A Naturally Mythopoieic Creature:

Mythic Sensibility and Human Participation in Divine Creativity

Andrew T. Shamel

Linacre College

Faculty of Theology and Religion

University of Oxford

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For my parents,
Blair and Cindy Shamel,
who read me stories and
taught me how to see.

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Short Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that through mythopoiesis, human beings participate in God's creativity. Certain stories are characterised by a mythic sensibility, an interpretive presence enabling the subject to encounter the world and the self as meaningful. The making of such stories is a characteristically human action distinct from but participating by analogy in God's ongoing creative action. By approaching this creative action in terms of the Trinitarian return of God to God, mythopoiesis can be understood as a human participation in this return and so as a making toward God, always already theological. Because of the limitations on making imposed by human finitude and sin, mythic sensibilities reveal the world as meaningful in diverse and often contradictory ways. Because *mythoi* operate according to aesthetics, they do not conform to discursive reasoning, and in a Christian approach, the beauty of Christ becomes the criterion of all rival *mythoi*. The mythic sensibility revealed in Christ, manifesting as a *mythos* of unconditional peace, interrupts the violence of conflicting *mythoi* without succumbing to it. In this way, the *mythos* and mythopoiesis of Christ opens the redemption of all mythopoiesis by its assumption by God into the Trinitarian dynamic of creation.

Long Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that through mythopoiesis, human beings participate in God's creativity. In telling stories in order to encounter the world and the self as meaningful, we participate in the Trinitarian operations of creativity and redemption, made possible by the appearance of God as both *mythos* and myth-maker in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Though limited by human finitude and sin, the revelatory dynamics of the 'mythic sensibility' of this relationship between human being, narrative, and the world derive from an interpretive presence greater than the sum of their mere words. This hermeneutic *novum* emerges as a function of the ongoing gift of being in and through God's creativity.

From the Gospel injunction to see the person of Christ in the hungry, the naked, and the imprisoned to the Harry Potter fan's loyal declaration that they belong to Hufflepuff House, certain stories serve to interpret the world as meaningful to those subject to them. I develop this hermeneutic presence in terms of a 'mythic sensibility'. The language of myth and mythology have long been terms of contention: your sacred story is my mythology, where my sacred story is Holy Scripture. The stories which interpret the world as meaningful to one person or community have been denigrated as 'only myths' by those who wish to discredit them, and the word 'myth' is, as often as not, used synonymously with 'lie'. This thesis represents an attempt to recuperate the idea of the mythic as a bridge between the explicitly symbolic and sacred language of faith and the flattened ontological horizons of secular modernity. By entering the dynamics of mythic sensibility through the door of the mythopoieic fantasies that have captured the public imagination in the past twenty to thirty years, I seek to demonstrate both how the mythic sensibility is visibly in operation today and how its ongoing importance undermines claims by secular modernity to have entirely 'disenchanted' the world.

Following Augustine, if our mythopoiesis is understood in terms of the restlessness of our hearts for God, rooted in our desire to praise God, then it can plausibly be said that it represents a 'making toward God', irrespective of the faith commitments of the maker. By

telling stories seeking after meaning, we make toward God, the root and source of meaning. In this way, I seek to demonstrate how mythopoiesis destabilises the concept of the secular, infused as it always already is by a seeking after God, implicit in the creative dynamics of our making. Once both Christian faith and the worldview of secular modernity can be thought in terms of *mythos*, the dominant *mythos* no longer need be considered a given and assumed to set the terms of debate. Further, by allowing the *mythos* of Christ to interpret the world and the plurality of mythic sensibilities operative in Western culture, it becomes possible to eschew the language of conflict and warfare between rival *mythoi*, as the 'peace which passes all understanding' is recognised as a more beautiful and more life-giving account of things. The Great Commission can be thus approached not in terms of a colonial, coercive project of conversion, but rather a process of making audible and visible the ongoing call of God, in and through the operations of aesthetics, drawing the creation by love back into the Trinitarian return of God to God. The Christian theological approach to mythopoiesis explored in this thesis opens the possibility of such an understanding.

