, but it stems from a desire to move away from “systematising” theologies, towards the recognition of social context, plurality and the role of dialogue in the process of meaning-making. As Jason W. Wyman Jr. explains, “Constructive theology is an attempt to create an open-minded, context specific variety of theology that is an ongoing conversation made up of many voices rather than a single systematic description of the nature of God and the world's relation to it.” While constructive theology “is indebted to both dogmatic and systematic theology,” it considers “grand systems [to be] inherently fallacious when faced with the actual pluralistic lived experiences of Christianity, across cultures and people as well as across history.” The variations among constructive theologians is great: “Some claim to be systematic constructive theologians [as we will see, Tanner is perhaps one of these], or both systematic and constructive theologians. Others reject ‘systematic’ outright as an outdated way of doing theology.” Jason A. Wyman Jr, *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), xi, xxvii, x.

⁴⁵ Tanner, “Christian Claims,” 43.

⁴⁶ “Christian Claims,” 41.

⁴⁷ “It is impossible to understand [the] meaning and social point [of Christian ways of living] without understanding the culture of the wider society and what Christian habits of speech and action are saying about it through modifications made to it. ... Theological construction—figuring out what it is that Christians should say and do in the present context—therefore requires a highly complicated and subtle reading of the whole cultural field in which Christianity figures.” “Christian Claims,” 44.

⁴⁸ “Christian Claims,” 40.

⁴⁹ “Christian Claims,” 43.

⁵⁰ “Christian Claims,” 41. This aim is particularly evident in her recent book, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). There, she explores economic inequality, the debt economy, and structural under- and unemployment from the perspective of Christian faith. Note that Tanner argues against using the Trinity as a basis for a socio-political theology, opting instead for the use of Christology in this regard. See “Social Trinitarianism,” 371, 72.

on the consideration of Christian life and praxis. In *Theories of Culture*, she argues that Christian identity “can no longer be determined by group specificity, sharp cultural boundaries, or homogeneity of practices,” as Christian identity (much like general cultural identity) is determined by the recognition of difference.⁵¹ In this context, Christian identity and Christian practices are shaped not by “agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship, but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out.”⁵² She cautions that any theology that proposes “what the Word of God requires at a particular place and time” must “remain open for new movements of faithfulness to a free Word” because “what it really means to be a Christian ... cannot be summed up in any neat formula that would allow one to know already what Christian discipleship will prove to include or exclude over the course of time.”⁵³

In the first of her systematic (constructive) theologies, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, Tanner aims to offer “a consistent Christian outlook on life and the corresponding character of human responsibilities,” but with the caveat that we have just outlined (that it remain open to recognising new ways that “faithfulness to the free Word” might be lived).⁵⁴ Her reconsideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life centres on an understanding of God as “the giver of all good gifts,” where “creation, covenant [and] salvation in Christ represent[-] a greater communication of goodness to the creature and the overcoming of any sinful opposition to these gifts’ distribution.”⁵⁵ For Tanner, the suffering and moral failings reflected in the contemporary context “are purified, remedied, and reworked through the gifts of God’s grace.”⁵⁶ In this way, “the world is perfected and brought into closer relations with the God who perfects it.”⁵⁷

Tanner identifies two general principles that underpin her theological vision: “firstly, a non-competitive relation between creatures and God, and secondly, a radical interpretation of divine transcendence.”⁵⁸ The first principle relates to the distinction between God and creature. She argues, “[t]he distinctness of the creature is ... the consequence of relationship with God as its creator; here difference is the product of unity, of what brings together, of relationship.”⁵⁹ While God’s transcendence implies that God and creature are “on different planes of causality,” the difference

⁵¹ *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 151-52.

⁵² *Theories*, 153.

⁵³ *Theories*, 155.

⁵⁴ “Christian Claims,” 42. *Both* constructive and systematic (see note 44, above). *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), see xvii-xviii, 1. Her second systematic theology to date is *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁵ *JHT*, 1, 2.

⁵⁶ *JHT*, 2.

⁵⁷ *JHT*, 2.

⁵⁸ *JHT*, 2, see 2-4.

⁵⁹ *JHT*, 3.

between God and creature is affirmed and perfected in the divine-human relationship.⁶⁰ The recognition of this difference affirms the fullness of God's agency in creation, while at the same time affirming the agency of the human person in moving towards perfect relationship with God. For Tanner, grace is central to the relationship between God and the human person because God is the provider of all that humanity is: "the creature in its giftedness, in its goodness, does not compete with God's gift-fullness and goodness because God is the giver of all that the creature is for the good."⁶¹ Her argument for the recognition of a non-competitive relationship between God and creature avoids any ontological conflation of God and world and affirms the active agency of the human person in accepting God's grace. She writes,

God does not give on the same plane of being and activity as creatures, as one among other givers and therefore God is not in potential competition (or co-operation) with them. Non-competitiveness among creatures—their co-operation on the same plane of causality—always brings with it the potential for competition: Since I perform part of what needs to be done and you perform the rest, to the extent I act, you need not; and the more I act, the less you need to. Even when we co-operate, therefore, our actions involve a kind of competitive either/or of scope and extent. Unlike this co-operation among creatures, relations with God are utterly non-competitive because God, from beyond this plane of created reality, brings about the *whole* plane of creaturely being and activity in its goodness. The creature's receiving from God does not then require its passivity in the world: God's activity as the giver of ourselves need not come at the expense of our own activity. Instead, the creature receives from God its very activity as a good.⁶²

According to Tanner, the human person is not an agent of God in bringing about the perfection of the world; instead, human persons are perfected and brought into relationship with God, and in doing so, overflow with the gifts given by the creator. She explains that "what makes God different from us enables closeness with us, ... [a]nd closeness, from God's side, establishes difference."⁶³ In this way, she argues, "because God differs differently" from the ways in which human persons differ (by virtue of the incarnation, a theme to which we will turn shortly), "the characteristics that distinguish God from creatures need not be covered over or held in abeyance, God's characteristics need not be made more like those of our common life, for God to be brought near to us, indeed to become one with us."⁶⁴ Here, we can identify in Tanner's approach a desire to move away from the mono-correlational theologies of modernity, a theme that is also reflected in her discussion of the second principle that underpins her approach.

Tanner's second principle—a radical interpretation of divine transcendence, which functions as "a precondition to the first"—considers God to be beyond any contrasts that can be made

⁶⁰ "The perfection of created life, the perfection of the creature in its difference from God, increases with the perfection of relationship with God." *JHT*, 3.

⁶¹ *JHT*, 3.

⁶² *JHT*, 3-4.

⁶³ *JHT*, 13.

⁶⁴ *JHT*, 13.

between God and creatures.⁶⁵ For Tanner, the recognition of God's transcendence "avoids either simple identity or contrast with the qualities of creatures" and affirms the non-competitive relations between them.⁶⁶ She writes, "God is not a kind of thing among other kinds of things; only if God is transcendent in that way does it make sense to think that God can be the giver of all kinds of things and manners of existence; and only on that basis, in turn—God as the giver of all gifts—does it make sense to think of a non-competitive relation between God and creatures."⁶⁷ Again, the desire to eschew the correlational tendencies of modern theology is reflected here, particularly in terms of Tanner's understanding of the relationship between God and the human person. While some modern approaches (especially political and liberation theologies) emphasise Christ's humanity over his divinity and, in doing so, seek to reduce the differences between God and humankind, Tanner aims to avoid any contention that human persons or communities imitate Christ as if he is merely a model for Christian life (his divinity "down-played").⁶⁸ In the same vein, in her discussion of the Christological implications for the relationship between God and creature, Tanner contends that the case of Christ "has its own irreducible distinctiveness": it is "not an instance of a general relationship found everywhere; it is not the highest point on a continuous grade of relationships between God and the world."⁶⁹ Against Rahner, she contends that Christ is not merely the irrevocable and irreversible pledge, guarantee and climax of the movement from God to creatures and from creatures to God"; rather, "the movement takes place throughout the world, from its very beginning, by virtue of God's grace."⁷⁰

The principle of divine transcendence underscores Tanner's conception of the incarnation. She argues that it is God's radical transcendence that enables the incarnation, the union of God with what is not God. She writes,

Only what is not a kind—and therefore not bound by the usual differences between natures—can bring together in the most intimate unity divinity and humanity. Because divinity is not a kind, God is not bound by apparent contrasts between divine and creaturely qualities; God is thereby free to enter into intimate community with us, without loss to the divine nature, without sacrificing the difference between God and us.⁷¹

⁶⁵ *JHT*, 2, 11. Recall the discussion in Ch. 2, on the nature of the theological *via eminentiae* and philosophical *hyperphasis*.

⁶⁶ *JHT*, 4.

⁶⁷ *JHT*, 4.

⁶⁸ *JHT*, 8. As we will see, later, Coakley charges Tanner with this very issue (she contends that Tanner offers a theology of imitation). See Sarah Coakley, "Why Gift? Gift, Gender and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (2008): 232-33. See also, n. 89 and 98 in the present chapter.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *JHT*, 7.

⁷⁰ *JHT*, 7, n.10. She "contest[s] the apparently continuous character of the relationship that joins, for Rahner, what happens in Christ with what goes on throughout the whole of creation as the recipient of God's grace." Her particular concern with Rahner is that "he assimilates those general graces too much to what happens in Christ," whereas, she argues, "creation generally and from the beginning has too much."

⁷¹ *JHT*, 11.

Tanner cites Henk Schoot, who contends, with Barth and Aquinas, that God's transcendence "undermines the opposition between transcendence and immanence, because God is not transcendent in such a way that God is simply 'outside of' or 'above' the world, and thus not transcendent in such a way that it would exclude God's 'descent' into the world."⁷² God's transcendence and immanence, therefore, creates and establishes both "closeness" and difference between God and humankind.⁷³

A recognition of the radical transcendence of God and the distinction between God and creatures has profound implications for human life, according to Tanner. Explaining in trinitarian terms how this comes to be, Tanner contends that the Father, as creator of the world, sends the Son and the Spirit into the world as an "extension" of trinitarian relations.⁷⁴ As the Son is "the image of the Father," the world is the "image of the Son" and the Spirit opens the relations of the Father and Son into the world, carrying "the love of Father and Son to us."⁷⁵ In accepting God's gracious gift of this love, the human person *acts* with love, spreading God's gifts out into the world.⁷⁶ Tanner's words, here, reflect the nuances of her argument:

The Father creates the world and sends the Son to us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit to dwell in us through Jesus—all as a kind of extension outside God of the way the Father is the source of the Son and Spirit within the Trinity. The Son is the image of the Father—all that the Father is in differentiation from the Father—so the world is the image of the Son in virtue of the Father's relations with the world through the Son—created through the Son, saved through the Son of God become Son of Man. The Holy Spirit in the Trinity, pushing beyond the dyadic self-enclosure of Father and Son, opens that Trinity outward to what is other than God. Reinforcing the unity of being between Father and Son by a unity of love and joyful affirmation, the Holy Spirit is the exuberant, ecstatic carrier of the love of Father and Son to us. Borne by the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father for the Son is returned to the Father by the Son within the Trinity; so the triune God's manifestation in the world is completed in Christ through the work of the Spirit who enables us to return the love of God shown in Christ through a life lived in gratitude and service to God's cause.⁷⁷

Through the perfection of humanity in Christ—the unity of God with what is "other than God"—Tanner contends that "God's gifts are distributed to us" through the Holy Spirit so that we might use them "in gratitude and service to God's cause."⁷⁸ In other words, human gratitude to God as giver is given not to God but to the "other." Here, Tanner engages Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epectasis*, which denotes the stretching of human capacities towards perfection in God. Gregory writes,

⁷² Henk Schoot, *Christ the 'Name of God': Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 144-5, cited in Tanner, *JHT*, 12.

⁷³ *JHT*, 13.

⁷⁴ *JHT*, 14.

⁷⁵ *JHT*, 14.

⁷⁶ The world cannot "fill up God" in the way that God fills up the world with goodness. Humankind, as receivers of the gifts, can only offer these gifts to others in the world. *JHT*, 43. There can be no reciprocity in the relationship between giver and receiver, as this would imply a competitive relation. See *JHT*, 2-3.

⁷⁷ *JHT*, 14.

⁷⁸ *JHT*, 9, 14.

“participation in the divine good is such that ... it makes the participant ever greater and more spacious than before. ... [E]verything that flows in produces an increase in capacity.”⁷⁹ Through the bestowal of gifts to the world—the gifts that permeate trinitarian relations—God moves the world towards perfection, and the free acceptance of these gifts by believers empowers them to participate in God’s work of transformation. Tanner explains, “United with Christ, we are ... emboldened as ministers of God’s beneficence to the world, aligning ourselves with, entering into communion with, those in need.”⁸⁰ In other words, human persons, brought into closer relationship with God through God’s bountiful gifts, give to others with the hope that these gifts will form the basis of their own giving: “one gives to them for their empowerment as givers in turn.”⁸¹

Central to Tanner’s political argument is that God does not need anything from humankind—she cites Barth, noting that “God does not so much want something *of* us as want to be *with* us”—however, she argues that the *world* needs something from us (as human persons), especially as our sins “hinder the world’s reception of God’s gifts.”⁸² Tanner proposes that God is not changed in any way by a person’s acceptance of grace, but the *person* is transformed: God assists the person to “overcome[-] sin and its effects” so that his or her life might reflect “the complete communication of God’s gifts that transpires among the members of the Trinity.”⁸³ Human persons are therefore called to “engage in an active fellowship or partnership with the Father through our union with Christ the Son and in Christ’s Spirit.”⁸⁴ Acceptance of God’s gifts aligns the person freely and self-consciously to his or her humanity, as created in God’s image, so that the person, in turn, might participate in God’s abundant overflow of gifts into the world.⁸⁵ Put simply, God’s gifts are a “gratuitous trinitarian

⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Soul and Resurrection,” PG 46.105B-C, trans. H. Musurillo, as cited in Tanner, *JHT*, 43.

⁸⁰ *JHT*, 9. “As God in Christ was *for us* in our need and as Christ was a man for others, especially those in need.” While it is beyond the scope of the present work to explore in detail the current discussion on the gift, it is worth noting that such a discussion seems to underpin Tanner’s approach (although she does not explicitly state as much in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*). A helpful summary of the basis of the relationship between gift and responsibility for the other can be found in Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. John D. Caputo, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 183. Horner writes, “To read responsibility as a response to a gift (of self, of life, of the world), it must be protected from identification, for otherwise the gift will be undone. That in responding I receive myself as a gift must always be undecidable—it could be a given or a gift, and therefore I need posit no donor. If I see it as a gift, rather than a given, there can be no response out of indebtedness, but only a response of giving if that response forms the gift itself. In other words, if I give, it can only be because I have been gifted with the capacity to give, not because I feel that I must give back. The saying from 1 John [4:19] can thus be read, not that we love God because God first loved us and we have so been obliged, but that we love God because God in loving enables us to love. And even if just the capacity to give is the gift, it must not be returned. Levinas’s conversion of desire here becomes very important. Goodness does not return to the Infinite but is lavished upon the undesirable Other. Therefore my giving must always remain undecidable. I must never know whether or not I truly give, for otherwise I could rest rewarded by self-congratulation.”

⁸¹ Tanner, *JHT*, 90.

⁸² *JHT*, 68, 69. Tanner cites Karl Barth, *Ethics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981): 462.

⁸³ *JHT*, 15.

⁸⁴ *JHT*, 70.

⁸⁵ *JHT*, 70. Note the nuanced use of “participation” here. We will return to this, below.

overflow” into the life of the person, the person is invited to give these gifts into the world as a “reflection in action of our assumption into Christ,” and in doing so, we participate in God’s transformation of the world and come into closer union with God.⁸⁶ Returning to the conception of the difference between God and creature, Tanner contends that the closeness and difference that is found in the complete unity of trinitarian relations overflows into relations between God and the world and becomes the “prototype” for all relationships: God gives so that we might give, so that we might participate in the “superabundance” of trinitarian love flowing out into the world.⁸⁷

We have noted Tanner’s desire to move away from mono-correlational approaches that result in the conflation of the characteristics of God and the human person, as well as her rejection of the ontological conflation of God and the world prevalent in such approaches. In many ways, her “constructive” trinitarian theology does resonate with social trinitarianism (recall the discussion in chapter 6), but as we have seen, it differs somewhat in its nuances.⁸⁸ In her contribution to *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology*, Tanner criticises “social” models of the Trinity not only for their too-easy correlations between human communities and trinitarian relations, but also for their tendencies towards communitarianism, whereby humanity itself, for all of its differences, is subsumed within community.⁸⁹ Moreover, with their return to biblical sources in order to ground their trinitarian theology in the economy of salvation, Tanner argues that some social trinitarians unwittingly reinforce gendered stereotypes and subsume the identity of one gender (female) into the other (male) in order to highlight the essential relatedness of human persons.⁹⁰ What these theologians miss, Tanner contends, is a recognition of the radical difference between God and humankind, and the *difference* that this difference actually makes in terms of our relation to God.⁹¹ Participation in the Trinity, for Tanner, goes beyond imitating the divine community. Instead, it comes as result of the incarnation:

In Christ the Trinity enters our world to work over human life in its image, through the incorporation of the human within the divine Trinitarian life. By joining us to those relations, Christ gives us the very relations of Father, Son and Spirit for our own. By becoming incarnate, the second person of the Trinity takes the humanity joined to it into its own relations with Father and Spirit, and therefore, in Christ, we are shown what the Trinity looks like when it includes the human, and what humanity looks like when it is included in the

⁸⁶ *JHT*, 68, 71.

⁸⁷ *JHT*, 13, 14, 8.

⁸⁸ See Ch. 6, p. 184.

⁸⁹ Tanner, “Social Trinitarianism,” 372. Coakley questions Tanner’s use of difference as a category for thinking about the relationship between God and human persons, and, thus, *between* human persons. She argues that Tanner’s theology, “is notably *sanitising* of difference of any sort. ... The primary model for the Trinity is that of non-competition”; there is no hint of *kenotic* reflexivity between the divine persons, of mutual relations of submission and response. ... [The] erasure of the motif of ‘exchange’ [results in] the effective obliteration of distinguishing ‘differences’ of *relation* both in God (qua persons of the Trinity) and in us (qua even-ing out difference of resources out of ‘our’ plenitude).” Coakley, “Why Gift?,” 232-33.

⁹⁰ Tanner, “Social Trinitarianism,” 375.

⁹¹ “Social Trinitarianism,” 278-81.

Trinity's own movements—the character of a human life with others when it takes a Trinitarian form.⁹²

The radical inclusivity reflected in Tanner's approach affirms and upholds the differences between human persons because the trinitarian relations are constituted by both difference and unity.⁹³ By drawing humankind into the relations of the Trinity, God enables the preservation of both unity and difference in the relationship between the human person and God and between human persons. Tanner's approach reflects a theology of the Trinity which is constitutive of human relations and which, at the same time, serves as an ethical mandate: the gratuitous giving of God to the world—the overflow of unconditional love—leads (in freedom) to a Christian responsibility to multiply these gifts and give them, in turn, outwards into the world.

Strengths and Limitations of Tanner's Approach

Tanner's trinitarian theology offers a promising perspective on the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. In her approach, the gift of faith comes with more gracious gifts from God that "fill up" the human person with goodness and bring the human person to greater heights of perfection in God (recall the above mention of her retrieval of Gregory of Nyssa's notion of *epektasis*). As a result, faith-filled human persons are gifted with the abilities necessary to be more perfectly human in their relationships with each other and with the world. The "overflowing" of goodness that marks Christian faith leads Christians to live in the world as reflections of God's love for the world. More than simply about the perfection of the individual, Tanner's trinitarian theology is about the recognition of the Christian responsibility towards the "other." When Christians are enabled in faith to live in the world as reflections of God's love for the world, Christian life necessarily becomes focused on the inclusion of others into divine love, but without needing to subsume these others (through conversion) into the Christian narrative. There are, of course, concerns with this approach in terms of the elevation of the Christian as the bearer of gifts by virtue of faith. Against such a reading, Tanner insists that God "does not so much require something of us as want to give to us."⁹⁴ All of humankind are offered the same gifts by virtue of their humanity, and the difference comes with their acceptance or rejection of such gifts.

In chapter 6, I introduced three theological horizons that Graham Ward contends are opened by postmodern thinking. To re-iterate, Ward argues that the dialogue between theology and

⁹² "Social Trinitarianism," 382. While there seems to be some ambiguity, here, in terms of Tanner's contention that the human person is "incorporated" within the divine trinitarian life and my contention that she avoids Wisse's concerns about an ontology of participation in contemporary trinitarian theology, Tanner's discussion in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* provides helpful nuance. There, she contends that in Christ, the human person is "[i]ncorporated within the indivisible workings of the Trinity *ad extra* through Christ [and] our lives are similarly set in motion." See *JHT*, 70.