In Chapter One, I articulate what is meant by the 'mythic sensibility' that characterises both mythopoieic fantasy in particular and mythopoiesis more generally. By highlighting the 'shamelessly fictive' quality of fantasy fiction, in that it does not pretend to realism and so with an ironic wink to the reader welcomes her into the 'game' that the story is playing, I argue that contrary to the assumption that myths only 'work' when they are unconscious and assumed, mythic sensibilities can be entered into in the same way a player enters a game. The metaphor of the game provides a sense by which a mythic sensibility structures the perceptions of the 'mythic subject' and conditions the meaning of objects, actions, people, and the self. This interpretive quality has, in the case of a mythic sensibility, a kind of 'presence' or *novum* that is surplus to the words on the page: a novel, personalistic hermeneutic that gives the mythic its revelatory, almost magical quality. In order to understand how myth-making in this way can be considered 'creative', the genesis of this personalistic presence must be given an account.

In Chapter Two, I argue that the genesis of this *novum* in a mythic sensibility can only be accounted for in terms of participation by analogy in God's *creatio ex nihilo*. As mythopoiesis in its most 'basic' form, creation narratives and theologies of creation uniquely embody the mythopoieic character not only of traditional narratives but also of theology itself: a theology of Creation is an act of narration and an act of myth-making. In these terms, Catherine Keller's mythopoieic process theology of *creatio ex profundis*, which identifies created generativity with divine creativity, makes a credible claim to provide a language with which to account for the generativity of our myth-making. In this chapter, however, I demonstrate how by being unable to account for being itself and by failing to be accountable to the Christian tradition in which it claims to stand, this process approach cannot finally serve. Rather, by renewing the Thomistic language of participation in terms of reader-response to the text of God's creation, I argue that our productions are, as interpretations of God's creative act, participants in that creativity, analogically and ontologically.

In Chapter Three, I expand the context of this interpretive participation from Christian theological discourse to all mythopoieic production. By examining more closely the historical relationship between myth and theology, I argue that not only narratives of creation, but all of theology and mythopoiesis are inextricably intertwined. Even in the 'immanent frame' of secular materialism, the theological traces inherent in myth-making remain and that only a theological approach can unravel the dynamics and meaning of our mythopoiesis. By drawing on John Milbank's analysis of the origins of secular modernity in a flawed reading of Christian theology, I argue that likewise, 'secular' mythopoiesis in the West can be thought in the same theological terms. If the Christian claim of the supernatural end of all human beings is true, then it becomes possible to situate all human beings (and so all human activity) in terms of that end. I argue that all human making, mythopoiesis included, can be thought most fully in terms of this 'making towards God'. The plurality of this making, however, results in *mythoi* that contradict one another, and a Christian account of this difference must take the witness of the Christian mythic sensibility into account.

In Chapter Four, I argue that from the vantage of Christian theology, difference between mythic sensibilities can only thought in terms of aesthetics and taste. By critiquing Milbank's use of *mythos* to describe the terms of engagement with secular materialism, I argue that his insistence that this relationship must be one of relentless conflict is mistaken. Against Milbank's contention that a *mythos* cannot be refuted, only out-narrated, I argue that contradictory mythic sensibilities instead relate to human subjects in aesthetic and even erotic terms. By using the language of beauty and willing seduction, I argue that a *mythos* calls to the subject even before it is understood, in the dynamics of aesthetic encounter. And so, it is only by an appeal to beauty and the beauty of the world as it is revealed by the mythic sensibility that difference can be bridged or resolved. Returning to the metaphor of the game as a mythic structuring of perception, I conclude this chapter by arguing that the encounter between one mythic sensibility can be disruptive even if it is not violent, and like a spoilsport revealing the inner contradictions of fictionality of a game, one *mythos* (and most especially the *mythos* of Christ) can precipitate the dissolution of another.

In Chapter Five, I examine the life of Christ as *mythos* and Christ's myth-making as God's participation in and assumption of human mythopoiesis. I argue that the Christian witness represents the claim that the mythic sensibility of Christ opens the redemption of all mythopoiesis, and so the redemption of our vision of the world and human beings. Against Rudolf Bultmann, I demonstrate how the mythic is a necessary part of the witness and mission of Christ. As such, the parabolic teaching of Christ can be understood in terms of a disruptive mythopoiesis, upending and reshaping the way that we see *as*. This mythic, narrative expression is none other than the means by which God became a human being. The name given to that human being, Jesus Christ, becomes the locus of redemption as one is incorporated into that Name in baptism. Rooted in the Trinitarian economy of return, and so encompassing all of Creation, the *mythos* and mythic sensibility of Christ can thus be spoken of as fundamental to all human myth-making, the search of all human beings for fullness of life.