⁹³ In this regard, Tanner's approach has some affinity with Lieven Boeve's conception of "constitutive difference." See p. 135 in the present work.

⁹⁴ Tanner, *JHT*, 69.

postmodern philosophy has drawn attention to i) “the role of the unsayable and unrepresentable as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented”; ii) “the self as ... never self-enclosed but always open onto that which transcends its own self-understanding”; and iii) “the movement of desire initiated and fostered by the other, that which lies outside and for future possession, the other which is also prior and cannot be gathered into the rational folds of present consciousness.”⁹⁵

Tanner’s approach certainly recognises the transcendence of self and the “otherness” of the other (in line with Ward’s second and third horizons). By offering a theological understanding of the differences between human persons and a redefinition of the political implications of Christian life in this regard, Tanner proposes a way forward by which differences between human persons and communities might be maintained, while enabling the particular understanding of God in the Christian narrative to shape Christian life. Through her employment of the concept of gift, Tanner avoids any notion of reciprocity in relation to the Christian outpouring of God’s love.⁹⁶ Perfected by the relations of the Trinity, the Christian outpouring of love occurs not in the desire to convert the “other” to Christian faith, as such (thereby returning the gift), but in the desire to witness to faith in a God who is so profoundly relational that all relationships are transformed.

Ward’s first theological horizon—“the role of the unsayable and unrepresentable ...”—is perhaps not so evident in Tanner’s approach. There is a certain apophysis in her recognition of divine gift-giving as an outpouring of God’s “superabundance” of love into the world, but this abundance seems to be reflected only in and through the subsequent outpouring of gifts from the Christian, as a result of his or her assent in faith. Considering all that we have discussed thus far in the present work, is it not possible that the “other” becomes gift, challenging and stirring the Christian to new ways of thinking about God? Tanner’s unilateral notion of gift, which moves from God through the believer to the other, does not seem to allow for this. While she does insist that God does not “require something of us” but wants “to give to us,” thus implying that God’s “superabundance” of love is poured out into the world despite the actions of Christians in response, she does not discuss how such a gift might be manifest *outside* a particularly Christian response in faith.⁹⁷ Not only does this potentially lead to a paternalistic relationship between Christians and those who hold other faith perspectives and worldviews, but it also ignores potential ways that God might be recognised *outside* the Christian narrative. In the political and liberation theologies of modernity, the face of Christ was understood to be reflected in the vulnerable “other,” and this became the basis of Christian praxis. One might ask where this vulnerability lies in Tanner’s approach. Here, the “vulnerable other” is potentially at the mercy of Christian agency.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Ward, “Postmodern Theology,” 325.

⁹⁶ See n. 80 in the present chapter.

⁹⁷ Tanner, *JHT*, 69.

⁹⁸ Coakley’s criticism of Tanner proceeds along similar lines, but Coakley questions, in addition, Tanner’s unilateral understanding of gift and her “determined erasure of the motif of ‘exchange’.” See, again, n.80,

A final consideration in my discussion of Tanner's work relates to the role of prayer in Christian life. In Tanner's approach, prayer is certainly not absent—she contends that through the Spirit, we are able to pray to the Father with Christ “the very prayer that Jesus prays to his Father as the Son,” and she lists prayer among the acts by which the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ.⁹⁹ However, these references are fleeting at best; they do little in terms of considering the implications of prayer for deepening the relationship with God and for forming Christian life towards the other. In contrast, Coakley's approach is centred on the notion of prayer, and it is to this that we now turn.

Sarah Coakley: A Contemplative Approach to the Trinity

In the first volume of Sarah Coakley's systematic theology, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity,'* we find a very different approach to trinitarian theology from that of Tanner.¹⁰⁰ Like Tanner, Coakley is highly influential as a contemporary theologian. Her work integrates systematic theology, sociology, gender studies and philosophy of religion, and she is particularly known for her expertise in patristic sources.¹⁰¹ Unlike Tanner, who begins with questions of context and seeks to provide a direction for Christian life and practice within such a context, Coakley turns to the Christian practice of prayer to consider how it might reorient, transform and empower Christian life today. She argues that theology “cannot simply be ‘conformed to the world’ and its current philosophical or cultural presumptions without a remaining excess of meaning, and an implicit critique of that ‘world.’”¹⁰² Beyond the “false alternatives” of fideism and secularism, Coakley considers theology and

above). Coakley writes, “Where is the Cappadocian perception that our whole life is ‘indebted’ to God from the outset, and that in giving ... we receive back far more from the ‘poor’ than we ourselves have given (for we receive Christ in them: see Mt 25:40)?” Coakley, “Why Gift?,” 223. Coakley argues that while Tanner presents her approach as a theology of participation in the Trinity, it more closely resembles imitation (*mimesis*). She contends that “Tanner’s principles of divine ‘non-competition’ and ‘transcendence’ ... seemingly imply an unwillingness to *explain* ‘participation’ at all.” “Why Gift?,” 228. As I have noted, Tanner’s argument is somewhat ambiguous in this regard. While she argues that the Christian is “incorporated within the workings *ad extra* of the Trinity,” at the same time, she contends that Christians act as agents and reflections of God. Tanner, *JHT*, 67, also see 70. Consider the following passage: “Reflecting in our own lives the goodness of God’s own triune being, we do so as the free active agents we are. Our agency is part of the gifts God gives in imitation of God’s own dynamic life; we reflect, then, the goodness of God in those actions. ... [H]umans, at their best, reflect the goodness of God by a self-conscious and freely chosen active alignment of what they are with God’s gift-giving to them. ... Our assumption by Christ has as its whole point such a correspondence in action between Christ’s life and ours: we are to live our lives in community with Christ’s life as that is demonstrated in all that we think, feel and do. Our lives are to be the reflection in action of our assumption into Christ.” *JHT*, 70, 71. Here, Christians are presented as being at the same time aligned with Christ, assumed by Christ, and the reflection of Christ. While the connections with a theology of participation are strong, Tanner’s guiding principle of the difference between God and the human person seems to preclude an *ontology* of participation in the sense that human persons are subsumed into God (*vis-à-vis* Wisse’s criticism).⁹⁹ *JHT*, 62, 73.

¹⁰⁰ Coakley, *GSS*.

¹⁰¹ Coakley has published widely, with 16 books to date, over 40 book chapters and dozens of journal articles. She held the chair of Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge from 2007-2018. For a helpful appraisal of Coakley’s work, and a collection of essays about her theological influence, see Janice McRandal, ed. *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

¹⁰² Coakley, *GSS*, 16.

secular (modern and postmodern) philosophy to exist in a “contrapuntal” relationship, where their ongoing interaction serves to deepen and challenge Christian life.¹⁰³ In this interaction, she argues, the “bodily and spiritual practice of prayer” deepens the theological vision, transforms Enlightenment-style notions of rationality, and leads to “certain distinctive ways of knowing.”¹⁰⁴ It is a theology “*in via*,” Coakley contends, “always undoing and redoing itself, not only in response to shifting current events, but because of the deepening of vision” that emerges in silent contemplative prayer.¹⁰⁵ In short, Coakley argues that the practice of contemplative prayer leads the pray-er towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and the world, to the subversion of mis-ordered desire and to his or her cooperation in God’s transformation of the world.

Coakley takes Paul’s understanding of prayer in Romans 8 as the starting point for her “*théologie totale*.”¹⁰⁶ She notes that Paul presents an “‘incorporative’, or ‘reflexive’,” understanding of prayer that begins with a recognition of “the cooperative action of the praying Christian with the energising promptings of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁷ She extends Paul’s insights to argue that in relatively wordless contemplative (or charismatic) prayer, the trinitarian life of God is revealed and the unity and distinction of persons is affirmed.¹⁰⁸ On this view, the economy of the Trinity is not linear, but a “movement of divine reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays.”¹⁰⁹ Coakley explains,

What is being described in Paul is *one* experience of an activity of prayer that is nonetheless ineluctably, though obscurely, triadic. It is *one* experience of God, but God as simultaneously (i) doing the praying in me, (ii) receiving that prayer, and (iii) in that exchange, consented to in me, inviting me into the Christic life of redeemed sonship. Or to put it another way: the ‘Father’ ... is both source and ultimate object of divine longing in us; the ‘Spirit’ is that irreducibly—though obscurely—distinct enabler and incorporator of that longing in creation—that which *makes* the creation divine; and the ‘Son’ is that divine and perfected creation, into whose life I, as pray-er, am caught up.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ GSS, 18.

¹⁰⁴ GSS, 17, 19. A “theology *in via* [is] founded not in secular rationality but in spiritual practices of attention that mysteriously challenge and *expand* the range of rationality, and simultaneously darken and break one’s hold on previous certainties.” GSS, 33.

¹⁰⁵ GSS, 18-19.

¹⁰⁶ Coakley’s use of the phrase, “*théologie totale*,” to describe her approach refers not to notions of totalisation (political speaking), but to her desire to uncover the breath of theological thought and practice, “an attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression.” GSS, 48. I discuss the implications of this later in the present chapter.

¹⁰⁷ GSS, 111, 112.

¹⁰⁸ “[W]hat is going on here is not three distinguishable types of ‘experience’ (in the sense of emotional tonality), each experience relating to a different point of identity’ Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ ... [but] *one* experience of an activity of prayer.” “Living Into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer and Sexuality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (1998): 226.

¹⁰⁹ GSS, 113. Coakley contrasts her model with the “‘linear’ revelatory model,” which focuses on the relationship between Father and Son, and presents the Spirit as the extension of the revelation of Christ in the Church. See GSS, 111.

¹¹⁰ “Living Into,” 226. See also GSS, 114.

In Paul's understanding of prayer, Coakley notes that priority is given to the Spirit as "the primary means of incorporation into the trinitarian life of God."¹¹¹ The Spirit intercedes for us in prayer (see Rom 8:26-27), activating, enabling and sustaining the activity of prayer, and it is through the "reflexive" work of the Spirit in the pray-er that creation is "caught up" into the life of God.¹¹² Building on Paul, she argues that the Spirit is not reduced to "the Father's outreach" (as it is understood in "linear" models), nor presented as a hypostasis of a relationship that flows between the Father and the Son; instead, the Spirit is understood to be radically personal from the outset.¹¹³ She writes: "There is something, admittedly obscure, about the sustained activity of prayer that makes one want to claim that it is personally and divinely activated from within, and yet that that activation (the 'Spirit') is not quite *reducible* to that from which it flows (the 'Father')."¹¹⁴ In Coakley's approach, the Spirit is conceived as a "distinguishing hiatus: both within God and in God's relations to creation": "[The Spirit] is what makes God irreducibly *three*, simultaneously distinguishing and binding Father and Son ... its love presses not only outwards to include others, but also inwards (and protectively) to sustain the difference between the persons, thus preserving a perfect and harmonious balance between unity and distinction."¹¹⁵

For Coakley, the Spirit is the eruption (or interruption) of God into the world, who is revealed in the abyss of silent contemplative prayer as the One who transforms the human person and draws the person into "a particular form of human participation" that moves beyond "direct human imitation."¹¹⁶ What is required on the part of the pray-er is "a delicate ceding to something precisely not done by oneself," she argues.¹¹⁷ It requires a "deliberate waiting on the divine" in silent contemplation or charismatic prayer so as to witness the "call and response of divine desire" that draws and incorporates the pray-er into the life of the 'Son.'¹¹⁸ Coakley draws again from Paul (Romans 8:19-25) to argue that in this model, the term 'Son' connotes "the divine life of Christ into which the whole creation, animate and inanimate, is tending, and into which it is being progressively transformed."¹¹⁹ 'Sonship,' on this view, is not restricted to a sense of the human life of Jesus, nor the "mystical 'body of Christ'" (the Church), but "includes the full cosmological implications of the incarnation": the movement of all of creation to its final end in God.¹²⁰ As we will see, Coakley argues

¹¹¹ GSS, 111.

¹¹² GSS, 111.

¹¹³ GSS, 112.

¹¹⁴ GSS, 112.

¹¹⁵ GSS, 24. Coakley here foregrounds Denys the Areopagite's notion of God as "difference-in-unity," an insight to which we shall return shortly.

¹¹⁶ GSS, 23. Coakley refers explicitly to "the divine 'interruption' of the Spirit." See GSS, 344.

¹¹⁷ GSS, 113.

¹¹⁸ GSS, 113.

¹¹⁹ GSS, 113.

¹²⁰ GSS, 114. While there seems to be a hint of an ontology of participation, here, Coakley's approach differs from those of modern political theologies in this regard, as it points to a dynamic interplay between a low and a high Christology. See below for a discussion on Coakley's conception of participation.

that a contemplative approach has radical implications for Christian life, as it transforms and interrupts modern idolatries and leads to fresh thought about the relationship between God and the world.¹²¹

The use of a prayer-based approach to consider the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life leads to what Coakley calls an “earthed sense” of the truth and meaning of trinitarian faith.¹²² She traces the insights from Romans 8 through the works of the Patristics, sociological sources and iconography, and in doing so, aims to demonstrate that the approach is not an appeal to subjective experience but instead “contributes to an expanded objectivity.”¹²³ From there, she presents a theology of divine desire that emerges from her investigations and applies the insights to current social and ecclesiastical concerns. According to Coakley, a theology of the Trinity that emerges from this approach leads to a reconstructed vision of the participation of the human person in the triune God and provides a potential response to issues facing human communities today.

In her consideration of the patristic sources, Coakley finds an “incorporative” trinitarian model of prayer in the writings of Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and the mystics. She notes Origen’s use of Paul’s approach when he insists on the primacy of the Spirit in moving the pray-er beyond narrow “human rationality” and allowing the pray-er to partake of the Word.¹²⁴ Moreover, she contends that the Spirit is linked with procreation in Origen’s work, so that we see a “nexus of association” between the Spirit, prayer, gender roles and human desire.¹²⁵ In the work of Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, Coakley uncovers a latent incorporative theology with what she contends are “metaphors of divine outreach and a human responsive ascent,” although she notes that these differ somewhat in their nuances.¹²⁶ In his later works, Athanasius affirms the Spirit’s equality with Father and Son in the Godhead and, according to Coakley, the “incorporative ‘adoption’ into Sonship by the Spirit” becomes an important theme.¹²⁷ In Gregory’s work, the apophatic impetus of contemplative prayer comes to the fore, with the Spirit understood to advance the contemplative into the “darkness of incomprehensibility,” while in Augustine’s work (especially in *De Trinitate*), divine desire proceeds from the Father in the Holy Spirit, “inflaming us with love.”¹²⁸ Coakley notes that the theme of incorporation continues through the work of medieval mystics, such

¹²¹ GSS, 24.

¹²² “Living Into,” 223.

¹²³ GSS, 26.

¹²⁴ GSS, 127. The use of the term “human rationality,” here, refers to Coakley’s contention that her approach moves beyond Enlightenment-style rationality, towards an expanded notion of rationality that includes the recognition of experience in rational thinking (see n. 104 in the present chapter).

¹²⁵ GSS, 128. Coakley contends that Origen develops a “newly creative marriage of biblical themes with the Platonic notion of ‘eros’.” GSS, 127. As we will see, this becomes important for Coakley’s conception of divine desire.

¹²⁶ GSS, 140.

¹²⁷ GSS, 136. Coakley cites Athanasius’ *Letters to Serapion* (esp. 1.24) as a case in point.

¹²⁸ GSS, 139, 143. Coakley cites Gregory’s *Life of Moses*, and Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, xv.17.31.

as Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and John of the Cross, and she argues that it is particularly evident in their use of “indwelling Trinity motifs.”¹²⁹ She finds a striking excerpt from John of the Cross’ *Spiritual Canticle*, where allusions to Romans 8 are clear: she writes that John speaks of “the Holy Spirit’s action on the ‘feminized’ soul, which ‘raises the soul most sublimely with that his divine breath ... that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father.’”¹³⁰

Coakley contends that trinitarian thought, contemplative prayer and questions of desire formed a “nexus of association” in the Patristics, but precisely because of this association, the approach was relegated to the margins at the time of conciliar discussions of the doctrine and was “further marginalized ... [in] modern histories of dogma.”¹³¹ She suggests that in the emerging (patriarchal) Church, the distinction of the Spirit in prayer was perhaps politically dangerous, potentially leading to the overturning of established gender roles and to a subversion of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹³² The effects of such a relegation can be seen in the iconography of the early to medieval periods, she argues, and has come to be manifest in contemporary charismatic groups, in which despite the centrality of prayer in the Trinity, issues of biblical fundamentalism and hierarchical social structures abound.¹³³

According to Coakley, in line with the early Patristics, trinitarian thought (a prayer-based theological approach) is entangled with sociological issues of authority, gender, and human desire, and a retrieval of this “spiritual nexus” has potential importance for theology today. For Coakley, Christ’s teaching on divine love (*agapē*) sheds light on the Platonic notion of desire (*erōs*), allowing for the consideration that God is the source of all desire and that desire for God is the highest form

¹²⁹ GSS, 143.

¹³⁰ GSS, 143-44. Coakley cites John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 39.3.4.

¹³¹ GSS, 6.

¹³² GSS, 127, 142-43. Coakley argues that the conciliar Church feared that this “nexus of association” (between trinitarian thought, contemplative prayer and questions of desire) could lead to challenging ecclesiastical authority, releasing women into positions of power, and the expansion of the terms of reference—particularly in relation to ‘Sonship’—whereby the rational account of the Logos yielded to an account which was wholly unpredictable and uncontrollable. See also Coakley’s discussion of the sectarian heresy in GSS, 121-22.

¹³³ In her iconographic investigations, Coakley finds that early representations tended towards tritheism, and were overtly anthropomorphic, while medieval Western representations depicted unmistakably literal images, sometimes resulting in the depiction of God as a person with three heads. GSS, 195-96, 228. In the Western iconographic tradition, Coakley notes that the Spirit becomes near redundant or perpetuates feminine stereotypes, while in the East, a visual hierarchy of the three persons is evident. For Coakley, the most “successful” representations of the Trinity—“the ones that stir the imagination, or direct the will beyond the known to the unknown”—are those that present symbolically a vivid sense of the Spirit, avoid male anthropomorphisms, and point to the incorporation of both men and women into the life of God. GSS, 197-98. In her investigations into an Anglican charismatic church and a sectarian charismatic “Fellowship” group, Coakley notes that the central and explicit role of the Spirit in prayer and pastoral practice is recognised, however, one group risked the dissolution of trinitarian doctrine altogether (in favour of God as Spirit), and both failed to recognise the tension between “biblical directives about the subordination of women, on the one hand, and a ‘mystic’ trinitarian model earthed in prayer” that potentially subverts and destabilises social structures based on subordination, on the other. GSS, 181-86, at 185. I will return to Coakley’s experiences “in the field” when I consider the limitations of her approach.

of human desire.¹³⁴ This insight leads Coakley to present a “contemporary trinitarian *ontology of desire*,” which “connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God’s own creation and for its full ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.”¹³⁵ It reflects “a vision of God’s trinitarian nature as both the source and goal of human desires, as God intends them. It indicates how God the ‘Father’, in and through the Spirit both stirs up, and progressively chastens and purges, the frailer and often misdirected desires of humans, and so forges them, by stages of sometimes painful growth, into the likeness of his Son.”¹³⁶ For Coakley, the purgation and transformation of misdirected human desires leads not only to a renewed understanding of human relationships, human desire, gender and sexuality, but also to a renewed understanding of hierarchy, power and order in God and to the potential transformation of communities in this light. When placed above all other human desires, desire for God leads to a “purgation” which transforms human life.¹³⁷ Modern human notions of power, vulnerability, hierarchy, difference, unity, order and reason are subverted in this process and charged with trinitarian insight, which interrupts, overturns and expands limited human understandings. In short, Coakley contends that the human person moves from the entanglement of earthly, physical, love to divine, all-encompassing love, incorporated into the very life and love of the Trinity. In contemplative prayer, she argues, the conditions are set for the emptying of the self, the “simultaneous erasure of human idolatry and [the] subtle reconstitution of the self in God.”¹³⁸ This leads to a “reordered engagement” with the world: “the practice of prayer provides the context in which silence in the Spirit *expands* the potential to respond to the realm of the Word.”¹³⁹

On this view, contemplative practice is not “narrowly introverted” nor “apolitical,” but effectively transformational for both the pray-er and the world.¹⁴⁰ It has “inexorably social and even cosmic significance as an act of cooperation with, and incorporation into, the still extending life of the incarnation,” Coakley writes.¹⁴¹ Based as it is in contemplative practice, this approach recognises that “prayer at its deepest is God’s, not ours,” and the pray-er is taken “beyond any normal human language or rationality of control.”¹⁴² A “prayer-based” approach, she argues, leads to the “right contemplation of God, right speech about God, and the right ordering of desire.”¹⁴³

¹³⁴ GSS, 266-300. As Coakley later states, this is in line with Denys the Areopagite, who writes “the sacred writers regard ‘yearning’ (*erōs*) and love (*agape*) as having one and the same meaning.” GSS, 313. Coakley quotes Denys, *Divine Names*, IV.12, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Classics of Western Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 81.