Contents

Acknowledgements 3

Short Abstract 5

Long Abstract 6

Introduction 13

I — Mythic Sensibility and Mythopoieic Fiction 25

- I. Imaginative Structures 26
- II. Shaping Our Seeing 38
- Conclusion 44

II — Mytho/poiesis 47

- I. Process and the Deep 53
- II. Creation Ex Nihilo 65
- III. Participation 73
- Conclusion 82

III — Making Toward God 86

- I. The Landscape of Mythopoiesis 88
- II. The Contemporary Mythos 100
- III. Trinitarian Ontology 112
- Conclusion 121

IV — Myth and Desire 125

- I. How to Think Difference 128
- II. Taste and See 144
- III. Spoilsports 157
- Conclusion 163

V — Christ the Myth/maker 166

- I. The Mythos of Christ 173
- II. Christ's Mythopoiesis 188
- III. Baptism 196
- Conclusion 209

Conclusion 212

Bibliography 222

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'Well, I mean, *dammit*, it's human nature, isn't it?... I'm just saying man is naturally a mythopoeic creature.'

'What's that mean?' said the Senior Wrangler.

'Means we make things up as we go along,' said the Dean, not looking up.

— Terry Pratchett, *Hogfather*

Introduction

On the high altar of Dorchester Abbey in south Oxfordshire is written '*Ecce Panis Angelorum factus cibus viatorum*': 'Behold, the Bread of Angels is made food for pilgrims.'[1] The Abbey is a pilgrimage site for Christians as the place where Birinus baptised Cynegils, king of the West Saxons, and is so considered the *fons fidei* for the ancient kingdom of Wessex. Pilgrimage itself is an iconic practice, revealing the wayfaring nature of life on earth and directing the pilgrim's attention to the Christian's final goal: homecoming. The journey of the pilgrimage from one's domestic sphere, into the world, and finally to the destination is transformed by a re-orientation of the pilgrim's perceptions, transforming travel to a strange, foreign shore, into a return to the bosom of God. In this light, the Eucharist represents an incursion into the journey by the destination: a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, food to sustain the pilgrim on her way. The road, the footsore journey, the blessed bread and wine bear resonances of meaning which the pilgrim encounters through her journey and through participation in the Eucharist. By prayer and reflection, her previous experiences of journeys and of eating meet these experiences, along with the history of journeys and nourishment which lay embedded in the language the pilgrim uses to describe and to understand her experience. The pilgrim makes of her life a narrative of return, telling a story of labour and repentance, seeking and being found, and this making reveals new meaning in her life and actions.

[1] Translation my own.

To the outside observer, however, what is witnessed might be nothing more than a human being cherishing a wafer of 'bread' at the end of a long day's walk, bread which gives neither the calories nor the sense of stomach-filling satiation required of a person exerting herself physically and mentally. The presider at the table is seen to be speaking in unfamiliar cadences and vocabulary, at times to the inanimate bread and wine themselves. With unfamiliar motions, the priest gestures to the objects and then offers them a kind of reverence that is not seen by most Westerners in the twenty-first century in everyday life. To one the behaviours are non-sensical and to the other, they are filled with signification and are even revelatory of something otherwise unseen. Since the earliest days of the Christian Church, Christians have spoken of 'seeing with the eyes of faith'[2] and of 'discerning the body' where the outsider sees nothing of the sort.[3] Common appeals made by public intellectuals to 'wilfully insisting upon nonsense'[4] do not take adequate account of the dynamics involved for the faithful in perceiving the actions, objects, and relationships of their faith as means of perceiving the world meaningfully. Likewise, many fideistic accounts of transubstantiation and miracle do not dwell adequately upon the role of the human being in the making of the actions, objects, and relationships which so reveal the world to be participating in God's redemption of itself. There is a complex alchemy between the human act of making a narrative, whether by word or enactment, and the meaning that presents itself through encounter with what has been made.