¹³⁵ GSS, 6, 10. Coakley refers to Denys the Areopagite’s notion of *ekstasis*. See GSS, 316-17.

¹³⁶ GSS, 6.

¹³⁷ GSS, 11.

¹³⁸ GSS, 23. It is a “vision of selfhood reconstituted participatorily in the triune God, in such a way that misdirected desire (sin and blindness) is radically purged and chastened.” GSS, 26.

¹³⁹ GSS, 343, 25.

¹⁴⁰ “The spiritual practitioner is a symbolic microcosm of the ‘world’ she inhabits (and transforms).” See *Powers and Submissions*, xix.

¹⁴¹ GSS, 114.

¹⁴² GSS, 115.

¹⁴³ GSS, 2.

Strengths and Limitations of Coakley's Approach

Coakley's contemplative approach offers a potentially profoundly transformative understanding of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. Through her retrieval of Paul's model of prayer from Romans 8, and by reading it in light of the insights offered in patristic sources, Coakley's approach moves trinitarian theology out of the bounds of abstract theorising and firmly into human experience. Expressing the Trinity as the source and goal of divine desire, in the 'Father,' the enabling and incorporative flow of the Spirit into divine desire, and the powerful perfection of creation in the 'Son,' Coakley's conception of God the Trinity is of an intimately desiring God, who desires full and intimate relationship with humankind.¹⁴⁴ Contemplative prayer is here presented as the central means by which God the Trinity calls the human person into loving, gratuitous, trinitarian relationship.

With its emphasis on prayer, Coakley's approach points to the powerful marriage between a personal relationship with God and a life lived in the world as *imago Dei*. Through patiently waiting on the Divine in contemplative prayer, Coakley argues, the fast-paced, idolatrous and oppressive contemporary world is blocked out (even if just for a moment) and the pray-er feels a "sense of *being grasped*" by God and brought into divine trinitarian life.¹⁴⁵ This powerful, emotive imagery expresses the intimate, personal encounter with God that the Christian experiences in prayer, and at the same time points to the potential transformation of the person that takes place as a result. The seemingly individual act of contemplation becomes a powerful act of God, whereby the pray-er comes to a deeper sense of her or his relationship with God, is oriented towards God and, as Coakley writes, is enabled and empowered to "cooperate with the promptings of divine desire."¹⁴⁶ If Coakley is right, the understanding of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life that stems from a prayer-based approach has the potential to re-enliven and sustain Christian worship and praxis.

Returning to the theological horizons that Ward contends are opened up by postmodern thinking, we can elucidate further strengths of Coakley's approach as a contemporary way of thinking about the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity. As I noted in chapter 6 these postmodern "interruptions" reflect a desire to highlight the necessarily apophatic nature of claims to truth, thereby subverting the universal pretensions of metaphysics, undermining potentially onto-theological tendencies, and affirming a recognition of the (transcendent) other, who, according to Ward, initiates and fosters a "movement of desire" towards that which "cannot be gathered into the rational folds of present consciousness."¹⁴⁷ In *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley confronts these issues head-on, arguing that a contemplative approach to systematic theology, such that she

¹⁴⁴ GSS, 114.

¹⁴⁵ GSS, 23, emphasis original.

¹⁴⁶ GSS, 343.

¹⁴⁷ Ward, "Postmodern Theology," 325. See p. 160 in the present work.

undertakes, calls for the “un-mastery” of knowledge of God so as to come to a “new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge.”¹⁴⁸ In doing so, Coakley contends that “radical attention to the ‘other’” is opened.¹⁴⁹

Discussing the resistance to systematic theology offered by those who would proffer the charge of onto-theology, Coakley contends that the criticism has at its heart a concern to highlight the dangers of idolatry when speaking of the divine nature.¹⁵⁰ She explains that the charge of onto-theology

goes back to the claim that Greek philosophical metaphysics was already engaged in a hubristic and inappropriate attempt to explain the divine, the ultimate Cause, and so to extend metaphysics beyond its proper reach; and further, that classical and scholastic Christian theology in its dependence on Greek metaphysics, unthinkingly extended such a trait into its projects of philosophical and systematic theology.¹⁵¹

Her response to this charge foregrounds the necessarily apophatic dimension of Christian thought. Even in the classical period, she argues, it was fully acknowledged that “to make claims about *God* involves a fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing, a form of unknowing more fundamental even than the positive accession of contentful revelation.”¹⁵² In Coakley’s view, “the modern problem of the dissociation of theology from *practices* of un-mastery” has led to such a charge, and it is in this light that she argues a contemplative approach “becomes crucial.”¹⁵³ For Coakley, the unknowing that needs to take place cannot be achieved by “mere mental fiat or a false sense of intellectual control.”¹⁵⁴ It “can never be mere verbal play, deferral of meaning, or the simple addition of negatives to positive (‘cataphatic’) claims,” but connotes the relinquishing of “*any* sense of human grasp” of God.¹⁵⁵ She explains that the centrality of contemplation in her approach recognises “contemplation [as] the unique, and wholly *sui generis*, task of seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly; ... [it is] the necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement which, in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father.”¹⁵⁶ In Coakley’s view, the *practice* of contemplation (and its reconnection to systematic theology) is the only way to ensure the necessarily apophatic impetus of speech about God.¹⁵⁷

Further to addressing concerns about systematic theology’s tendency towards onto-theology (and its possibly inappropriate use of metaphysics), Coakley discusses the potentially hegemonic

¹⁴⁸ Coakley, *GSS*, 43.

¹⁴⁹ *GSS*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ *GSS*, 45.

¹⁵¹ *GSS*, 44.

¹⁵² *GSS*, 44.

¹⁵³ *GSS*, 45.

¹⁵⁴ *GSS*, 46.

¹⁵⁵ *GSS*, 46, 23.

¹⁵⁶ *GSS*, 46.

¹⁵⁷ *GSS*, 46.

tendencies of systematic theology and argues that in this regard, too, a contemplative approach undermines these tendencies. It does this on two fronts. First, “the intentional and embodied” practice of contemplation realigns the theologian towards attention to the otherness of the ‘other’: “the ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized ‘other’,” she writes.¹⁵⁸ The act of contemplation moves beyond abstract theorising on the part of the privileged about the necessity of “justice for the oppressed,” and subverts attempts to make plans for reform in ways that effectively “drown out” the voices of the oppressed and negate and disempower the very groups of people and individuals affected by such plans.¹⁵⁹ “The moral and epistemological stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation is a vital key here,” Coakley concludes, as its “practised self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomforting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than simply intentional *design* on empathy.”¹⁶⁰

Second, Coakley argues that a *théologie totale* that explicitly brings together theological theory and *practice* (by means of contemplation) necessarily leads the theologian towards the exploration of “dark and neglected corners” of the tradition (historically speaking, as well as in terms of contemporary communal and cultural expressions) precisely to destabilise and redirect theological endeavours and to open theology “to the possibility of risk and challenge.”¹⁶¹ The very notion of contemplation, with its “patient attempt to attend to God in prayer,” affirms an openness to God as Other and a vulnerability in the face of trinitarian love.¹⁶² For Coakley, the “radical practices of attention to the Spirit” in a contemplative approach renders the task of theology “persistently vulnerable to interruptions from the unexpected.”¹⁶³ While the call for vulnerability could be considered problematic in a world marked by oppression and violence, Coakley (rightly) calls for a true understanding of vulnerability in God: learning to pray in right contemplation, she argues, is infinitely, and paradoxically, empowering.¹⁶⁴ In this way, based as it is in the practice of contemplation, Coakley’s *théologie totale* avoids hegemonic intentions and remains open to the possibility of the interruption of the Spirit when encountering the new.

Two further insights from Coakley’s approach will prove fruitful for my reflections on the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption in the chapters to follow: her understanding of difference within and between the persons of the

¹⁵⁸ GSS, 47.

¹⁵⁹ GSS, 47-48.

¹⁶⁰ GSS, 48.

¹⁶¹ GSS, 48, 49.

¹⁶² GSS, 23. A criticism that has been made of Coakley’s work relates to this very notion of vulnerability in contemplative prayer. For an extended discussion in this regard, see Mark Oppenheimer, “Prayerful Vulnerability: Sarah Coakley Reconstructs Feminism,” *The Christian Century* 120, no. 13 (2003): 25-31; and Janice Rees, “Sarah Coakley: Systematic Theology and the Future of Feminism,” *Pacifica* 24 (2011): 300-14.

¹⁶³ Coakley, GSS, 49.

¹⁶⁴ GSS, 343-44.

Trinity, and her conception of personal revelation. Earlier, I discussed Coakley's contention that the love of the Spirit presses "not only outwards to include others, but also inwards (and protectively) to sustain the difference between the persons, thus preserving a perfect and harmonious balance between unity and distinction."¹⁶⁵ Coakley's argument here reflects the work of Denys the Areopagite, who conceives of God the Trinity as "difference-in-unity."¹⁶⁶ As we will see in chapter 8, this theme plays an important role in my reflections on the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption, as it allows for a consideration of the implications of trinitarian faith for the recognition of differences between and within faith communities and cultures (not by way of a functionalisation of the Trinity, but through a re-reading of the revelation of the Spirit at Pentecost [Acts 2:1-21]). For Coakley, this recognition of God as a perfect balance between difference and unity has political import, as it subverts the binary oppositions set up in modern epistemology (between, for example, power and vulnerability, male and female, unity and difference). With the Spirit cast as primary in Coakley's trinitarian theology—as "the constant [enabling and incorporative] overflow of the life of God into creation,"—the *difference-in-unity* that is sustained by the Spirit subverts such oppositions and allows them to be considered afresh.¹⁶⁷

On the second point, Coakley's conception of revelation is worth noting as it extends a thread I have been developing throughout the present work (especially through my discussion of Boeve's theology of interruption). In chapter 4, I discussed Boeve's conception of revelation as the interruption of God, breaking in and breaking open the Christian narrative each time it closes in on itself and claims a mastery of knowledge about God and God's relationship with the world. We saw in chapter 4 that for Boeve, "every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential locus of God's manifestation."¹⁶⁸ Coakley's conception of revelation is equally dynamic.¹⁶⁹ While she affirms the importance of the content of the tradition in coming to understand God's self-revelation, as I noted earlier, she also contends that the "submission to mystery and unknowing" that takes place through prayerful contemplation provides the condition of possibility for the replacement of human ambition to grasp God with an "elusive, but nonetheless ineluctable, sense of *being grasped*" and subtly reconstituted in God.¹⁷⁰ For Coakley, the "darkness of incomprehensibility" is "the condition of revelatory presence."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ GSS, 24. See Ch. 7, p. 214.

¹⁶⁶ See Ch. 6, n. 1.

¹⁶⁷ Coakley, GSS, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Boeve, *GIH*, 176. See p. 95.

¹⁶⁹ See Ch. 3, n. 82 for a brief discussion of Ratzinger's reading of *Dei verbum* to the extent that revelation can be understood to be both "static" and "dynamic."

¹⁷⁰ Coakley, GSS, 23.

¹⁷¹ GSS, 23. Recall the reference to Gregory of Nyssa, above.

The potential limitations of Coakley's approach relate to the insights raised from the recognition of today's context as pluralising and detraditionalising. In Coakley's view, a "proper" understanding of God—one that evinces the mysterious revelation of God to the world and attests to God's infinite desire for the world's participation in trinitarian life—is mediated by a sustained and regular form of contemplative prayer that is practised by believers and, as a result, transforms and empowers believers to participate in God's trinitarian desire for relationship with the world. While this is indeed a powerful conception of the way in which Christians can move towards a deeper relationship with God and the world, the movement of the world into relationship with God (salvation) becomes potentially reliant on a decreasing number of Christians who regularly and actively engage in contemplative practice of the sort that Coakley advocates.

Moreover, the act of contemplation (with its worldly, political, implications) is potentially subject to both individual and communal distortions (hence Coakley's insistence on the need for "right" contemplation, where the pray-er ceases to set the agenda).¹⁷² Coakley herself found that in communities where the prayer was not sufficiently "trinitarian" (where *singular* emphasis was placed on the Spirit in prayer), social practices reflected a biblical fundamentalism and the communities tended towards the subordination of women through the strengthening of hierarchical social structures.¹⁷³ In Coakley's view, trinitarian thought is entangled with sociological issues of gender, sexuality and authority, and she argues that there is a "tension between biblical directives about the subordination of women, on the one hand, and a 'mystic' trinitarian model earthed in prayer that might somehow transcend and destabilize such subordinationism, on the other."¹⁷⁴ In the two communities that Coakley investigated, this tension had clearly given way to a preference for the patriarchal status quo. In the contemporary landscape, Christian communities reflect as much difference in their practice of the tradition as they do similarities. With its potential for distortion in charismatic communities, as well as its seemingly universal pretensions (in terms of placing the onus on the Christian pray-er to mediate God's relationship with the world) the contemplative approach to prayer in the Trinity potentially loses its political potency.

As we have seen, Coakley's approach places great importance on the participation of the person in trinitarian life, but she notes that such participation has a particular form that moves beyond an individual or communal imitation of God.¹⁷⁵ For Coakley, this particular form of participation is possible only by virtue of a "contemplative effacement," whereby the believer embraces moral, intellectual and spiritual change and, over time, learns a new (wholly apophatic) way of thinking, feeling and imagining God.¹⁷⁶ Only in this way, Coakley argues, can the person

¹⁷² GSS, 340-44.

¹⁷³ GSS, 181-86.

¹⁷⁴ GSS, 185.

¹⁷⁵ GSS, 23.

¹⁷⁶ GSS, 23.

“enter, willingly and consciously, into the life of divine desire.”¹⁷⁷ On my reading, in Coakley’s approach, the notion of participation in God avoids the ontological elision of God and the human person about which Wisse is concerned, and focuses instead on the transformation of the person so that he or she is enabled to participate in the divine *trinitarian* transformation of the world.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined two influential contemporary approaches to the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, namely, those offered by Kathryn Tanner and Sarah Coakley, and I have brought them into dialogue with Wisse’s concerns about the use of an ontology of participation in contemporary theology, and with the theological horizons that Ward contends are opened up by postmodern thinking. In doing so, I have highlighted the particular issues, concerns and perspectives facing theologians who seek to recognise the philosophical trends and insights of postmodernity. As I have discussed throughout the present work, many modern political theologies, with their universal pretensions, have been placed under pressure by the increased recognition of plurality and heterogeneity in the contemporary Western world. With faith pushed to the margins in favour of notions of scientific rationality, modern Christian political theologians were concerned to establish the relevance, coherence and rational nature of the Christian narrative, and ultimately aimed to correlate the narrative of Christian faith with other discourses. The critique of modern narratives undertaken by postmodern philosophy has shifted the focus from the recognition of similarities as the basis for harmony in a pluralising society to the consideration of difference as constitutive of identity and as the means by which the hegemonic tendencies of would-be metanarratives are subverted.

In the two examples of postmodern theologies of the Trinity that I have considered in this chapter, I have highlighted the retrieval of aspects of the Christian tradition that Tanner and Coakley consider to have been forgotten, ignored or misconceived, and I have examined their reflections on contemporary theological and contextual issues. Each approach reflects a recognition of the role of language and apophatics in shaping the life of faith and a renewed awareness of the difference it makes to theology and Christian life when the nearness and transcendence of God is considered in tension. While consideration of the anthropological questions of participation and transformation run through the work of each of these thinkers, they each offer a different understanding of the implications of Christian faith for the world today.

In the next chapter, I consider the contribution that Lieven Boeve’s “theology of interruption” might make to the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life by examining this theme through the lens of the four philosophical-conceptual

¹⁷⁷ GSS, 23.

approaches of a theology of interruption, which I distilled from Boeve's work in chapter 5. In doing so, I offer yet another way of thinking about the implications of trinitarian faith for Christians living in a pluralising and detraditionalising Western context. In my evaluation of Boeve's work, which follows the application of his approach in chapter 8, I propose that one of the theological approaches we have explored in the present chapter might prove useful as a critical partner to a theology of interruption.

Chapter 8. The Trinity and Christian Life Through the Lens of a Theology of Interruption

Having surveyed some of the modern and postmodern approaches to the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, we now return to Boeve's work, to consider the contribution that his "theology of interruption" might make to our reflections on this theme. When I discussed the potential limitations of the two postmodern approaches to the Trinity that I examined in chapter 7, I drew attention to the need to recognise the particularity of Christian faith and to appreciate the diversity of ways in which Christian faith is realised and practised today. In doing so, I highlighted the apophatic impetus of the task of theology (which I have defined throughout the present work as "faith seeking understanding"). In the present chapter, the four philosophical-conceptual approaches of a theology of interruption (distilled from the three case studies of Boeve's work that I analysed in chapter 5), will form the framework of the discussion. My intention is not to offer a recontextualisation of the doctrine of the Trinity, as such, but to bring a theology of interruption into dialogue with the theme I have explored throughout part II of the present work, namely, the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity. In doing so, I consider the fruitfulness of Boeve's work for contemporary theologising.

As I noted in chapter 5, a theology of interruption cannot be considered a "method," as such, with a distinct structure or system that aims to provide an unambiguous understanding of a Christian text or theme. Instead, it amounts to a series of philosophical-conceptual approaches that allow for the possibility of multiple hermeneutical intersections when undertaking the task of faith seeking understanding. In chapter 5, I summarised these approaches under four categories: the recognition of particularity, apophatics, reflexivity, and performativity. These approaches have at their heart an openness to the recognition of the "traces of God" that might be revealed in a particular text or experience and are underpinned by Boeve's argument that the Christian narrative is an open narrative, open to the interruption of God in history and open to the interruption that might occur when a Christian engages in authentic dialogue with a religious or cultural other.¹

Boeve and the Trinity

There are very few explicit references to the Trinity in Boeve's work, and these references are fleeting, at best. However, what he does say may provide a starting point for the consideration of our theme through the lens of a theology of interruption. In a paper he co-authored with Kurt Feytaerts, Boeve refers to Denys the Areopagite's understanding of the relationship between kataphatic and apophatic theology, noting Denys' contention that all names and titles used for God are "symbolic" in nature. Boeve and Feytaerts write, "All names and titles which are predicated of God—theological names such as Trinity, Father, Son, Spirit; intelligible or conceptual names as the good, one, beauty,

¹ Boeve, *GIH*, 105, 109, 138; *LT*, 123. On Boeve's use of "traces of God," see in the present work, Ch. 4, n. 106.

truth, life, love; representations of the experiential world as sun, rock, water, wind—all have a strictly ‘symbolic’ nature: they stand for what we predicate of God, but they do not touch God.”² In “Linguistica Ancilla Theologiae,” Boeve qualifies this symbolic language as metaphoric by considering the relationship between theology and cognitive semantics. Here, he argues that abstract concepts such as “time, life, love [and] God, are *essentially* metaphorically structured (... time is money, life is a journey, love is a partnership, God is Father).”³ He contends that these concepts are metaphoric “because they are semantically non-autonomous; ... they are understood through structures coming from other knowledge domains.”⁴

In “Postmodern Theology on Trial,” Boeve criticises John Milbank’s use of “concepts such as ‘the doctrine of the Trinity,’ ‘the doctrine of the incarnation,’ ‘the doctrine of the Church’ ... as if these concepts are self-evident truths, embedded in a corpus of Christian truths, once and for all fixed and available.”⁵ He reprehends Milbank for failing to consider the essential mystery of Christian faith evoked by these doctrines (and others) and for ignoring the historicity and contextuality embedded in these propositions of faith. Boeve writes,

unless the situatedness of both first-order and second-order discourses (confessional and dogmatic respectively) is taken into account, and a serious hermeneutical attempt is undertaken to retrieve what is at stake in these discourses, theology risks drying up in a rather sterile repetition of phrases which are disconnected from the faith community which lives in the world of today.”⁶

Boeve’s intention to retrieve the mysterious function of theological language is evident in this passage from *Lyotard and Theology*:

It is indeed the case that certain terms in the theological narrative have become established, as, for example, is the case with Father, Creator, Trinity, Logos, ... but it is also important to note that these terms actually cease to function when they become merely part of the discourse. Such terminology should not be considered as a standard for rejecting every other language use that attempts to refer to God. One might better turn the relationship around.