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[2] Though this term is not specifically Biblical, one need only think of examples such as Paul on the Damascus road and the disciples on the road to Emmaus whose eyes were opened to see Christ to understand the origin of the phrase.

[3] As in the case of regular confusion of cannibalism and the Eucharist by non-Christians in the first centuries of the Church. See, for instance, The second-century *Octavius* of Minicius Felix, which recounts a debate between a Christian and a pagan, in which the charge of cannibalism is made and refuted: 'Now, you charge us with Murder and Adultery, and report, that we first Kill, an Infant, then Eat him, and then rush into the most vicious Pleasures [...]' *Those two excellent monuments of ancient learning and piety, Minucius Felix's octavius, and Tertullian's apology for the primitive christians, render'd into English*, (London: White Hart, 1708), 124.

[4] In an interview, Richard Dawkins paradoxically endorsed the Authorised version of the Bible for its very obscure language, commending it to clergy as a means of covering their tracks in peddling nonsense: 'I think if they had any sense they'd stick to the King James version, which has the advantage of poetry and the advantage of obscurity. Because when you talk nonsense, it's probably better if you do it in obscure language so nobody can understand what nonsense it is.' *Penguin Podcast* quoted on penguin.co.uk: https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/october/richard-dawkins-penguin-podcast-king-james-bible-nonsense.html (accessed 11 January 2021).

The inscription on the altar of the Abbey comes at the climax of Thomas Aquinas' Corpus Christi hymn *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*, in which he praises the miracle of transubstantiation, itself a doctrine founded upon the question of how we perceive the world and how its meaning is encountered. He writes of the encounter with the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic bread and wine, '*Sub diversis speciebus, signis tantum, et non rebus, Latent res eximiae*': 'Beneath diverse appearances, priceless things lie hidden, as signs only and not the things themselves.'[5] Aquinas acknowledges a mysterious relationship between the object and what is encountered. Signs, like language, can only be read if one is already proficient in the system to which they belong. The signification is there, though it may lie unseen if one cannot read the signs themselves: there is an encounter, but the meaning drawn from the encounter will be conditioned by one's access to systems of language and signification, narratives which characterise and contextualise the objects and sensations encountered. It is not enough to say that the actions and language of the Eucharist constitute a distinct language-game and so of necessity remain opaque to outsiders, though this is surely the case, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's observations about language and practice still apply.[6] The contextuality of the encounter constituted by the Eucharist has always been known by the Church, even if it has been misunderstood and misapplied through the centuries.[7] It is not enough to recognise that the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements is discernible only by faith to assuage the horror felt by some when the consecrated bread and wine are mishandled, perhaps by those of a different theological persuasion. According to those of a high Eucharistic theology, what is encountered is beyond the perception of the encounter: whether through transubstantiation, real presence, or a mystery beyond words, the bread and the wine have an ontological character different from their character before consecration, whether it is perceived or not. It

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[5] Translation my own.

[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, revised ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 7.

[7] Witness the emergence and propagation of the 'blood libel' against the Jews. It was 'known' that the bread of the Eucharist was truly Christ's body, even if it was not recognised as such by non-Christians. Nevertheless, this knowledge was so basic to a Christian worldview that combined with baseline Christian anti-Semitism, the narrative of Jews doing horrible things to Christian children and the bread of the Eucharist still made sense to the medieval mind.

is not enough to recognise how community effects the meaning of language. For the Christian who wants to affirm the reality of their encounter with the risen Christ in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, something more must be insisted upon about what happens in the making of narratives that inform and underwrite the practices of Communion. George Steiner writes,

> The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical, experience, the most 'ingressive', transformative summons available to human experiencing. Again, the shorthand image is that of an Annunciation, of 'a terrible beauty' or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have rightly heard the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before. A mastering intrusion has shifted the light...[8]

Something real has occurred on account of an encounter with a real presence that goes beyond the experience. For many Christians, the Eucharist is the paradigm of this encounter. It is not, however, as Steiner makes clear, unique in this regard. The presence of the work of art, the mythic narrative, the practice of faith interprets the world such that it is indeed no longer habitable as it was before because everything has been re-arranged, from the inside out. The priest and the congregation together recite and re-embody the institution narrative of the Eucharist, making again the story by which Christians are called to encounter the world and themselves. Narrative and 'pragmatic' reality blend, overlap, or merge through the story told and re-told, enacted once for all and innumerable times by Christians through the centuries. Like all human beings, Christians seemingly cannot help but tell stories (and telling them, embody them) and so encounter the world as meaningful.