² Boeve here paraphrases Denys the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, 1032D-1033C, 1048B, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). He continues, “In the end this is also true for divine names as Trinity, and even for the name ‘the One’. Not even these names exhaust the divine essence, or make God knowable. They are names referring to what is beyond all names, beyond all naming. Only through the negation of these names can one create a space for God.” Boeve and Feysaerts, “RM,” 156. In Denys’ words, “There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.” Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, V, 1048B.

³ Boeve, “LAT,” 22, emphasis original.

⁴ “LAT,” 22.

⁵ “(Post)Modern Theology on Trial? Towards a Radical Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Particularity. Response to Anthony Godzieba and Laurence Hemming,” *Louvain Studies* 28 (2003): 253.

⁶ “PMTT,” 253.

Such terms only retain their established status when their referential power is once again illuminate[d] and restored by new references, or metaphors.⁷

Connected with this is Boeve's understanding of the relationship between the resurrection and the mystery of the Trinity. In 2011, writing about Edward Schillebeeckx's discussion of the experience of Easter, Boeve notes,

[T]he resurrection is the creative act of the ever faithful Father, which reveals that Jesus the Son is Messiah and Lord, and opens for us the possibility of salvation and fellowship with God in the Spirit. ... [T]he mystery of Jesus' resurrection and living presence constitutes the heart of the *Eucharist* and Christian *community life*—at one and the same time living from the resurrection while remaining under its promise.⁸

From these examples, as well as from the case studies examined in chapter 5, we can distil some insights for consideration: the need to highlight the metaphoric, historic and contextual nature of trinitarian language and discourse; the potential for Boeve's Christology (seen most clearly in his recontextualisation of the doctrine of Chalcedon, explored in chapter 5) to provide insights for the consideration of trinitarian faith in relation to Christian life; and the affirmation of my contention that in order for trinitarian theology to speak in any meaningful way to Christians today, it must be recontextualised in such a way that it brings the particular insights of the doctrine into dialogue with contemporary Christian experiences in diverse communities.

Two final excerpts from Boeve's catalogue are helpful for the consideration of trinitarian theology in light of a theology of interruption. The first of these relates to Boeve's concern about the functionalisation of the Word and the Spirit in theology when they are used in reflections on the relationship between Christian faith and other religious traditions. In "Theological Truth, Difference and Plurality," Boeve argues that the temptation to separate the Spirit from the Word—whereby the Word is aligned with the Christian tradition and the Spirit to other faith traditions—leads to a relativisation of Christian faith.⁹ Later in the present chapter, through a re-reading of the narrative of the Pentecost, I will argue that a recognition of the relationship between Word and Spirit can assist Christian theology to consider its dialogue with other religious traditions, but this need not fall prey to the postmodern anathemas of relativism or absolutism.¹⁰

⁷ *LT*, 113.

⁸ "Believing That There is Hope for Love: The Promise of Christian Faith in the Resurrection of the Body," *Pacifica* 24, no. 1 (2011): 47-8. And he refers to the Spirit as Christ's Spirit, "at work in the world and in the hermeneutical efforts of the communities living in His name." "GPH," 329.

⁹ "TDP," 82-83.

¹⁰ Respectively, the processes by which the Christian tradition either loses the elements that set it apart from other religious traditions in an effort to harmonise, or the truth of the Christian tradition is posited over and against other worldviews, with the insights of other religious traditions being denied or subsumed into the Christian narrative. See *GIH*, 146-49, 170-72; and "TPI."

The second helpful excerpt appears in Boeve's *Theology at the Crossroads*, where he contends that dialogue is central to Christian faith because it "belongs to the essence of God."¹¹ He refers explicitly in this text to Rahner's axiom (that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa) to argue that God reveals Godself as dialogue through the incarnation of the Word.¹² While Boeve is concerned to elucidate the role of the Word in the self-communication of God to the world, this insight nevertheless has important implications for thinking about trinitarian theology through the lens of Boeve's project.¹³ As we will see, Boeve's contention that God is dialogue assists us to consider the mission of the Spirit, united as it is with Christ, and allows us to highlight the dialogical nature of grace.¹⁴ In my reflections on the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity, through the conceptual approaches of Boeve's theology of interruption, I argue that by conceiving God not only as dialogue, but also as "difference-in-unity" (borrowing Denys the Areopagite's term), we can come to a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and

¹¹ TC, 193.

¹² For Rahner's axiom in context, see Rahner, *Trinity*, 21-24. I discussed this at length in Ch. 6. Boeve is here offering his thoughts on the importance of dialogue with a range of religious and philosophical worldviews in Catholic education. The full paragraph reads: "Such a Christian concept of dialogue is founded in the manner in which God reveals Godself as Word in history. The Word does not proceed [from] the dialogue, but is the first move in the dialogue itself. In the Word, God ventures Godself to the dialogue with humanity. So, God reveals Godself as a dialogical God, a God who searches for dialogue with human beings, gives Godself in such a dialogue, and does so to the utmost in the revelation of the Word in Jesus Christ—something which is, as we learn from Scripture, a risk even for God, intrinsically marked by vulnerability, with the cross as its ultimate consequence. From the manner in which God has revealed Godself to humanity in history, we have not learnt that there is first a God who then enters into dialogue, but that God is dialogue. Dialogue belongs to the essence of God (see also Karl Rahner's maxim that the economic trinity is the immanent trinity, and vice versa). From within this dialogue the human being finds himself or herself in the answering position: even more, this dialogue determines who the human being fundamentally is: a being already in dialogue—also in the relationship among humans, being spoken to and challenged to answer. Dialogue is a game of asymmetries, of changing asymmetry, of placing oneself vulnerably under the word, and addressing the word. In the dialogue with the other, we receive our identity and learn who we really are." Boeve, TC, 193.

¹³ James Gerard McEvoy also offers a helpful discussion on the notion of dialogue in relation the Trinity and includes the mission of the Spirit in this light. I turn to his work later in the chapter. See James Gerard McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church-World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2014); "Dialogue: Drawn into the Life of the Trinity," *Pacifica* 25, no. 3 (2012): 239-57.

¹⁴ Other explicit references to the Trinity in Boeve's catalogue are either repetitions of those highlighted here, or make similar points, except for a quotation he uses from Saskia Wendel's work, which happens to mention the Trinity. In this case, Boeve is discussing (and disagreeing with) Wendel's contention that postmodern philosophy (with its concern to overcome metaphysical constructs) is not a helpful dialogue partner for theology, and he cites Wendel's thesis in his footnotes. The quotation he uses reads: "Christian tradition defines God with reference to metaphysical thinking, at the one hand, as Origin and Creator, transcending the immanence of the world, and, at the other, as Trinity, and therefore as Difference, be it a triune of Unity. From this follows that Lyotard's non-presentable, which one definitely can not perceive as a transcendent, original Unity, is simply in contradiction with the concept of God in traditional theological thinking." Saskia Wendel, "Ästhetik des Erhabenen – Ästhetische Theologie? Zur Bedeutung des Nicht-Darstellbaren bei Jean-François Lyotard," *Das Ende der alten Gewißheiten: Theologische Auseinandersetzungen mit der Postmoderne*, ed. Walter Lesch and Georg Schwind (Mainz: Grünewald, 1993), 64-65, cited in Boeve, Boeve, "MPT," 30, n. 29.

the world today and to a deeper sense of the role of the Christian, who, through the assent of faith, shares in the life of the Trinity.¹⁵

Considering the Doctrine of the Trinity Through the Lens of a Theology of Interruption

As I noted above, the philosophical-conceptual approaches of Boeve's theology of interruption fall into four categories: particularity, apophatics, reflexivity and performativity. In this chapter, I will consider each of these categories in turn, using them to raise questions or to open new ways of thinking about the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life. As we will see, the lines between the philosophical-conceptual approaches are often blurred, and they certainly overlap, but by trying to consider them in turn, I hope to highlight some of the ways in which this "radical hermeneutical approach" that is the theology of interruption might assist theology to consider anew the relationship between God and the world.¹⁶

Particularity

It has been said that "Christianity stands or falls with trinitarian faith."¹⁷ As I noted in chapter 6, Gerald O'Collins calls trinitarian faith the "faith of martyrs"; it is the distinctive and particular belief that separates the Christian tradition from the other Abrahamic faiths.¹⁸ The doctrine of the Trinity, as we know it today, with all of its caveats, paradoxes and ambiguities (captured in the summary definition I provided in chapter 6) is the result of multiple points of recontextualisation throughout the history of the Church: from scripture, through the time of the Church fathers, the councils of Nicaea I and Constantinople, and, as we saw in chapters 6 and 7, through to the consideration since Vatican II of the relationship between the profession of belief in the Trinity and the practice of Christian life.¹⁹ The doctrine is thoroughly particular in the sense that it reflects a particularly Christian way of understanding God, and God's relationship with the world. As a central tenet of Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity refers to the particular way in which God is revealed in concrete history and it underpins the various ways in which many theologians conceive of Christian engagement with the world (I discussed some of these in chapter 6). At the same time, as a formula

¹⁵ Recall our discussion in Ch. 7 on the notion of participation in God. For a useful discussion on this in Denys the Areopagite's work, see Beierwaltes and Hedley, "Unity and Trinity," 7, 5-9. Beierwaltes and Hedley cite Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*, II 4; 127, 7 and II 1, 123, 9; 124, 10, in Beate Regina Suchla: *Corpus Dionysiacum I: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita De Divinis Nominibus* (Berlin: Patristische Texte und Studien Bd. 33, 1991).

¹⁶ Boeve, *LT*, 75.

¹⁷ O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 6.

¹⁸ *Tripersonal God*, 6.

¹⁹ For my summary definition, see p. 164. It is beyond the scope of the present work to discuss all of the trinitarian controversies that arose in the lead up to the councils of Nicaea I and Constantinople. For a comprehensive summary of the debates and the key figures involved (with helpful tables), see Tarmo Toom, *Classical Trinitarian Theology: A Textbook* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 49-51 for tables.

that points to the revelation of the One God as (paradoxically) tri-une, it moves beyond the particular to refer to the mysterious transcendence and ungraspability of God.

As I noted in chapter 5, the recognition of particularity functions in two ways in a theology of interruption. First, it reminds theologians of the central task of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, thus affirming the role of faith in the qualification and illumination of Christian discourses. Second, it reminds Christians of the boundaries of our discourses: we cannot subsume other faith traditions into our own, but we can be open to new insights that arise for us as a result of dialogue with other traditions. By holding unity and difference in tension, the recognition of particularity allows for the interruption of difference, and as the recognition of differences found in particular discourses serves as interruptive, it can allow the Christian to come to a deeper understanding of his or her faith.

To this effect, Boeve argues that a recontextualisation of the Christian narrative for today must recognise the plurality and diversity of philosophical and religious discourses in the social milieu and it must be aware of and respect the differences between them. Underpinning this notion is Boeve's contention that Christian theology today must hold in tension the claim to truth with the concomitant recognition that it cannot take hold of the truth. These insights are exemplified most clearly in the three case studies I examined in chapter 5. A consideration of trinitarian theology through the lens of a theology of interruption requires that we think through the particularity of the Christian affirmation that God is Trinity, from a theological perspective which is attuned to context.

The scriptural roots of trinitarian theology

While space does not permit a full discussion on the roots of trinitarian theology and its development in the history of the tradition, a number of insights from scripture will serve to inform the discussion. The revelation of God as Trinity is certainly grounded in scripture, but the trinitarian formula—God is Father, Son and Spirit, one God in three Persons—is by no means fully articulated there.²⁰ In his extensive overview of the scriptural roots of trinitarian theology, O'Collins argues that predicates such as Father, Mother, Word, Wisdom, and Spirit are used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to God, to describe the way in which God relates and reveals in particular times and contexts, and to demonstrate the agency of God in the narrative of salvation.²¹ As metaphors, he argues, these

²⁰ For an extended discussion on this point, see Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: a Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MA: Baker Books, 1982). Fortman argues that the Hebrew scriptures provide the terms for the later development of trinitarian doctrine and the "climate in which plurality within the Godhead was conceivable." *Triune God*, 10. While I have referred to O'Collins' exegesis in the section that follows, I also found Anthony Kelly's reading of the scriptural roots of trinitarian theology very helpful. See Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1989).

²¹ O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 11-34.

predicates testify to God's nearness to the world and to the people, while emphasising the radical transcendence and mystery of God.²²

In the New Testament, the nearness of God is radicalised in the person of Christ, who shares a unique relationship with God (calling God "Abba"), and in the Spirit of God, who is present both before and throughout Jesus' ministry and who comes to be called the Spirit of Christ after the resurrection.²³ In the Matthean and Pauline literature, we find an awareness of the revelation of the three "*dramatis personae*," although as Anne Hunt writes, there is little evidence of a trinitarian "problem" as such in these texts; the synoptic gospels and Paul do not seem to be concerned with the question of how to hold belief in the Three as revealed in the economy, while at the same time testifying to belief in the One God.²⁴ However, in the Johannine literature, Hunt argues, a certain awareness of the relationship between the three persons is evident; this is particularly seen in the evangelist's emphasis on the divinity of the Son and on the personal nature of the Spirit.²⁵ In John's prologue, Jesus is identified as the "Word" (*Logos*) of God, who pre-existed with God and "became flesh" in Christ (Jn 1:1-18, esp. 1-5, 14). Later in the text, when Jesus speaks to his disciples before promising the Spirit, the evangelist affirms the intimacy between Father and Son ("No one comes to the Father except through me ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me" [14:6, 10]) and then he clearly distinguishes the Son from the Father, recounting Jesus' words: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father (Jn 14:28, 31).²⁶

In the Johannine texts that mention the *Paraclete* (*Gk*, translated as Advocate, Helper, Consoler, Counsellor or Intercessor), the personal nature of God's ongoing presence through the Holy Spirit is depicted. Jesus tells his disciples: "The Father will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ... [T]he Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:16-17, 26). The text tells us that the *Paraclete* will be sent by the Father in the name of the Son (Jn 14:26), but

²² *Tripersonal God*, 32.

²³ See: Peter's testimony in Acts 2:14-24; Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which he writes, "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (Gal 4:6); and Paul's letter to the Romans, where he identifies the Spirit of God with the Spirit of Christ: "you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom 8: 9). On this last example, O'Collins informs us that use of the genitive "of" is ambiguous in Paul's writings: it can have an objective, originating or identifying function. Respectively: "The Spirit brings us to God/Christ, ... comes from or is drawn from God/Christ, ... [or] is God/Christ." *Tripersonal God*, 63, emphasis mine.

²⁴ Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus*, 7, 8. For example: the Matthean baptismal formula, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19-20, a development on Acts 2:38); and the Pauline benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor 13:13, other translations read "*fellowship* of the Holy Spirit").

²⁵ *Trinity: Nexus*, 9.

²⁶ Jesus' reference to the Father as "greater than I" led to one of the central trinitarian debates in the fourth century, with Arius using it to bolster his argument that the Son was not begotten, but "the first among all created beings." Toom, *Classical Trinitarian Theology*, 17, 17-18. See also Hunt, *Trinity: Nexus*, 9, 11.

also by and after the Son. Jesus' words testify to this: "for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). The Spirit acts as witness and teacher and, as we can see in this final excerpt, along with the Son, the Spirit is radically personified: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13).

I take this segue into the missions of the Son and Spirit in the economy in order to highlight the particular way in which God is conceived in Christian faith. For Christians, the revelation of God in Christ and in the Spirit radically personalises the divine, while at the same time pointing to God's ultimate mystery, and it is this insight that has led contemporary thinkers to conceive of the implications of trinitarian faith for Christian life. In the present work, particularly through my discussion of Boeve, I have been concerned to highlight new ways of thinking about Christian faith in a pluralising and detraditionalising context. Boeve focuses on Christology in order to do this (due, largely, to his reliance on Schillebeeckx), however, a theology of interruption also raises questions about how we might consider the interruption of the Spirit.²⁷ If God interrupts history, as Boeve contends, God does so not only in Christ, but also in the Spirit (indeed, it is God the *Trinity* who interrupts). The narrative of the Pentecost provides a helpful place to begin in terms of the consideration of the interruption of the Spirit, and it is particularly helpful for our purposes, as it provides a potential way of articulating Christian faith's relation to difference.²⁸

Rereading the narrative of Pentecost

As we will return to this narrative a number of times throughout the discussion, it seems pertinent to reproduce the Lukan account of the Pentecost in full, here (Acts 2:1-21, NRSV):

2 ¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and

²⁷ Recall the discussion at the end of Ch. 2, where I noted the Christo-centric nature of Boeve's approach.

²⁸ I noted earlier that Boeve cautions against the functional differentiation of the Word and the Spirit, whereby the Word is confined to Christian faith and the Spirit seen at work in other religions. This approach, he says, relativises Christian faith and posits a pluralism that empties trinitarian particularity. See Boeve, "TDP," 82-3. As we will see, in my reading of the narrative (taking the recognition of particularity as my starting point) the relationship between Word and Spirit need not be conceived as (respectively) the particular and the universal in order to consider the relationship between Christian faith and other religious traditions in the context of religious and cultural plurality.

visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

Above, I noted scriptural passages that testify to the belief that the Word of God became flesh in concrete history (John 1:14, for example). Here, in the narrative of the Pentecost, the Spirit (of Christ) is sent out into the world in history after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 2:1-17). This is the same Spirit who pervades all of history, who is present throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and throughout Jesus’ ministry, and who is poured out “upon all flesh” at the Pentecost (Acts 2:17).

In chapter 5, I examined Boeve’s argument that the doctrine of Chalcedon—the doctrine that came to be known as the hypostatic union: that Christ is one person (*prosopon/hypostasis*) in two natures (*physeis*), both fully human and fully divine—holds in tension an understanding of the universal and the particular. Here, in the narrative of the Pentecost, we see this same tension at work, not in the person of the Spirit, so to speak, but in the way in which the Spirit is revealed. At the beginning of the narrative, the Christian *particularity* is emphasised—the Spirit filled all of the *disciples* seated at the table (v. 2-4) and the crowd watched on outside in bewilderment and amazement, asking one another, “What does this mean?” (v. 6, 12). When the action moves outside and Peter addresses the crowd, the focus shifts to the *universal* (contextually speaking). Peter chooses the words of Joel (2:28-32), saying: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh ...” (Acts 2:17).²⁹ Joel’s words then continue to prophesy the effects of the pouring out of the Spirit, and in the final line of the evangelist’s retrieval of Joel, we see the

²⁹ Emphasis mine.

particular once again: at the “coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day, ... [e]veryone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v.21).

Considering the narrative today, we might ask the same question as the crowd: “What does this mean?” Scholars such as John Scott refer to the Pentecost as the reversal of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Scott writes, “Ever since the early church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. At Babel human languages were confused and the nations were scattered; in Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ.”³⁰ In chapter 4, I considered the narrative of the Tower of Babel in light of a theology of interruption and in dialogue with Jacques Derrida’s reading.³¹ I argued, there, that God’s interruption subverted the Shemites’ claim towards totalisation. The Shemites attempted to unify their people, make a name for themselves and place themselves at the level of the heavens, but God halted the building of the tower, confused the languages and scattered the nations. Reading the Pentecost as a reversal of this narrative leads to the claim that Stott makes, that in the event of the Pentecost, the diversity enacted at Babel is replaced by unity in Christ. In short, it leads to the universal claim of Christian faith.

However, a consideration of the narrative through the lens of a theology of interruption allows for a more nuanced reading of the Pentecost. Certainly, my reading of the narrative, above, draws attention to Boeve’s argument that the event of Christ holds the tension between the universal and the particular, with neither being subsumed into the other.³² In “Christus Postmodernus,” Boeve argues that in Christ’s particularity, he bears witness (as event, or interruption) to the “universality of grace” and as such, Christ signifies grace (makes it present definitively) while never containing it.³³ To express this differently, in the particular way in which Christ signifies grace, the particular (Jesus’ humanity) and the universal (his divinity) are neither opposed nor integrated, but held in tension. On the consideration of Christ’s universality, Rowan Williams’ discussion of the “finality of Christ” is helpful. Williams argues that Christ’s universal significance lies not in a “totality of meaning” on the ontological level, where Jesus is asserted as “the meaning of human meanings” and “the container of all other meanings,” but in the consideration of Christ as the “test, judgement and catalyst” of all human meaning in relation to God.³⁴ As Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer explains in his reading of Williams’ argument, “the finality of Christ makes a claim about God’s action in Christ, the kind of judgement that Christ makes in history, and how this judgement opens up the possibility of connecting different schemes of meaning and value in the

³⁰ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today (Nottingham, UK: Inter-varsity Press, 1990), section A, 2.

³¹ See Derrida, “Babel.”; also, Hart’s exegesis of Derrida’s reading, in Hart, *Trespass*, 109-10.

³² Boeve, “CP.”

³³ See “CP,” 589. And the discussion in the present work, Ch. 5, p. 145.

³⁴ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000), 105, 94.

broadest possible context of community.”³⁵ These insights allow us to conceive of the second person of the Trinity as God’s definitive action in history, without seeking to posit Christian faith as a “totality of meaning.”³⁶

While Boeve does not engage the narrative of the Pentecost in his publications, we can draw similar conclusions from the application of his approach in our reading of the Lukan account. Here, the tense relationship between the particular and the universal is also revealed. The evangelist’s insertion of Joel’s prophecy into Peter’s sermon (at 2:17-21) interrupts a reading that would posit the grace of the Spirit through Christian faith (or discipleship) alone. I recall, here, Boeve’s words in *Lyotard and Theology* about the conception of heterogeneity in postmodern discourse:

[I]n the postmodern context of plurality, transcendence is conceived of in accordance with the event of heterogeneity which confronts us with the particularity and contingency of our own (Christian) engagement with reality. Transcendence, as event, interrupts and disturbs the on-going particular narrative, challenging this narrative to open itself to the heterogeneity which breaks through in that event.³⁷

While Boeve is speaking of transcendence in light of the interruption that takes place in the immanent frame when one person encounters another, we can draw inferences for our purposes in the consideration of God as the Other of the Christian narrative: in the Lukan account of the Pentecost, God radically enters the narrative in the person of the Spirit and opens up the discourse to the world.³⁸

The terms “particular” and “universal” are working in two interrelated ways in my argument here. From a theological perspective, the universality of grace is made manifest (and possible) in the particular life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In the narrative of the Pentecost, this tension is signified in the narrative itself, in the particular way in which the Spirit is revealed to the disciples: the Spirit is poured out to the disciples, filling “the entire house where they were sitting” (2:2) (the *particular*) while at the same time escaping the containment of the house and pouring out to “all flesh” (v.17) (the *universal*) so that every nation gathered there (v.5-11) could “hear” the revelation of the Spirit (“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” [Mk 4:23; Lk 8:8]). In the evangelist’s account of the Pentecost, the particular takes on sacramental properties: the particular is the vehicle for the presence of the truth but does not contain the truth.³⁹ Here, the particular does not become the universal in a linear concept of time (with the disciples simply recounting their experience in the house to the nations gathered outside), but the sacramental nature of time is brought into view—the universal grace of God is manifest in the particularity of time and context, not only in the room but

³⁵ Jacobs-Vandegheer, “Finality,” 3.

³⁶ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 105.

³⁷ Boeve, *LT*, 121.

³⁸ Recall my discussion of Boeve’s argument that God is radically *in* the narrative and transcends it (Ch. 4, p. 94). See Boeve, “CCPC,” 466; “PNT,” 424.

³⁹ I refer, here, to one of Boeve’s central insights—the apophatic nature of Christian truth. I take up this notion at length in the next section.

also throughout the world. A further excerpt from Boeve's *Lyotard and Theology* assists us to illustrate this point. Boeve writes,

Sacramental time is the time of the interruptive, apocalyptic "now-moment" ("Kairos"), the event which opens up the particular and contingent, placing it in the perspective of the transcendent God, but without nullifying or cancelling its particularity and contingency. The event of grace, or the grace of the event, consists precisely in this: self-enclosed narratives are opened up, and this openness is remembered, experienced and celebrated. Living by this openness to what happens, narratives lose their hegemonic characteristics and become truly open narratives.⁴⁰

A reading of the account of the Pentecost through the lens of particularity (as a key element of a theology of interruption) opens the narrative to allow for the consideration of the ways in which the Spirit might be revealed outside the confines of those seated at the table (figuratively speaking). To express this another way, from the perspective of Christian faith the recognition of the Spirit as a particular and, at the same time, indispensable instance of the universal grace of God calls Christians towards a disposition of openness to an ever-deepening understanding of revelation in the context of plurality today.

This line of argument is consistent with that of James Gerard McEvoy, who notes in his book, *Leaving Christendom for Good*, that in the Johannine writings we see the fullest account of the Spirit and the "continuity and novelty" that the Spirit brings.⁴¹ McEvoy argues that in John, the Spirit ensures "the community's continuity with Jesus while enabling it to interpret Jesus' life" in new contexts.⁴² Moreover, the revelation of the Spirit in the economy allows for the recognition that the narrative does not end with Christ's resurrection and ascension. McEvoy writes, "[Christians] in every age find themselves caught up in the life of the Trinity, constantly moving between Word and Spirit and being led to the Father: always attending to the Christ event for the unsurpassable embodied expression of God's compassion while simultaneously listening carefully for fresh stirrings of the Spirit in the present."⁴³

Conceived in this way, and coupled with Boeve's recontextualisation of the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon, the narrative of the Pentecost allows for a consideration of the relationship between Christian faith and other worldviews that does not amount to the binaries of either relativism or absolutism. Boeve's caution against the relativisation of Christian faith through the easy association of the Word with narrative (and, therefore, "stability and sameness") and the Spirit with the interruptive event (and, therefore, "newness and otherness") is mitigated, here, by the affirmation that the Spirit in the narrative of the Pentecost is the Spirit of Christ.⁴⁴ Here, I have

⁴⁰ Boeve, *LT*, 122.

⁴¹ McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 135.

⁴² *Leaving Christendom*, 135.

⁴³ *Leaving Christendom*, 139.

⁴⁴ For this caution in context, see Boeve, "TDP," 83.

utilised Boeve's contention that Christ is the interruptive event of God and, as such, is not enclosed in the narrative, and that Christ initiates a "continuous dynamic tension" between the particular word (narrative) and the Word ("Logos") of God.⁴⁵ In one of Boeve's rare references to the Trinity, he notes that "the Spirit remains the Spirit of Christ, and as the Spirit of Christ it fosters the Christological reading key within the radical and political-theological hermeneutics that are called for."⁴⁶ In this way, he continues, the Spirit

assists the faithful to receive and interpret [the] tension between word and Word, in which both narrative and interruptive event ultimately are kept together: the narrative being opened up by the event, and the event borne witness to by the interrupted narrative. It is here also that Word and Spirit are not to be pitted against one another; rather they constitute together the very dynamics of God's involvement in history and the way the faithful read this involvement.⁴⁷

In my reading of the narrative of the Pentecost thus far, I have highlighted the tensive relationship between the universal and the particular and affirmed the role of the Spirit in such a reading as the means by which Christians can come to a deeper understanding of the revelation of God (in Christ) in the context of plurality. Moreover, considered in this way, the Spirit can be seen as the Spirit of Christ, opening up the narrative of Christ to the world as gracious gift (we will return to this notion in our apophatical approach to the same text, below).

On the possible alternative charge of absolutism, or even a kind of masked colonialism that would posit Christian faith over and against other faith traditions, I offer the following additional thoughts. While a recognition of the universality of grace seems to imply a tendency towards accounting for other religions from the perspective of Christian faith and subsuming other traditions into an all-encompassing Christian metanarrative, this need not be the case. In the context of plurality, McEvoy argues that the Spirit is "at work breathing life into all creation, constantly stirring the many cultures, and inspiring the practices of other world religions."⁴⁸ The recognition of particularity in postmodern philosophy reminds Christians of the boundaries of trinitarian discourse. It warns Christians of the dangers of subsuming differences into the narrative of Christian faith, and of the easy, relativistic, correlation of similarities. The Christian affirmation of God as triune holds the tension between difference and unity and affirms an understanding of difference in unity as constitutive of Christian faith, but it cannot account for difference in the world by way of an easy correlation (we could not say, for example, that there is difference in God, and this accounts for difference in the world). Instead, for Christians, a recognition of the ongoing nature of God's revelation in the Spirit and the free gift of faith in Christ that this brings can allow Christians to come

⁴⁵ "TDP," 83. See, also, "CP."

⁴⁶ "TDP," 83.

⁴⁷ "TDP," 83.

⁴⁸ McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 139.

to a deeper understanding of God as Trinity.⁴⁹ From a Christian perspective, the recognition of the stirrings of the Spirit in other faith traditions leads not to an account of the different world religions as different ways of living the Christian truth (albeit anonymously, as Rahner would have it), but to the recognition that in the difference found in the context of plurality, Christians might come to see the mysterious workings of the Spirit in human life and, therefore, come to a deeper understanding of the triune God. Here, in the narrative of the Pentecost where we experience the pouring out of the Spirit of Christ into the world, the universal nature of grace meets the particular truth-claims of Christian faith. From the perspective of a theology of interruption, because Christ is the definitive self-revelation of God and in Christ, God is revealed as a God who interrupts, the mystery of how God's universal grace is manifest in new times and new contexts is affirmed.⁵⁰

Apophatics

The recognition of particularity is connected with the second philosophical-conceptual approach in Boeve's theology of interruption, namely the use of theological and philosophical apophatics. More than any of the other elements in a theology of interruption, the use of apophatics highlights the *dispositional* nature of Boeve's approach. It provides the background to a theology of interruption by offering a way of standing in relation to a text or discourse (or God) that allows for an openness to the interruption of the new. Boeve argues that the use of apophatics, as an "abiding and conditioning background" to affirmations about God, provides a means by which theology can "leave behind" metaphysics and ontotheology.⁵¹ Moreover, he contends that apophatics conditions Christian praxis to the extent that Christians are called to recognise the concealing nature of language and witness to the event of difference.⁵²

In the examination of the case studies in chapter 5, I argued that apophatics functions in a number of different ways in a theology of interruption. First, it allows for the use of a hermeneutical approach that points beyond the ontological grounds of *kataphasis* and *apophasis*, towards the excess of meaning that cannot be captured in the narrative. This hermeneutical approach to Christian texts, which considers the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*, reminds the theologian that the language used to refer to God in the Christian narrative is metaphorical: in naming God—as Christ, as Spirit, as Trinity—God is revealed in the predicate, and yet withdraws from the predicate,

⁴⁹ See Ch. 3, n. 82, on the notion of revelation as both "static" ("all that is contained and completed in Christ, who 'is the end of God's speaking'") and "dynamic" ("Christ is 'the constant address of God to man'"). Note, there, Horner's clarification of this understanding in light of *Dei verbum* and the work of Joseph Ratzinger. See Horner, "Experience of God." Horner cites Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Chapter I," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London/New York: Burns and Oates/Herder and Herder, 1969), 172, 175, 172-73.

⁵⁰ Note, again, Ch. 3, n. 82. Also p. 220.

⁵¹ Boeve, "PNT," 418, 417.

⁵² "PNT," 419.

exceeding the meaning that it connotes.⁵³ Second, it allows the theologian to consider the ambiguities within a text that subvert an otherwise propositional tone and to leave open inherent paradoxes so that the excess to which a paradox points can continue to interrupt.⁵⁴ Third, the recognition of the apophatic impetus of the Christian narrative allows for the consideration of Christian truth not as dogmatic, but as enigmatic and pragmatic; it refers both to concrete history and to transcendence, and in its mystery, it enlivens Christian life and praxis.⁵⁵

As I noted in chapter 6, the classical articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, with its use of philosophical terms such as *hypostases*, *homousios* and *spiration*, has fallen prey to the same concerns that Boeve described of the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon: they no longer point to the mystery that the Council fathers sought to express.⁵⁶ In addition, the metaphorical designations assigned to the three “persons” (“Father,” “Son” and “Spirit”) have, to a large extent today, become crystallised and are used almost exclusively as *names* for the divine hypostases of the triune God. As we will see, approaching the doctrine of the Trinity with an eye for the apophatic impetus of the narrative allows for the retrieval of its essential mystery.

While the designations of “Father,” “Son” and “Spirit” have come to be used as names for the three persons of the Trinity, some theologians today argue for the use of a variety of predicates. One such theologian (whose work I mentioned briefly at the beginning of chapter 7) is Elizabeth A. Johnson, who retrieves the language of Wisdom from the history of the tradition to offer alternative terms that might be used interchangeably with the otherwise masculine predicates.⁵⁷ In Boeve’s recontextualisation of the doctrine of Chalcedon (that Christ is one person in two natures, fully human and fully divine), he undertakes a *de-nomination* of the predicate, “Christ,” in order to retrieve the mystery to which the doctrine points.⁵⁸ In doing so, he argues for the retrieval of “Logos,” as this predicate holds the inherent tension between the words (of scripture, which attest to the Word) and the Word itself.⁵⁹ When we consider the naming of the Trinity, a similar exercise can be undertaken. There are numerous predicates that could arguably take the place of “Father,” “Son”

⁵³ Recall our discussion in Ch. 4, with reference to Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida.

⁵⁴ See Boeve, “SDDD.”

⁵⁵ See “CP,” esp. 592.

⁵⁶ See “CP,” 581-85. I discussed this text at length in Ch. 5. I noted there that Karl Rahner makes a similar point in relation to the use of “substance” and “essence” to designate the persons of the Trinity. See Rahner, *Trinity*, 53-4.

⁵⁷ See Johnson, *She Who Is*. Retrieving the Greek word for Wisdom, *Sophia*, Johnson argues for the use of Spirit-*Sophia*, Jesus-*Sophia* and Mother-*Sophia* to designate the three persons of the Trinity.

⁵⁸ Boeve, “CP,” 592. Boeve here utilises an approach taken by Jean-Luc Marion. Marion seeks a de-nomination of the name in order to overcome the inability of the predicative to point beyond itself. See Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, 46-7, 71, 95. Marion defines this more explicitly in his “In the Name,” 139. He writes, “In its ambiguity, de-nomination bears the twofold function of saying (affirming negatively) and undoing this saying of the name. It concerns a form of speech that no longer says something (or a name of someone) but which denies all relevance to predication, rejects the nominative function of names and suspends the rule of truth’s two values.” See my discussion in Ch. 4., esp. at n. 73 and Ch. 5. n. 163.

⁵⁹ See Boeve, “CP,” 586-90, 592.

and “Spirit,” or even “Trinity” (on this last term, for example, O’Collins opts for “Tripersonal”).⁶⁰ However, for the purposes of the present discussion, we need not go down this path (space alone would preclude a systematic consideration of these). For our purposes, reference to the apophatic movement towards de-nomination (or even Derrida’s *dénégation*, to which Boeve refers in the same place), highlights a contemporary religious critical consciousness that seeks to unsettle the universal pretensions of metaphysics.⁶¹ When taken in this regard, the predicate, “Trinity,” in the affirmation that “God *is* Trinity” cannot function hegemonically. A disposition of openness to the event of difference leads to an affirmation of truth claims (here, the nomination), followed by the negation of such truth claims as limited by human conceptions (the crossing out of the nomination), and to a recognition that any claim to truth points beyond what can be said (and unsaid), to the mystery that escapes the discourse.⁶²

To this effect, the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis* assists theology today to return to the mystery to which the doctrine of the Trinity refers. The central teaching of the doctrine, that God is One and Three, is apophatically structured. It points to a paradoxical mystery that is beyond human grasp and that cannot be fully contained, captured or explained in language. Considered in this way, the essential paradox of the doctrine necessarily structures our hermeneutical engagement with it. Moreover, it assists us to consider the mystery that goes beyond the qualifications and negations we find in the classical definition. As I noted in chapter 6, classically speaking, the mystery of the Trinity is that while God has revealed Godself as three distinct persons, the interrelationship between the three is so close that they mutually indwell in one another.⁶³ Here, difference and unity are held together in such a way as to affirm the two at the same time in God. To express this differently, just as difference is constitutive of the truth of the Trinity, so, too, is unity constitutive of the truth of the Trinity. At the same time, each affirmation interrupts the other so that the truth of the Trinity escapes this construction. Attention to the *hyperphatic* nature of Christian discourse informed by a contemporary philosophical critical consciousness calls theology beyond the discourse, to recognise that God is beyond the binaries of difference and unity: God is revealed in the tension between unity and difference while at the same time exceeding this tension.

Connected with the recognition that the Christian narrative (and, therefore, Christian doctrine) functions *hyperphatically* is the consideration of the interruptive event in discourse. Boeve argues that a theology that is concerned to draw from postmodern philosophy in the consideration of Christian discourse must be open to *le différend*—the elusive moment, the event of difference—

⁶⁰ See O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*.

⁶¹ See Boeve, “CP,” 592. See my extended discussion on this in Ch. 6.

⁶² For more on this process, see n. 58, in the present chapter.

⁶³ See p. 164.

that defies predication and interrupts the discourse.⁶⁴ On one level, the qualifications, affirmations and negations of the classical articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity reflects (and witnesses to) the controversies and arguments amongst the Council fathers in the lead up to Nicaea I and Constantinople, and their desire to settle the debate by affirming orthodox belief.⁶⁵ On another level, just as Boeve argues in relation to the doctrine of Chalcedon, the doctrine of the Trinity (with its internal paradox) points to the recognition that Truth-as-such cannot be contained in the words of the doctrine.⁶⁶ They can only refer to the mystery that they seek to express. The excess that cannot be contained in the words of the doctrine refers to the truth of the mystery itself.

In his exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, Boeve highlights the Church's teaching on "the sacramental character of Revelation."⁶⁷ With recourse to the encyclical, he argues that the truth of revelation is made present by faith and the "truth of faith has a eucharistic character. ... It becomes truly present without being ontologically available."⁶⁸ In John Paul II's words, "the knowledge proper to faith does not destroy the mystery; it only reveals it more."⁶⁹ This insight assists us to consider the doctrine of the Trinity to the extent that in the trinitarian formula—the affirmation that God is One and Three—the truth of revelation becomes present in a way that cannot be grasped ontologically. We could say that the notion of grace, too, functions in a sacramental way: poured out to all in the sending of the Spirit, grace takes on a sacramental character. In his exegesis of *Fides et ratio*, Boeve goes on to say that all speech concerning this truth of faith "takes on a sacramental character, and so only from this sacramental perspective is it understood as absolute, universal and even objective. ... Witness to this truth occurs within the strict frame of the faith option."⁷⁰

This understanding of truth has clear implications for the Christian affirmation of God as Trinity in the context of cultural and religious diversity. In the discussion of the relationship between the particular and the universal, above, I argued for the necessity of a recognition of the boundaries of trinitarian discourse and I noted that to do so affirms the mystery of revelation. In chapter 5, I highlighted Boeve's argument, in his "Christus Postmodernus," that truth is relational; it cannot be possessed or appropriated, but one can stand in relation to truth, remain in it and witness to it.⁷¹ Thus, the truth of Christian faith refers to the relationship between God's revelation in Word and

⁶⁴ See Boeve, "CP," 579. See my discussion of Lyotard's work on *le différend* in Chs. 2 and 7. In Ch. 2, I discussed Boeve's engagement with Lyotard and his re-imaging of *le différend* as the interruptive event of grace.

⁶⁵ For an extensive overview of the history related to the development of the doctrine, see Toom, *Classical Trinitarian Theology*.

⁶⁶ Boeve, "CP," 579.

⁶⁷ FR, 13.

⁶⁸ Boeve, "SDDD," 127.

⁶⁹ FR, 13.

⁷⁰ Boeve, "SDDD," 128. For further discussion on this point, see p. 126.

⁷¹ "CP," 579.

Spirit and to the empty space created by “Truth-as-such” that can never be filled.⁷² Boeve contends that Christian truth, therefore, is “lived existentially” in the very life of the believer.⁷³ Applying this to our consideration of trinitarian theology, the openness of the Christian believer towards the “traces of God” or the “stirrings of the Spirit” outside the Christian narrative need not lead to the confirmation of a hegemonic truth claim.⁷⁴ Instead, it allows for the recognition of the Christian affirmation that our understanding of the revelation of God deepens in time and context, while at the same time always remaining beyond our grasp.