Mythopoieic Fantasy

The solemnity and holiness of the Eucharist is increasingly distant from and foreign to most of those living in what was once optimistically called Christendom. Indeed, the sincerity of the liturgy in recounting the words, 'This is my Body' and 'This is my Blood' is laughable or even repulsive to some. If this is so, the question arises as to whether this mythic impulse is as

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[8] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 143.

pervasive as was suggested above. Indeed, the famous preoccupation with irony that characterises postmodernity would seem to mitigate against it. Notwithstanding the 'new visibility of religion' that has so conditioned the first decades of the twenty-first century,[9] the relentless materialism and secularity of liberal, Western democracies is paradoxically and even ironically undercut by the widespread popularity of the fantastic, and most especially so-called 'mythopoieic fantasy'.

Fantasy fiction has always entertained the possibility of an enchanted universe. Emerging in its modern form in and through the mechanised devastation of the First World War in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, it has been a reaction to and comment upon the violent disenchantment of the world by modernity, and so for some can be dismissed as neo-Romantic escapism. However, as Tolkien himself puts it in his 1938 Andrew Lang Lecture 'On Fairy-Stories': 'Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.'[10] Tolkien was, of course, writing from a Catholic Christian position: he endorsed not only in his fiction but also in his life the persistence of the supernatural in the face of the disenchanting and secularising forces of modernity. This is not necessarily so for writers such as Terry Pratchett and Ursula K. Le Guin, whose personal faith commitments, or lack thereof, are much more ambiguous than, if not antithetical to, Tolkien's, and so their fictions may represent an equally ambiguous assertion of the 'relative level of enchantment' in the world as we find it. At some level, by his own account, Tolkien 'believed in magic', even if it came under the sanctioned rubrics of the sacraments of the Church, and his fiction displaced that belief into the forms of 'fairy-story' and what has become the familiar tropes of fantasy fiction: wizards and spells, gods and demons. Tolkien's Christianity, therefore, has become encoded in the forms and language games of mythopoieic fantasy itself. Much as the Christian imaginary still underwrites even the anti-theist and anti-Christian language, imagery, rhetoric,

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[9] Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

[10] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 55-56.

and mythic sensibilities of secular modernity, Tolkien's Christian imaginary underwrites much of what is sold today under the marketing label of fantasy fiction. Mythopoieic fantasy occupies the borderlands between Tolkien's faith and contemporary secularity, neither affirming nor denying the reality of the 'world outside,' the materialist dogmas of late capitalism and environmental exploitation and collapse. It disrupts the 'givenness' of both religious and secular orthodoxies, destabilising both categories. The persistent popularity and even ascendency of mythopoieic fantasy in recent decades can be attributed to its willingness to believe, even if only ironically, in 'something more' than the evidence of my senses. It can also be understood as a nostalgia for a metaphysics beyond phenomenology, for the assurance that reality has depth and is not merely a collection of surfaces.

The play of surface and depth is a mainstay of mythopoieic fantasy fiction. In wilful contravention of the hard-won recognition that a person's appearance does not dictate his or her character, fantasy fiction regularly employs the device of 'races', not referring to the colour of a person's skin, but rather to their *species*: elves, dwarves, trolls, gnomes, and orcs all vary in appearance, custom, and often mythological origin far more widely than the mere 'races' of European philosophical and sociological construction. As it was put in Terry Pratchett's *Witches Abroad*, 'Racism was not a problem on the Discworld, because—what with trolls and dwarfs and so on—speciesism was more interesting. Black and white lived in perfect harmony and ganged up on green.'[11] Throughout the Discworld novels, 'what it means to be a dwarf' is routinely brought into tension with the traditional image of the small man with beardy face—appearance and character are constantly in tension and in question, as given a face and a name by Constable Cheery Littlebottom[12] who comes out as the Discworld's first openly female dwarf. This ironising of the tropes of fantasy literature highlights the mythic quality of fantasy literature itself as well as the interpretive quality of mythic sensibility more broadly considered. In mythic forms, the appearance of the world is the meaning of the world as interpreted by the myth. The tropes of fantasy literature and the ancient mythic narratives

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[11] Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad* (London: Gollancz, 1991), 196.