Apophatics and the narrative of Pentecost

When we consider the notion that God is revealed as triune, we are further challenged by the question of how we might understand the divine missions in such a way as to recognise and respect plurality and heterogeneity in the context of today. While the recognition of *le différend* assists us to consider the excess of meaning in the doctrine when thinking the relationship between the three persons (God in Godself), it also assists us to consider the revelation of the triune God in the economy. Karl Rahner’s articulation of the purpose of the missions of Word and Spirit is that the Spirit is poured out as gracious gift to bring humankind into union with the Incarnate Word, who, through his death and resurrection, brings all of creation into union with the Father.⁷⁵ In the discussion of Rahner’s work in chapter 6, I highlighted the limitations of this approach for today’s context of pluralisation and secularisation. If we are to take seriously the relationship between faith and context, today, we must reconsider the role of the missions in the revelation of God as Trinity. From the perspective of Christian faith, Christ is the definitive revelation of God—God’s self-gift to humankind—however, as I argued above, this affirmation need not lead to the positing of Christian faith as a metanarrative, aimed at totalisation.⁷⁶ Boeve contends that in the Christian narrative itself, the space for the revelation of God is left open.⁷⁷

⁷² See “CP,” 579. Boeve writes, “Having become conscious of the finitude, the particularity and the contingency of existence, no one can claim to have access to Truth-as-such. One does not possess truth; absolute truth claims are no longer plausible. From now on, the space for Truth-as-such is left empty. ... Although one indeed is unable to take hold of the truth, one can, so to speak, remain in it, or relate to it. This happens when one vigilantly holds on to the tension between the always contextually determined articulation of particular truth claims and the irreducible inarticulate Truth-as-such—i.e., when one is aware of the unsurpassable gulf between one’s own particular narrative and the *in se* inexpressible Truth to which it bears witness. Truth, then, can no longer be regarded in terms of appropriation but as relational—no longer as something one can acquire.”

⁷³ “SDDD,” 125.

⁷⁴ *GIH*, 105, 109, 138; McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 139.

⁷⁵ See Rahner, *Trinity*, 91-99.

⁷⁶ As I explained in Ch. 2, the term “metanarrative” (or “master narrative”) comes from the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Boeve defines the master narrative as a narrative that makes a “cognitive claim” to truth and legitimises this claim to truth from within the narrative itself. Moreover, it holds “universal pretensions,” claiming to “speak of, and on behalf of, the whole of humanity.” Boeve, *LT*, 21, 21-22.

⁷⁷ “CP,” 579.

My reading of the narrative of Pentecost affirms this insight. The narrative of Christ, from the incarnation to the resurrection and even to the ascension, is firmly rooted in history, in the particularities of time and context. At the same time, the narrative makes it clear that Christ transcends this history in the Spirit. As we saw in the reaction of the crowd at Pentecost, something changed with the sending of the Spirit. The onlookers were “amazed and astonished” (Acts 2:12) at the theophany they had just witnessed. This theophany is not limited to “the sound, like the rush of a violent wind” (v. 2) that signalled the descending of the Spirit amongst the disciples, but can also be identified in the crowd’s witness to the transformation of the disciples: suddenly, the disciples could speak in the native languages of the surrounding regions, from the far East to the far West (2:6-11).⁷⁸ In the pouring out of the Spirit, the “superabundant” love between Father and Son is poured out into the world as the gracious gift of God.⁷⁹ In the pouring out of the Spirit, the story of Christ is continuously *kept* open.

Reflexivity and Performativity

Each of the conceptual approaches I have engaged thus far in the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity relates to the ways in which a theology of interruption assists contemporary Christian theology to consider the hermeneutical impulses of the Christian narrative. As Boeve contends, the theology of interruption is a “radical hermeneutical approach” that recognises the *particularity* of the Christian narrative and draws on contemporary philosophical *apophatics* to consider how we might think about the truth of the narrative in the context of today.⁸⁰ Such an approach, he contends, is not aimed at escaping Christian narrativity, but at taking it into account to the fullest extent possible.⁸¹ To a degree, the third and fourth conceptual approaches in a theology of interruption—*reflexivity* and *performativity*—have already been implied in the use of apophatics and the recognition of particularity, as each of these approaches requires a level of reflexivity on the part of the interpreter and each implies the performance of a theology of interruption. However, the notions of reflexivity and performativity refer not only to a hermeneutical engagement with the Christian narrative, but also to a hermeneutical engagement with the self and the world; that is, with the living expressions of Christian identity. In the discussion below, I will take the final two conceptual approaches in turn,

⁷⁸ Claude Romano’s work on the phenomenology of the event is useful here. He writes, “There is no event without change. ... In order for there to be an event, a change has to appear, or rather, the event is the appearing of the change itself. ... In order for a change to rate as an event, it has to appear to someone as change, that is, it has to modify something from the point of view of one’s experience. In order for there to be an event, it does not suffice that something changes; it is necessary for this change to make a change *for* someone. The event is not the transformation itself, it is the appearing of that transformation in the world, or yet again: it is the taking place of that transformation, its occurrence.” Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing* (New York: Fordham, 2016), 217.

⁷⁹ I am borrowing this term from both Moltmann and Tanner. See pp. 186 and 209 in the present work.

⁸⁰ Boeve, *LT*, 75.

⁸¹ See “TT,” 95; and “RTPI,” 199.

to consider the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, as they do have elements that set them apart from one another. However, in the space between them, I will discuss the shared element—the element of reflexive critical praxis—which, as we will see, has important implications for *living* trinitarian faith today.

Reflexivity

In chapter 5, I summarised the ways in which the notion of reflexivity functions in a theology of interruption, and this summary bears repeating here. First, the notion of reflexivity refers to a critical hermeneutical approach that brings together the old and the new, holding continuity and discontinuity in tension and allowing this tension to propel the process of recontextualisation (or, faith seeking understanding in the context of today). Second, I noted that it allows the hermeneut to bear witness to the interruptive event that otherwise remains silent in a text (or discourse, or experience), not only as a way of opening up the discourse in and of itself but also as a way of opening it onto the possibility of new interruptions. Finally, it allows for the recognition of the role of the Christian narrative in shaping and determining Christian identity as well as the recognition of the interruptive role that the contemporary critical consciousness can play in assisting Christians to understand their identity more deeply.

In a consideration of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity through the lens of a theology of interruption, the notion of reflexivity plays an important role of its own, despite its overlap with the categories related to particularity and apophatics. Considering the first way in which reflexivity functions, recall the discussion in chapter 4, where I noted the ways in which the Old Testament scriptures interrupt each other. I pointed out, there, that the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures reflects the story of a people coming to terms with what it means to be in relationship with God; thus, it reflects the peoples' qualification of God's revelation throughout history. I argued that the scriptures imply a reflective critical consciousness that continually considers the new in light of the old and *qualifies* the old by way of the new. In the New Testament, we see the same reflective critical consciousness exemplified in the evangelists' use of prophetic texts to assist readers to understand Christ's ministry, death and resurrection (consider, again, Luke's insertion of Joel's prophecy into Peter's sermon at the Pentecost, Acts 2:17-21). In Boeve's articulation of a theology of interruption, this reflective critical consciousness becomes *reflexive*. It stands for a disposition of openness to the interruption of the new and to the impetus that this provides for the reconsideration of the old. It considers the constant tension between continuity and discontinuity and recognises the important role that each plays in the recontextualisation of the narrative.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as we know it today, is the result of multiple points of recontextualisation in the history of the tradition. It is the culmination of the process of bringing the New Testament revelation of the Word and the Spirit into dialogue with the philosophical critical

consciousness of the early centuries of the Church, and most recently into dialogue with modernity (of course, with many debates and deliberations in between). As I noted above, the articulation of the doctrine after Constantinople, with its qualifications, affirmations and negations, reflects the context in which the Council fathers sought to make sense of the narrative articulated in the New Testament, as well as the arguments that took place in the first four centuries of the developing Church. In their deliberations, the fathers of the Church turned to fourth-century Greek philosophy, which provided the terms (*hypostasis* and *homoousios*, for example) and framework for their articulation of definitive teachings that they hoped would put an end to the debate.⁸² By drawing from the philosophical critical consciousness of the time, the fathers were able to qualify orthodox Christian faith in a way that had been precluded in the centuries prior. In modernity, as I discussed in chapter 6, the modern philosophical critical consciousness, with its focus on the subject and immediate experience, allowed for Christian theologians, such as Rahner and his contemporaries, to recontextualise the Christian narrative so as to renew its emphasis on the role of trinitarian faith in relation to the world. In each case, the old has met the new and each new context has interrupted the narrative, compelling its recontextualisation while maintaining a continuity with the Christian story.

With the interruption of the postmodern critical consciousness, and its calls for the recognition of difference, its subversion of rational progressions and its attempt to unsettle the universal pretensions of metaphysics, the new once again necessarily interrupts the old, but this time, the interruption highlights a tension between continuity and discontinuity and seeks to keep this tension open. The dialogue between theology and the postmodern critical consciousness ruptures any Christian claims that tend towards absolutes, particularly when the notion of truth is at stake. While this may unsettle those who seek to posit the truth of Christian faith over and against other faith traditions and worldviews, Boeve contends that a proper understanding of truth in relation to Christian faith (that is, truth as relational) provides an opportunity for the renewal of Christian faith in the contemporary context.⁸³ Indeed, in my examination of the doctrine of the Trinity and the revelation of the Spirit at Pentecost through the lens of particularity and apophatics, I have demonstrated some of the ways the postmodern critical consciousness (as it presents in Boeve's theology of interruption) can be fruitful for thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity and its implications for Christian life.

Reflexivity and the narrative of Pentecost

Considering the notion of reflexivity in relation to our theme raises further insights to this effect, particularly if we return to the narrative of the revelation of the Spirit at Pentecost. I have argued

⁸² See p. 164.

⁸³ Boeve, *TC*, 74.

that by reading the narrative of Pentecost through the lens of a theology of interruption, the tension between the universal and the particular comes to the fore and the recognition of the openness of the narrative to the onlookers (the disciples' "others") is highlighted. This openness does not simply refer to the commissioning of the disciples to evangelise the onlookers, as most readings of the text would have it, but to the sending of the grace of God to "all flesh" (Acts 2:17). Indeed, with the interruption of the Spirit into the story, both the disciples and the onlookers are changed irrevocably. Here, the dynamic of continuity and discontinuity comes into play. The adjectives the evangelist chooses to signify the crowd's response—"amazed," "bewildered," "perplexed" (v. 6, 7, 12)—signify a disposition of openness and receptivity to the rupture of the new. This response becomes even more striking with Peter's assertion that the crowd had been responsible for the crucifixion (v.23).

While Christians can never fully grasp the mysterious revelation of God to the world in the Spirit of Christ, the open and receptive response of the onlookers (as both witnesses to and receivers of the pouring out of the Spirit) becomes a possible model for the Christian response to the mysterious stirrings of the Spirit today. In the current, detraditionalised context, many Christians experience a feeling of isolation from the traditional practices of faith and might more easily align themselves with the onlookers than the disciples in the narrative of the Pentecost. While in traditional Christian discourses, the model of the disciples is presented as the most authentic way of living a Christian life, the exclusion of the crowd as possible models leads us to forget that there are a myriad of Christians today who might better identify with those who are "outside." Moreover, the response of the onlookers potentially interrupts the complacency of the "insiders," causing them to consider their own responses to the stirrings of the Spirit today. The narrative of the Pentecost, understood in this way, can assist us to consider the notion of reflexivity as a conceptual approach that is open to the interruption of God as well as (or because of) the interruption of other religious or cultural worldviews. Such an interruption potentially causes the Christian to reflect on his or her own Christian identity and the ways in which it is lived in the world today.

Reflexive critical praxis: the point at which reflexivity and performativity meet

Earlier, in the exploration of apophatics as an approach to trinitarian theology, I noted in passing Boeve's contention that Christian truth is "lived existentially" in the life of the believer.⁸⁴ Considering the doctrine of the Trinity with the recognition of the reflexive critical praxis of postmodernity allows us to further consider this insight, and for this, we return to Boeve's assertion that "dialogue is the essence of God."⁸⁵ In fact, in *Theology at the Crossroads*, Boeve goes so far as to say that "God is dialogue."⁸⁶ This understanding of God is certainly not new. McEvoy argues to this effect, through his

⁸⁴ "SDDD," 125.

⁸⁵ *TC*, 193.

⁸⁶ *TC*, 193, emphasis mine.

reading of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and it is consistent with the approach others have taken in their consideration of God as Trinity.⁸⁷ Walter Kasper, for example, writes in his book, *The God of Jesus Christ*: “The divine persons are not only in dialogue, they *are* dialogue. The Father is pure self-enunciation and address to the Son as his Word; the Son is a pure hearing and heeding of the Father and therefore pure fulfilment of his mission; the Holy Spirit is pure reception, pure gift. These personal relations are reciprocal but they are not interchangeable.”⁸⁸

We know from the discussion of apophatics in the present work (particularly on the use *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*) that the predicate in Boeve’s affirmation, “God is dialogue,” points both to the nature of God and beyond “God” to the truth to which the predicate bears witness. Boeve’s Christology, which he articulates in “Christus Postmodernus,” again provides the reading key: he argues that as the Word of God made flesh, Christ embodies the tension between the word (the words of the narrative) and the Word itself (the Logos).⁸⁹ In *Crossroads*, this understanding of the relationship between word and Word can be seen in Boeve’s conception of dialogue in relation to God, particularly if we consider the text preceding his statement that “God is dialogue”:

Such a Christian concept of dialogue is founded in the manner in which God reveals Godself as Word in history. The Word does not proceed [from] the dialogue, but is the first move in the dialogue itself. In the Word, God ventures Godself to the dialogue with humanity. So, God reveals Godself as a dialogical God, a God who searches for dialogue with human beings, gives Godself in such a dialogue, and does so to the utmost in the revelation of the Word in Jesus Christ—something which is, as we learn from Scripture, a risk even for God, intrinsically marked by vulnerability, with the cross as its ultimate consequence. *From the manner in which God has revealed Godself to humanity in history, we have not learnt that there is first a God who then enters into dialogue, but that God is dialogue.* Dialogue belongs to the essence of God.⁹⁰

Boeve goes on to suggest the implications that his affirmation of God as dialogue has for the human person, as *imago Dei*. He contends that in the dialogical revelation of God in the Word, “the human being finds himself or herself in the answering position: even more, this dialogue determines who the human being fundamentally is: a being already in dialogue.”⁹¹

This notion has implications not only for the dialogue between God and the human person (recall Rahner’s work on the revelation of God as God’s self-communication to humankind, which I discussed at length in chapter 6) but also for the dialogue between human persons in the pluralising context. Again, James McEvoy’s work is useful here. He argues, “Human agency is inherently dialogical. Dialogue describes the human being in relationship to language, culture, the good, and the

⁸⁷ See McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*.

⁸⁸ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (London: SCM, 1983), 290.

⁸⁹ See Boeve, “CP,” 586-90, 592.

⁹⁰ *TC*, 193, emphasis mine.

⁹¹ *TC*, 193.

other. It is the dynamism through which humans become who they are.”⁹² Moreover, he contends, as God is essentially dialogical, “the Christian concept of dialogue must be rooted in the Trinity.”⁹³

While Boeve is concerned with the consideration of God’s revelation in the Word as dialogue and the human person’s response to God in faith, let us, for a moment, consider the notion of God as dialogue in relation to God *in se*, by retrieving Denys the Areopagite’s insight that God is “difference-in-unity” and “unity-in-difference.”⁹⁴ In Beierwaltes and Hedley’s explanation of Denys’ work, this axiom is expanded to say that the Trinity is “unified through difference and differentiated through unity.”⁹⁵ Of course, if God is dialogue, the perichoretic interconnectedness of the three persons means that dialogue is essential to each hypostasis, but more than this, if we consider the affirmation that God is dialogue in the same way that we have other affirmations of faith throughout this chapter, we can say that the tension between unity and distinction in the Godhead points to a sustained dialogue between the persons of the Trinity—a dialogue that sustains the difference between them.⁹⁶

It is here that the reflexive critical praxis of a theology of interruption comes to the fore. Boeve argues that when in dialogue with the “other,” the Christian is called to “a praxis of both being interrupted and interrupting—respecting the very otherness of the other while at the same time also becoming the other of the other.”⁹⁷ If we take seriously McEvoy’s contention (through his exegesis of the documents of the Second Vatican Council) that the Christian concept of dialogue must be rooted in the Trinity, together with my contention (via Denys the Areopagite) that the dialogue between the persons of the Trinity holds the tension between difference and unity, we could argue in theological terms that when Christians dialogue with others in such a way as to respect “the very otherness of the other,” the Trinity (the ultimate Dialogue that holds difference in unity) is made present *sacramentally*. When thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity and its relationship to Christian life,

⁹² McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 168.

⁹³ *Leaving Christendom*, 138. “From a Christian perspective, the ultimate reason for conceiving of human agency in dialogical terms is that the life of the Trinity is inherently dialogical.”

⁹⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, II, 4, 640D-641C. This translation can be found in Beierwaltes and Hedley, “Unity and Trinity,” 7.

⁹⁵ “Unity and Trinity,” 7. Beierwaltes and Hedley cite *Divine Names*, II, 4; 127, 7 and II, 1, 123, 9; 124, 10. In Denys’ words, “[God] becomes differentiated in a unified way. [God] is multiplied and yet remains singular. [God] is dispensed to all without ceasing to be a unity. ... [God] remains one amid the plurality, unified through the procession, and full amid the emptying act of differentiation.” Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, II. 11. 649B.

⁹⁶ Sarah Coakley refers somewhat to this when she suggests (in a phrase I highlighted in Ch. 7, p. 200, 207) that the love in the Spirit “presses not only outwards to include others, but also inwards (and protectively) to sustain the difference between the persons, thus preserving a perfect harmonious balance between union and distinction.” Coakley, *GSS*, 24.

⁹⁷ Boeve, *LT*, 99.

Aquinas' maxim seems pertinent here: "The act of the believer does not terminate in the proposition but in the reality [signified by the proposition]." ⁹⁸

Performativity

In many ways, a theology of interruption is a performative action; it enacts an interruption of a theological text so that it can be considered in light of new cultural or philosophical insights. Additionally, a theology of interruption allows us to see the ways in which Christian doctrine can function performatively in theological discourse. In the discussion throughout this chapter, it has hopefully become clear that the doctrine of the Trinity defies the positing of a singular, univocal, hegemonic understanding of the meaning of the doctrine or its implications for Christian life. Instead, it opens up the possibilities for a hermeneutical engagement with the God of Christian faith. In his "Christus Postmodernus," Boeve argues that the Christological doctrine articulated at Chalcedon "attempts to express what, as a formula, it does," by highlighting the tension between revelation and concealment. ⁹⁹ In my consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption, I have attempted to show that the doctrine articulated at Nicaea I and Constantinople could be conceived in a similar vein. The doctrine of the Trinity itself, reflected in the formula, "God is Father, Son and Spirit, one God in three persons," works performatively to refer to the mystery of God as triune, without containing the mystery or essentialising it. Indeed, the formula points to the ultimate mystery of God as the tensive difference between unity and distinction. The recognition of this tensive difference in God supports Boeve's project for the recontextualisation of the Christian narrative that considers God as the interruptive event of difference that breaks into and breaks open closed, hegemonic narratives. ¹⁰⁰

In chapter 5, through my examination of the three case studies of Boeve's work, I argued that the theological-hermeneutical category of interruption functions not only as a means by which to understand a text more deeply, but by using this approach, the text itself potentially becomes interruptive: Christians are compelled to re-read Christian texts with a contemporary critical consciousness and to reflect on the implications of the texts for our understanding of both context and tradition. Moreover, as I noted in chapter 5 and as we have seen in the consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life, here, the performative nature of a theology

⁹⁸ *ST*, 2-2, q.1, a. 2, ad 2. This translation is cited in Ormond Rush, "Sensus Fidei: Faith "Making Sense" of Revelation," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2001): 242. A slightly different version of this maxim (without the addendum, "signified by the proposition") appears in McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 168.

⁹⁹ Boeve, "CP," 385.

¹⁰⁰ See *LT*, 96-7.

of interruption highlights the notion that the approach is not only intra-theological but also *political*. It is a postmodern political theology.¹⁰¹

In my hermeneutical engagement with the doctrine of the Trinity and the narrative of the Pentecost, I have tried to be true to the insights posited by Boeve in his own application of his theology of interruption. To this effect, I have aimed to continue Boeve's consideration of the Christian narrative as interruptive by deliberately drawing from his Christology—a Christology he arrived at by way of a theology of interruption. Rather than enter into a critical engagement with Boeve's Christology, I took as my task the extension of the insights of his theology of interruption to the consideration of trinitarian theology. To this effect, I used the theology of interruption performatively to demonstrate how it might function in the broader context of theology today, and to some extent, to consider whether his approach could be repeated by others seeking to deepen their engagement with Christian faith. In short, I have tested Boeve's claim that using a theology of interruption as a "reading key" allows for a hermeneutical engagement with the text that recognises the basic attitude of openness, the recognition of difference/s and the critical engagement with self and world exemplified in the open Christian narrative.¹⁰²

The Theological and Contextual Potential of a Theology of Interruption

In part II of the present work, I have considered the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity. I have explored some modern and postmodern responses to this theme, and I have offered my own reflections through the lens of a theology of interruption. In chapters 6 and 7, I brought modern and postmodern trinitarian theologies into dialogue with Graham Ward's articulation of three theological horizons opened up by postmodern thinking, and in chapter 7, I considered the implications of Wisse's work on the recontextualisation of participation as a theological category in light of postmodern concerns. By highlighting some of the limitations of the approaches I discussed, I drew attention to the changing cultural and religious landscape and emphasised the need (in line with Boeve's argument) for Christian theology to take seriously the interruption of this changing context in the task of faith seeking understanding.

Much has been said throughout the present work about Boeve's explicit engagement with postmodern thinkers. I have explored his extensive dialogue with Lyotard, and the influence of Derrida and Marion on the development of his approach. Through an explication of the philosophical-contextual approaches of a theology of interruption (chapter 5), I highlighted the ways

¹⁰¹ See p. 82. This insight has important implications for my discussion (below) on the ability of a theology of interruption to mitigate some of the limitations of the postmodern approaches to trinitarian theology that I raised in Ch. 7.

¹⁰² For Boeve's reference to the use of a theology of interruption as a "reading key," see Boeve, "BMADGS," 303; *TC*, 53; "SDDD," 133-34. For a discussion of the structure of an open narrative, in light of Boeve's work, see Ch. 2 of the present work.

in which a theology of interruption explicitly engages the critical impulses and ideas of postmodern philosophy and culture, and in the present chapter, I have tested Boeve's approach by considering a central Christian theme through its lens. While I have by no means attempted to provide a developed trinitarian theology here, the work I have done allows for some conclusions to be drawn about the possible fruitfulness of a theology of interruption to mitigate some of the concerns I raised in relation to other contemporary approaches.

As I utilised in chapters 6 and 7 Graham Ward's helpful summary of three theological horizons that are opened up by postmodern thinking, it is perhaps pertinent again to recall his work in order to consider the potential strengths and limitations of a theology of interruption when engaged in a contemporary reflection on Christian texts and themes. To restate, Ward contends that postmodern thinking "pushes modernism to its margins" and opens up "its circles of development and linear progressions," drawing attention to:

First, the role of the unsayable and unrepresentable as it both constitutes and ruptures all that is said and presented. *Secondly*, the self as divided, multiple, or even abyssal, and therefore never self-enclosed but always open onto that which transcends its own self-understanding (rather than simply being an agent and a *cogito*). *Thirdly*, the movement of desire initiated and fostered by the other, that which lies outside and for future possession, the other which is also prior and cannot be gathered into the rational folds of present consciousness.¹⁰³

With Boeve's explicit engagement of Lyotard's *le différend*, the "unsayable and unrepresentable" plays a fundamental role in a theology of interruption. It underpins the use of apophatics (understood here as the movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*), and it supports Boeve's call for the use of a reflexive critical praxis, engaging the approaches of reflexivity and performativity in the task of theology. Moreover, with its recognition of the "other" as the condition of possibility for the interruption of God, the important place of dialogue is brought to the fore, not to encapsulate, subsume or gather the other into rationality, but in such a way as to uphold the particularity of the other and leave open the possibility of interruption.¹⁰⁴ A further word on these insights in relation to their application in the present chapter will assist us to illustrate the potential of a theology of interruption as a lens through which theology might proceed today.

In the discussion of the reflexive critical praxis of a theology of interruption, above, I noted Boeve's contention that the Christian is called to "a praxis of both being interrupted and interrupting—respecting the very otherness of the other while at the same time also becoming the other of the other."¹⁰⁵ At the heart of this argument is the central element of Boeve's theology of

¹⁰³ Ward, "Postmodern Theology," 325, emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴ On the notion of the "other" as the condition of possibility for the interruption of God, recall my discussion in Ch. 4 on Christ as the paradigm of interruption (p. 92ff).

¹⁰⁵ Boeve, *LT*, 99.

interruption: his re-imagining of Lyotard's *le différend* as the interruptive grace-event of God.¹⁰⁶ His argument to this effect is summarised in the following passage, from *Lyotard and Theology*:

We asked the question ... of whether, from a theological perspective, the terminology of grace in a sound theological discourse could function as the word "event" does in Lyotard's discourse. 'Grace' then would be considered 'the naming of the unnameable gift of love by the Unnameable, the One who is not merely part of the Christian narrative but which radically transcends it in principle.' *God would then be understood as the Other who becomes visible in the concrete other, especially in the excluded other. God becomes impalpably revealed in the 'graced event' which interrupts our narrative.* As the interrupting, open-breaking [sic] Other, God calls us out of our closed narratives and summons us to conversion, to open up our narrative for God's coming. Precisely because God does not have a place in our narrative, God becomes the driving force behind the critical praxis of openness, fostering forms of engagement which constitute a Christian open narrative. Indeed, it would seem that the other who challenges the Christian faith is not as such an external other, but may well *reveal itself from within Christian faith*. From within a Christian hermeneutics, the encounter with the other may be the place where traces of God become manifest.¹⁰⁷

In Boeve's consideration of the event of grace, God is revealed in the interruption that occurs when the narrative of the believer is opened onto the new. His approach calls for a critical praxis on the part of Christian believers to challenge hegemonic narratives and open up discourses that exclude or subsume difference and, in doing so, recognise that their narratives, too, must be opened. Through his dialogue with Lyotard's work, Boeve argues that "the task of postmodern philosophy is to bear witness to the differend" in critique and praxis (that is, to criticise "linking strategies [that] forget or exclude the differend" and to look for phrases "that evoke the aspect of undecideability").¹⁰⁸ Therefore, he argues, the task of postmodern *theology* is political: Christians are called to witness to the interruptive grace-event that calls attention to the excluded other.¹⁰⁹

In chapter 3, I discussed Boeve's intention to continue the program of political theology while radically interrupting it.¹¹⁰ It is here that we see the potential for a trinitarian theology approached through the lens of a theology of interruption to mitigate the concern I raised of Tanner's approach in chapter 7, that it tends towards a paternalistic relationship between the Christian and the "other." In Tanner's approach, the Christian is transformed through grace, which effects an overflow of God's gifts to the world in Christian praxis.¹¹¹ In the discussion of her work, I raised the question of whether the "other" might also become gift, challenging and stirring the Christian to new ways of thinking about God.¹¹² While Tanner's approach is reminiscent of that of Johann Baptist Metz, who argues that Christian theology plays an important role in the interruption of the context, and especially in relation to the experience of suffering, Tanner does not take into

¹⁰⁶ Recall my discussion to this effect in Ch. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Boeve, *LT*, 96-7, first emphasis mine, second original.

¹⁰⁸ "LCMN," 301.

¹⁰⁹ "LCMN," 310-11.

¹¹⁰ See "LCMN," 311; also, "IPT."

¹¹¹ See Tanner, *JHT*, 67-95.

¹¹² See p. 211.

account the potentially interruptive impact of the context for Christian self-understanding.¹¹³ As I discussed in chapter 4, Boeve nuances Metz's notion of interruption to recognise the *mutual* interruption that takes place between the Christian tradition and the context of today, and he extends it to consider the implications of the interruptive event of God from a Christian theological perspective. In doing so, Boeve argues that it is God who effects the interruption.¹¹⁴

In my engagement with the narrative of the Pentecost throughout this chapter, I highlighted the interruptive nature of the sending of the Spirit, the breaking-open of the Christian story that the Spirit enacted, and the transformation that resulted in those who witnessed the event. Against the claim that the Pentecost is the reversal of Babel, I argued that we can consider the un-confusion of languages that causes the crowd to be "amazed and astonished" (Acts 2:4, 7) not as the arrival of a unified language that relativises the differences between peoples, but as God's pouring out of Godself into the world in such a way that differences are embraced. I proposed that the interruption of the Spirit recounted in the narrative of the Pentecost effects a transformation in both the disciples and the crowd and that in each case, the transformation occurs not as a result of the actions of the "other," but as a result of the agency of the Spirit. To this effect, I suggested that the disposition of openness to the revelation of God that can be seen in the reaction of the crowd might become a model for the Christian response to the mysterious stirrings of the Spirit today. Here, we see the potential of a theology of interruption to recognise, reflect and respect the particularity and contextuality of discourses and to affirm the possibility of the mutual interruption that can take place when a Christian enters into dialogue with a person who holds a different religious or cultural worldview. Considering the narrative of the Pentecost through the lens of a theology of interruption opened the possibility for new hermeneutical insights. On my reading, through the lens of a theology of interruption, the narrative of the Pentecost brings to light the insight that when the Christian encounters the "other" in dialogue, just as the Christian is the potential locus of the interruptive event of God (through witness to Christ), the "other" also becomes the potential locus of the interruptive event of God, challenging and opening the Christian's self-understanding onto the world.

Extending the reflections to the consideration of trinitarian relations, I considered the *hyperphatic* nature of the doctrine of the Trinity. In doing so, I noted Denys the Areopagite's contention that God is "difference-in-unity" and "unity-in-difference."¹¹⁵ In other words, God is revealed in the tension between unity and difference while at the same time exceeding this tension. While the doctrine of the Trinity affirms the dialogical nature of God, the recognition that God is difference-in-unity nuances the understanding of dialogue in relation to God. As I noted, the tension between unity and difference in the Godhead points to a sustained dialogue between the three

¹¹³ See Metz, *FH*, and my discussion of Metz' work in Ch. 3.

¹¹⁴ See Boeve, *LT*, 96-97. See p. 252, above for extended quotation.

¹¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, II, 4, 640D-641C. This translation in Beierwaltes and Hedley, "Unity and Trinity," 7.

persons, a dialogue that sustains the difference between them. Considering this insight through the lens of the reflexive critical praxis of a theology of interruption, I argued that the recognition of God as “difference-in-unity” reminds Christians of the boundaries of trinitarian discourse and leads Christians to dialogue with the “other” in such a way as to witness to the mystery of revelation. I proposed that when Christians dialogue with others in ways that respect “the very otherness of the other”—when they seek not to subsume the differences of other faith traditions into the Christian narrative, but allow the insights from other traditions to interrupt and deepen their own understanding—the Trinity (the ultimate Dialogue that holds difference in unity) is made present sacramentally. Considered in this way, together with the insights we summarised above in relation to the revelation of the Spirit at Pentecost, a trinitarian theology approached by way of a theology of interruption has the potential to undermine any tendencies towards paternalism that might accompany the preferential option for the poor so fruitfully engaged in political theology.

A further insight is worth noting in relation to the sacramental nature of trinitarian faith. In chapter 7, I discussed Maarten Wisse’s concern to move beyond the notion of participation in God because it can lead to the ontological conflation of God and world. Recall that Wisse highlighted three interrelated movements typical of theologies based on an ontology of participation: “a distinct moment of negative theology,” the contention that “everything that is is in the Absolute,” and the “pan-mediation of the world.”¹¹⁶ Like Wisse, Boeve is concerned to offer a theological approach that moves beyond what he calls a “pre-modern ‘participation’ in salvific presence [and] a modern ‘anticipation’ of the ultimate identity” and, in doing so, avoid a reliance on metaphysics and the potential positing of an onto-theology.¹¹⁷ To this effect, as I have foregrounded in the present work, Boeve’s use of apophatics goes far beyond a simple affirmation and negation. The retrieval of mystical theology (*tres viae*) together with the use of the philosophical notion of *hyperphasis* allows Boeve to eschew the ontological tendencies of speech about God.¹¹⁸ While notions of the pan-mediation of the world imply that the world is *in* God, and thus is being progressively transformed and deified, Boeve’s approach focuses not on the transformation of the subject so as to move into union with God, but on the political implications of human transformation through a reflexive engagement with the context. To this end, Boeve’s approach provides a compelling theological response to the question of how Christians might live in relation to God today. While God’s agency is affirmed in the interruptive event of grace, human agency is affirmed in the acceptance of faith and the reflexive critical praxis that ensues.

In his re-imaging of *le différend* as the interruptive grace-event of God (recall the discussion in chapter 4), Boeve considers the sacramental nature of revelation, noting the potential for “traces

¹¹⁶ Wisse, *TBP*, 8. See my discussion on p. 198ff.

¹¹⁷ Boeve, *LT*, 121.

¹¹⁸ Recall the discussion in Ch. 2.

of God” to be revealed in human experience.¹¹⁹ Two excerpts from *Lyotard and Theology* illustrate this point. In the first excerpt (which I also cited earlier), we see the culmination of Boeve’s argument that God interrupts history and continues to do so in the contemporary context:

‘Grace’ [is] considered ‘the naming of the unnameable gift of love by the Unnameable, the One who is not merely part of the Christian narrative but which radically transcends it in principle.’ God would then be understood as the Other who becomes visible in the concrete other, especially in the excluded other. God becomes impalpably revealed in the ‘graced event’ which interrupts our narrative.¹²⁰

In the second passage, Boeve makes it clear that this interruption escapes ontological foundations:

The sacramentality of life, clarified and celebrated in the sacraments, is no longer considered as a form of participation in a divine being, nor as an anticipation of a self-fulfilling development, but as being involved in the tension arising from the interruption of the divine Other into our human narratives, to which the Christian narrative testifies from old. Sacramental living and acting thus presuppose the cultivation of a contemplative openness and testify in word and deed to that which reveals itself in this openness as a trace of God. ... Such a sacramental structuring of human existence has implications which go beyond a theology of the sacraments.¹²¹

In Boeve’s theology of interruption, the interruptive event potentially becomes the sacramental “now-moment” of the interruptive God.¹²² In our consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption, and particularly in the reflection on the revelation of the Spirit at Pentecost, we might say that this sacramental “now-moment” is the moment of the Spirit.¹²³

This leads us to consider a somewhat striking criticism of Boeve’s approach, that his recontextualisation of the Christian narrative based on the postmodern criticism of modernity potentially leads to what Conor Sweeney calls, “a reification of the ‘now,’” or, more alarmingly, “a dictatorship of the present ‘now’ over and against any other epoch.”¹²⁴ In addition to the criticism I noted in chapter 3 by proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, that Boeve places too much emphasis on the context, to the detriment of the tradition, two further concerns seem to be at the heart of this criticism (and those similar to it).¹²⁵ First, that the “new” replaces the “old” to the extent that the current context is considered to be the beginning and end of theological endeavours, that somehow the task of theology is considered to end once the “now” has been appropriated into the Christian narrative. Second, that the rejection of metaphysics for theology leads to a stripping away of the ontological foundations of the Christian narrative to the extent that it leads to what Sweeney

¹¹⁹ See Ch. 3, especially my discussion on the influence of Schillebeeckx on Boeve’s work. Boeve, *GIH*, 105, 109, 138; *LT*, 97, 123.

¹²⁰ *LT*, 97.

¹²¹ *LT*, 123.

¹²² *LT*, 122.

¹²³ See Ch. 4, n. 33.

¹²⁴ Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence*, 125.

¹²⁵ See p. 79.

contends is a “vague” sacramental imagination, where the community itself becomes the locus of sacramental presence.¹²⁶

Taking the second concern first, it seems to me that the sacramental imagination of Boeve’s theology of interruption is far from “vague.” In my consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through its lens, the sacramental nature of the Christian narrative was brought to the fore as an *indispensable* element of the narrative, precisely as “open” to the elusive interruption of God. The presence-absence of God in the sacramental “now-moment” of the Spirit calls Christians towards the new, while at the same time referring to historical revelation. This does not elide a Christian sacramental understanding but interrupts exclusive, legalistic or hegemonic notions of sacramentality. In *Sacramental Presence After Heidegger*, Sweeney questions “the totality” of Heidegger’s rejection of metaphysics and asks, “Is the grounding of discourse by reference to God as *Causa sui* and *Causa efficiens* necessarily toxic to the temporality and historicity of *Dasein*?”¹²⁷ Sweeney’s concern is to consider the possibility of whether or not Christianity can “do without the structural support of ‘classical ontological theology,’” and whether it is “possible to transcend a metaphysics of presence.”¹²⁸ It is beyond the scope of the present work to engage Sweeney’s reading of Heidegger and to enter into the debate about the merits of *retaining* metaphysical constructs in theology. I will simply say here that Sweeney seems to essentialise the desire to “overcome” metaphysics in postmodern thought. Indeed, for Boeve, the influence of Derrida and Lyotard leads him not to seek to “overcome” metaphysics (as though this would be possible), but to interrupt the tendencies of metaphysics to totalise knowledge.¹²⁹ Sweeney criticises Boeve for what he sees as “a general antipathy to a creedal-Catholic sacramental imagination that would inform cultural norms and values” and for his apparent contention that the community becomes the locus of sacramental presence.¹³⁰ On my reading, in Boeve’s approach the potentially hegemonic understanding of sacrament as contained within the confines of Christian faith has simply been interrupted.

On the first concern that seems to underpin Sweeney’s criticism, regarding the reification of the now—that it leads to a replacement of the “old” with the “new”—I offer the following thoughts. As I discussed in chapter 2, with reference to Boeve’s dialogue with Schaeffler, the task of recontextualisation is certainly not new; the tradition, as we know it today, is the result of innumerable recontextualisations throughout its history. In each case, the recontextualisation has not replaced the narrative that has gone before; it has assisted in the handing down of the narrative

¹²⁶ Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence*, 181.

¹²⁷ *Sacramental Presence*, 182.

¹²⁸ *Sacramental Presence*, 126.

¹²⁹ Robyn Horner’s discussion of Boeve’s engagement with Lyotard follows this line. See Robyn Horner, “A Theology of the Differend: Engaging Boeve Engaging Lyotard,” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (2015): 508.

¹³⁰ Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence*, 125.

(as tradition) from context to context in ways that both reflect and challenge the critical consciousness of each epoch. An excerpt from Boeve's *Interrupting Tradition* illustrates this point well:

A non-cumulative, dynamic perspective on the development of tradition, such as recontextualisation, implies that we are not simply receivers of the tradition that comes to us from the past. We are *not only heirs to the inheritance, we are also its testators*. Living tradition is also our responsibility. By way of recontextualisation, we are called to experience and reflect upon Christianity's offer of meaning and to pass it on. This certainly does not mean that the tradition simply adapts itself—some will say 'surrenders' itself—to time and context. What it does imply is that every time and context challenges us to give shape to the message of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ in a contemporary way. If we do not accept this challenge we run the risk of sliding into inauthenticity.¹³¹

In *Lyotard and Theology*, Boeve contends that “the truth of [an open] narrative is ... no longer a matter of true propositions, it is perceived according to the quality of its relation to otherness.”¹³² He concludes, therefore, that “the truth of the Christian tradition [as an open narrative] is bound to the authenticity of the tradition's stance towards the other.”¹³³ A concern that some thinkers have raised in relation to Boeve's argument here is that Christian truth is potentially *only* perceived according to its narrative's relation to otherness. In other words, as Horner argues, the Christian narrative's relation to otherness potentially becomes a “single criterion of continuity.”¹³⁴ We will return to the question of criteria below, but first, let us recall the argument that I have followed throughout the present work: it is precisely within the context of everyday experiences that Christians come to know more deeply the God of Christian faith.¹³⁵ This is Boeve's argument, but it is also mine. Christian experience always exceeds what has been formulated in tradition and always becomes more through engagement with the context. In the context of today, the reality of religious and cultural pluralisation means that Christian faith is *lived* in relation to the “other.” It is precisely in this living that Christians witness, and indeed become witnesses *to*, the God of love. In Boeve's conception, the God of love is conceived as such by means of God's revelation in Christ. Within the Christian narrative is a particular conception of love that by its very nature is open onto the other.

Martin Kočí takes up this discussion in “Fighting Hegemony.”¹³⁶ He argues that the theological consequences of Boeve's contention that truth is no longer considered propositionally

¹³¹ Boeve, *IT*, 24. I have referred to this excerpt at two other points in the present work. See Ch. 2, n. 276, and Ch. 3, n. 162.

¹³² *LT*, 96.

¹³³ *LT*, 96.

¹³⁴ See Robyn Horner, “The Ties that Bind: Believing and Forgetting” (paper presented at the End/s of Religious Community: Challenging Continental Philosophy of Religion II, Vienna, May 16-18, 2018), 7.

¹³⁵ Boeve, *LT*, 96.

¹³⁶ Martin Kočí, “Fighting Hegemony, Saving the Event: Why Theologise with Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Philosophy?,” *Theologica* 7, no. 2 (2017): 105-25.

but *relationally*, are threefold: “first, it implies a Church outside the metanarrative structures; second, it leads to a historically embodied truth of Christianity in which the very historicity is not an obstacle but the very condition of its revelation; and third, theology recognises its limits and confesses that its words always fall short.”¹³⁷ For Kočí, these consequences are considered to be positive. He argues that theologising with postmodern philosophy, or more specifically, theologising with Lyotard by way of a recognition of *le différend* “helps the theologian remember the depth of tradition in its present contextual setting.”¹³⁸ For Boeve, as I noted earlier, this does not mean an escape from Christian narrativity; it means taking the Christian narrative into account to the fullest extent possible.¹³⁹

As Kočí notes, “[s]omeone may rightly argue that such a postmodern perspective prevents us from believing in any truth whatsoever and that it results in a kind of uncertain faith.”¹⁴⁰ Certainly, as Kočí contends, “this is pointed if the differend is taken as another objective—metaphysical—principle,” however, as I have argued, *le différend* cannot be functionalised in this way.¹⁴¹ It escapes predication, is present by *absence* in the open narrative, and can only be *referred* to, lest it become enclosed in the system of predication. To this extent, I agree with Kočí when he contends that “the real challenge is *thinking* from the perspective” of *le différend*, as it means “paying attention to oppressed, excluded voices,” and being open to the conflict that might arise in this paying attention.¹⁴² As Kočí eloquently writes,

Conflict can ... be the engine of thinking because a genuine conflict presupposes the respect for particular identities, including my own. Conflict is not an obstacle to be surpassed on the way to the total unity of truth, but the very path of any meaningful questioning of the truth. ... [T]he Church is not simply an open community of ‘anything goes,’ but the community of devotion to the revealed truth, yet shaken in its certainty about the meaning of this truth. Theology is not the excavation of the present yet, for the moment, somewhat hidden, obscured truth, but conflictual thinking of the presence of truth interrupted by the true absence. Thinking in theology does not result in a more solid theology, understood as full, complete, extensive (although this can also be and surely is a part of thinking); however, theological thinking leads to rewriting theology—thinking-through again and again. Why theologise with Lyotard then? The answer is in the question. Theologising, drawing inspiration from the differend, is opening up. However, this opening up is not meant as a blind reception of the otherness without questioning the other. Rather, it is adopting conflict while engaging with the other and acknowledging this conflict even within ourselves.¹⁴³

¹³⁷ “Fighting Hegemony,” 122.

¹³⁸ “Fighting Hegemony,” 123.

¹³⁹ Boeve, “TT,” 95.

¹⁴⁰ Kočí, “Fighting Hegemony,” 123.

¹⁴¹ “Fighting Hegemony,” 123.

¹⁴² “Fighting Hegemony,” 123. Kočí argues that conflict “can be the engine of thinking because a genuine conflict presupposes the respect for particular identities, including my own. Conflict is not an obstacle to be surpassed on the way to the total unity of truth, but the very path of any meaningful questioning of the truth.”

¹⁴³ “Fighting Hegemony,” 123.

Extending Kočič's insights to consider Boeve's theology of interruption—careful as it is to refer to *le différénd*—we can argue that a theology of interruption is not a matter of setting criteria for what might constitute “a genuine instance of God's sacramental interruption,” as Sweeney requests.¹⁴⁴ Instead, approaching theology by way of a theology of interruption means allowing the conflict that ensues (for both ourselves and the other) when we encounter the other in dialogue to “shake up” the certainty of the narratives by which we live, and to cause us to “think-through again and again” what it means to live in the image of God—the Trinity—today. It requires not only thinking, but also careful discernment.

In this chapter, I have considered the question: How does a theology of interruption help us to understand the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today? While a full, recontextualised account of trinitarian theology remains to be undertaken—perhaps by Boeve in the future—I set out to test the plausibility of an approach that brings a postmodern critical consciousness (as it presents in a theology of interruption) into dialogue with a central theme of Christian faith. In doing so, I considered the potential fruitfulness of a theology of interruption as a lens through which theology might proceed. Contrary to arguments made by some of Boeve's critics, that with its apophatic impetus a theology of interruption potentially empties theology of its roots in the tradition (recall Sweeney's and Schenk's criticisms, which I noted in chapters 2 and 3, respectively), my consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity through its lens took me back to the tradition itself, in all of its history, contingency and complexity.¹⁴⁵ As one of innumerable options for approaching theology that aims towards the task of faith seeking understanding, a theology of interruption provided a means by which my hermeneutical engagement with the tradition could proceed.

Of course, in any theological undertaking, there is the danger that the fruits of theological discernment move away from the central truths of Christian faith (understood sacramentally, as I have discussed in this chapter), and this is no less a danger when theology begins through the lens of a theology of interruption. In chapters 2 and 3, I discussed Boeve's contention that a recontextualised theology holds in tension continuity and discontinuity. This notion relates to both the Christian narrative itself, as it is interrupted by the context, and to the context, which in turn becomes interrupted by the particular Christian narrative.¹⁴⁶ If we were to offer criteria for continuity and discontinuity in a recontextualised theology, I would imagine Boeve to posit “love” as the criterion for continuity (yes, in the singular sense), not by way of an elision of Christian narrativity, nor by way of the *Idea* of Love, as hegemonic and recuperative (vis-à-vis Lyotard's criticism of the Christian narrative). In the open Christian narrative, love is understood in light of the God of love

¹⁴⁴ Sweeney, *Sacramental Presence*, 125.

¹⁴⁵ See pp. 54 and 79.

¹⁴⁶ See Boeve, “PNT,” 422-23; “IPT,” 54; “BW,” 364.

revealed in the person of Christ and in the revelation of the Spirit. It is a love that holds difference-in-unity, and unity-in-difference, a love that does not subsume the other into a hegemonic notion of truth but reveals truth relationally and sacramentally. In this understanding of the Christian narrative, the criterion for discontinuity is clear: the attentiveness to difference that breaks open notions of love that fail to reflect this revealed, trinitarian love. In this way, the irreducible particularity of the Christian narrative does not preclude authentic dialogue with other particular narratives. Other (equally irreducible) particular narratives interrupt the self-understanding of the Christian tradition and compel its recontextualisation when it fails to reflect its religious critical consciousness.

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, a theology of interruption is not a theological method, as such—indeed, by its very nature, it defies pretensions towards orderly, systematic accounts of Christian faith and would, in fact, seek to subvert these accounts with reference to *le différend*—but it is a theological-hermeneutical *approach* to Christian texts that allows interruption to propel a recontextualisation. The fruits of the interruption(s)—the recontextualised theology—will always be particular to time and context, but the theology of interruption itself, open as it is onto the new, can never be enclosed in this way. No particular interruption could ever exhaust the possible interruptions. Thus, a theology of interruption is an ongoing process of continually opening the narrative, the text, or the experience and engaging hermeneutically with it towards an ever-deepening understanding of faith.

In the concluding chapter of the present work, I will summarise the key insights gained from my engagement with the theme of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption, and in discussing a possible limitation of Boeve’s approach, I will argue for its potential pairing with an approach that is more “systematic” in its process but defies systematisation in practice.

Chapter 9. Conclusions

In the present work, I aimed to discern the extent to which the use of a theology of interruption assists in the consideration of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity today. In chapter 1, I indicated my conviction that in today's context, a theological approach that fails to take into account the critical impulses and ideas of contemporary philosophy and culture will cease to speak to the context in any meaningful way, and I argued that it is within a postmodern, pluralising and detraditionalising context that Christians are called to *live* trinitarian faith. As Boeve's approach to theology by way of a theology of interruption explicitly engages the contemporary philosophical and cultural context, it provided a means by which my approach to this central Christian theme could proceed.

In chapter 1, I noted that Boeve develops a theology of interruption on Christological grounds, and that the implications for thinking God's interruption in trinitarian terms are largely absent from his work. While he contends that a theology of interruption is the "endpoint of a theological recontextualisation" of the Christian narrative in light of a postmodern critical consciousness, I have argued throughout the present work that it also constitutes the means by which Boeve recontextualises Christian doctrines, texts and themes.¹ As he is not explicit about the ways in which he engages a theology of interruption as a hermeneutical approach to theological recontextualisation, my task necessarily began with an exegesis of his work. Through a critical examination of three case studies from his corpus, I discerned the philosophical-conceptual approaches that underpin a theology of interruption, and I engaged these approaches as *lenses* through which to consider how we might think Christian life in relation to God (as Trinity) today. As I noted in chapter 1, to think God, as Christians, is to think God in trinitarian terms. As there are no publications to date on the explicit application of Boeve's theology of interruption, apart from those texts written by Boeve himself, the task I have undertaken in the present work is distinctive.

As I have discussed at length, Boeve's theology of interruption brings a postmodern critical consciousness to the task of theology. At the heart of this critical consciousness is a heightened sensibility for the value of difference in the development of individual and communal identity and a concomitant recognition of the plurality of worldviews in the contemporary context. Against modern metanarratives that seek to subsume differences in the pursuit of harmony, the postmodern recognition of difference calls theology to be attuned to the "unpresentable."² Within the structure of language, this "unpresentable" escapes predication; we can only witness to the recognition that there is more to be said and that our words are inadequate. From a theological-contextual perspective, witness to the "unpresentable" mobilises action towards a recognition of the challenge

¹ "TDP," 72.

² Recall the discussion of Lyotard's work in Chs. 2 and 4.

posed by the “other” of Christian discourses, as this challenge is potentially the elusive moment in which God—“the Other” of the Christian narrative—is revealed.³

By its very nature, a theology of interruption affirms a dialogical relationship between the Christian tradition and the contemporary context. The four philosophical-conceptual elements of a theology of interruption—the recognition of particularity, apophatics, reflexivity, and performativity—when used together, allow Christian theologians to dialogue with the context in such a way that the challenges posed by the differences between discourses are welcomed. Theological endeavours proceeding from this perspective remain open for new insights about the relationship between God and the world that might arise from such dialogue and allow for the potential recontextualisation of the Christian narrative as a result.

Considering the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity through the lens of a theology of interruption (the focus of chapter 8) allowed us to explore this central Christian theme in new ways. First, it brought to light the tension between the universal grace of God and the particular narrative of Christian faith. We saw that not only is this tension evident in the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon (recall the discussion of Boeve’s “Christus Postmodernus” in chapter 5), but it is also evident in the revelation of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost. To this effect, I argued for a recognition of the sacramental impetus of the Christian narrative, that is, it points to and makes present (albeit elusively) the truth of Christian faith without containing truth within the borders of its discourse.⁴

Second, my consideration of the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity through the lens of a theology of interruption called to mind the apophatic impetus of the doctrine of the Trinity (considered as a movement of *kataphasis-apophasis-hyperphasis*). I noted that the essential paradox of the doctrine (that God is one God in three Persons, and that the three persons “mutually indwell” in the Godhead) *refers* to the ultimate mystery of God and at the same time affirms the inadequacy of language to express such mystery. I argued that in the doctrine, God is understood to hold difference and unity together in such a way that both difference and unity are constitutive of the Trinity, and that at the same time, the affirmation of both difference and unity in God performs an interruptive function so that the truth of the Trinity escapes this construction. By

³ Boeve writes, “the event as ‘novelty’ breaks open the established narrative, compelling it to bear witness to this ‘novelty’.” Boeve, “CCPC,” 462. On God as “the Other” of the Christian narrative, see *GIH*, 86. See also my discussion on pp. 104-106.

⁴ Recall the discussion of Boeve’s Christology in Chs. 4 and 5, and my consideration of sacramental truth in this regard. The following excerpt from *Lyotard and Theology* (to which I referred on p. 256) summarises Boeve’s argument in relation to this theme. He writes, “From a Christian perspective, the Incarnation stands as the concrete marker of God’s active involvement in the history of humankind. The paschal mystery (crucifixion, death and resurrection) forms the ground of hope for wholeness on behalf of a saving God; even in those experiences of unredeemedness, the hiddenness of God and God’s ‘present absence’ reveal themselves. In each of the sacraments, in a particular way, this ‘dangerous memory’ is commemorated. ... Sacramental living and acting thus presuppose the cultivation of a contemplative openness and testify in word and deed to that which reveals itself in this openness as a trace of God.” *LT*, 123.

highlighting the *hyperphatic* nature of trinitarian discourse, I again affirmed its sacramental impetus: the doctrine of the Trinity points to and makes present the truth of revelation in such a way that the truth cannot be grasped ontologically.

Third, I argued that the recognition of particularity and the use of apophatics when considering the relationship between Christian life and faith in the Trinity leads to a reflexive critical praxis that not only affirms difference in the context of everyday experiences, but also actively welcomes difference as a means by which a deeper understanding of God might proceed. I noted that the dialogical nature of God reflected in the doctrine of the Trinity certainly has implications for Christian life in the sense that McEvoy contends—that “the Christian concept of dialogue must be rooted in the Trinity”—but a consideration of trinitarian faith through the lens of the reflexive critical praxis of a theology of interruption also highlighted a particular type of dialogue within the Trinity: a dialogue that *sustains*, rather than reduces, difference.⁵ Again, the sacramental impetus of trinitarian faith was brought to the fore. I argued that when Christians dialogue with others in such a way as to respect the “otherness” of the other, the Trinity (the ultimate Dialogue that holds difference in unity) is made present sacramentally.

Finally, I argued that my consideration of the relationship between trinitarian faith and Christian life through the lens of a theology of interruption provides theological support for Boeve’s project of recontextualisation. By recognising and welcoming the interruption of difference in the Christian narrative (by way of an *open* narrative), Christian faith has the potential to function anew in the context of today. A theology of interruption calls Christians not only (reflexively) to allow for the interruption of their own narratives when they tend towards hegemonic claims, but it also compels an active praxis of interruption that challenges hegemonic narratives in the context. In this way, the political implications of Christian faith in the context of plurality are underlined. We could say that in the particular ways that Christians *live* an open Christian narrative—the ways in which they hold difference and unity together in dialogue, the ways in which they allow themselves to be open to new insights and experiences that deepen faith, and the ways in which they challenge narratives that relativise Christian faith (that is, challenge those who seek to posit Christian faith as merely one option among many equally valid, or invalid, options)—they witness to the God who, in boundless love, embraces differences as a condition of possibility for the human person and for creation itself.

Method in Theology

In my discussion of Sarah Coakley’s contemplative approach to the Trinity in chapter 7, I noted her concerns to offer a systematic theology that resists the onto-theological tendencies of modern systematics and destabilises its potentially hegemonic claims.⁶ I explored her contention that the

⁵ McEvoy, *Leaving Christendom*, 138.

⁶ See p. 218.

explicit reconnection of systematic theology to practices of contemplation—a “*théologie totale*”—allows for a recognition of the “*un-mastery*” of knowledge that is necessary to the task of theology.⁷ For Coakley, a recognition of the centrality of apophatics in theology goes beyond mere verbal play or deferral of meaning; it leads to an acknowledgement that the claim to have “*any* sense of human grasp of God” is potentially idolatrous.⁸ Moreover, as I noted, Coakley contends that the practice of contemplation realigns the theologian so that attention to the “otherness” of the other is brought to the fore, and “settled presumptions” about the other are destabilised.⁹ For Coakley, the reconnection of contemplative practice with the process of systematic theology leads the theologian to “dark and neglected corners” of the tradition and opens theology to “the possibility of risk and challenge.”¹⁰ In this way, Coakley contends, the systematic nature of theological method (conceived as *théologie totale*) refers not to notions of totalisation (politically speaking), but to the “attempt to do justice to every level, and type, of religious apprehension in its appropriate mode of expression.”¹¹ In a *théologie totale*—a theology that explicitly connects contemplative practice with systematic method (understood in the way I have just described)—the theologian ceases to set the agenda and makes space for God.

The theological impulses of Coakley’s *théologie totale* have clear affinities with those of Boeve’s *theology of interruption*. Each approach recognises the necessity of apophatics in the task of theology, and each approach affirms a recognition of the other in coming to “know” God. For Coakley, contemplative practice leads to an openness to God as Other and a “true attentiveness” to the marginalised other, while for Boeve, the recognition of the other precisely as *other* becomes the potential locus of God’s interruption.¹² On my reading, the major difference between the approaches is that while Coakley seeks to offer a (postmodern) systematic theology, thereby reflecting a concern to rethink theological method in ways that are both continuous and discontinuous with the methods of the past, Boeve’s approach defies pretensions towards method altogether. As I noted in chapter 8, a theology of interruption cannot be considered a *method*, as such; it amounts to a series of philosophical-conceptual approaches or dispositions that provide a lens through which a hermeneutical engagement with Christian texts and themes might proceed. It does not aim to offer orderly, systematic accounts of Christian faith, nor does it aim to follow a systematic process in the theological task. I concluded that a theology of interruption would, in fact, seek to subvert systematic accounts and processes with reference to *le différend*.

⁷ Coakley, *GSS*, 43.

⁸ *GSS*, 46, 23.

⁹ *GSS*, 47, 48.

¹⁰ *GSS*, 48, 49.

¹¹ *GSS*, 48.

¹² *GSS*, 47.

It is not my task in the present work to debate the merits (or otherwise) of systematic method, but a discussion of these two approaches does highlight a potential limitation of Boeve's approach: it does not seem to take adequate account of the contemplative aspect of theology. When Boeve discusses the sacramental life of the Christian in *Lyotard and Theology*, he notes the importance of "a contemplative openness" in sacramental living, but references to prayer are limited in his corpus.¹³ He does not define the relationship between contemplation, as such, and a theology of interruption, nor does he engage in discussion about the implications of prayer for Christian life. He refers to Derrida's and Lacoste's discussions on prayer in a number of works, but in these texts, he refrains from offering any insights as to how prayer might be considered from the perspective of the open Christian narrative that he espouses.¹⁴ One surprising reference to prayer that occurs in his work comes in his account of why Pope Benedict XVI resigned from the papal office in 2013. In *Theology at the Crossroads*, Boeve proposes that Benedict resigned due to "cognitive dissonance": he writes, "Joseph Ratzinger's/ Benedict XVI's theological vision of conversion—and its consequences for his fundamental-theological ideas about divine truth, the Church and the world—has collided with the actual situation of Christian faith and the Church."¹⁵ Boeve later concludes that "[s]tepping down as pope is, of course, a dramatic way of realizing dissonance reduction on the personal level: by withdrawing into a life of *prayer*, Benedict leaves the difficult situation to God."¹⁶ Implied in this (perhaps contentious) excerpt is the implication that, like Coakley, Boeve conceives of the importance of divine agency in prayer. However, the negative undercurrent in this example implies an intellectual resignation and a loss of agency on Benedict's part, and it also implies that prayer is somewhat of an escape, an individual endeavour between the pray-er and God. There seems to be no hint in this example that Boeve's notion of prayer is conceived in line with a theology of interruption.

Largely influenced by the political theology of Metz and the experiential theology of Schillebeeckx, Boeve offers a theoretical-practical theology that points towards a reflexive critical praxis, and while he draws from mystical theology in his retrieval of apophatics, his reference to these thinkers and the application of their insights in his approach is largely cognitive. As is evident in my consideration of Boeve's work, I agree with many of Boeve's theological impulses, but the largely cognitive emphasis in Boeve's approach potentially leaves prayer-life wanting. As we have learned from the mystics, the "consciousness" of God that comes from silent contemplation exceeds what can be thought in relation to God (even as thought itself exceeds the bounds of language).¹⁷ To this

¹³ Boeve, *LT*, 123. See p. 255 of the present work.

¹⁴ The most notable texts include "TIE," "RNT," and "GPH."

¹⁵ Boeve, *TC*, 223, emphasis removed from original.

¹⁶ *TC*, 233, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ For a cogent study of the trinitarian insights of eight mystics (from William of St. Thierry, 11th century, to Elizabeth of the Trinity, 19th century), see Anne Hunt, *The Trinity: Insights from the Mystics* (Collegeville, MA:

effect, it seems to me that a consideration of the Trinity through the lens of a theology of interruption *together* with a contemplative approach, such as what Coakley offers, could be a powerful way of thinking about how trinitarian theology might be approached today. It potentially allows for the recognition of Christian praxis as central to Christian life, while also recognising the central role of prayer and contemplation in the deepening of Christian faith—the relational basis of Christian praxis. Of course, this would need to be developed further, to consider more deeply the notions of (contemplative) prayer in Boeve’s influential partners (especially postmodern “thinkers of difference”) and to determine the extent to which it might be continuous with the aims of a theology of interruption. This is a task, perhaps, for a future project.

Liturgical Press, 2010). On the use of “consciousness,” rather than “experience” to denote the mystical encounter, see p. xiv in the same text.

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