[12] Whose parents adhered to the traditional naming customs.

behind them tell you that dwarfs are avaricious and hard-working, masculine and fierce. All that is needed is to be shown a dwarf, and these traits are assumed. Pratchett's interrogation of mythic tropes squares with the ironic distancing of postmodernism from the comfortably-coded *mythoi* of modernity; the perpetual overturning of the assumed becomes the mythic practice of the new regime. However, the wink-and-nod mythic irony of the Discworld novels provides an 'acceptable' entry point to the fantastical mythic sensibility, such that Pratchett's forty-odd novels remained intensely popular even until the end of his life and beyond, where the more sententious, earnest mythic sensibility of Tolkien remains revered more than one suspects it is read.[13] Pratchett's ironic mythopoiesis, then, serves to assure the reader that the mythic has a recognisable depth: not only the spiritual depth promised by the Christian underpinnings of the fantasy genre, but the personal depth that is so prized by secular modernity: dwarfs are not fairy tale cartoons, but people like you and I. Indeed, it could be argued that this is one of the central pillars of Pratchett's mythopoiesis: for all the diversity of appearance, people are just people, good and bad[14]: a further ironic turn as the historically feudal hierarchical assumptions of the fantasy genre (kings, castles, knights, peasant farmers) are upended into the values of liberal democracy. One retains the sense, however, that the trace of the sacred remains in the mysterious omnipresence of magic and the power of the 'strong narrative force', which operates as a kind of ironised providence. Depth persists and resists the wan democratisation of the marketplace. The persistence of mythopoieic fantasy in the contemporary imagination is one signal of the continued desire and search for that depth.

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[13] Peter Jackson's films successfully transmogrified the novel in to an action story to the extent that many lovers of the films cannot 'make it through' the book. For one example of this phenomenon, see this conversation in the internet forum Reddit: francisl0007, 'Are the LOTR books too difficult or slow for people who don't read much?', post on Reddit (2 May 2020, 20:40 GMT): https://www.reddit.com/r/tolkienfans/comments/gcchm6/are_the_lotr_books_too_difficult_or_slow_for/ (accessed 31 January 2021).

[14] One of his collaborators, Neil Gaiman once said of Pratchett, 'He will rage, as he leaves, against so many things: stupidity, injustice, human foolishness and shortsightedness, not just the dying of the light. And, hand in hand with the anger, like an angel and a demon walking into the sunset, there is love: for human beings, in all our fallibility; for treasured objects; for stories; and ultimately and in all things, love for human dignity.' Neil Gaiman, 'Terry Pratchett isn't jolly. He's angry' in *The Guardian* (24 September 2014): https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/24/terry-pratchett-angry-not-jolly-neil-gaiman (accessed online 31 January 2021).

The Problem

This desire for depth undercuts the postmodern insistence that we live only in a play of surfaces is reinforced by the superficiality of consumer culture and the relentless production of the new, the glossily beautiful, and the denial of death manifest in the idolisation of youth and invisibility of the elderly and dying. The mythic turn of popular culture, even as it participates in these consumer capitalist preoccupations, nonetheless signals the ongoing hunger for something more: more dense, more present, more real. That we continue mythopoiesis, in its obvious and hidden forms, suggests something characteristic about the human way of being and which begs for exploration and rich description. Myth and mythology have been studied and dissected for centuries in the Western academy from a variety of vantages and with a variety of approaches. From Giambatista Vico's *The New Science* through Ernst Cassirer's *An Essay on Man* to Roland Barthe's *Mythologies*, myth and its role in culture and epistemology have occupied the thoughts of philosophers and cultural critics. Émile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Bronisław Malinowski, the pioneering cultural anthropologists, made the structural study of myth and mythology central to their theories of human social structures and religion. E. B. Tylor, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and many others have catalogued and theorised myth as everything from primitive science and psychology to the necessary human way of encoding and expressing the most fundamental truths. Theologians from Rudolf Bultmann to Milbank have sought to disambiguate the theological from the mythological and to articulate in wildly different ways the relationship between *logos* and *mythos*, between that account of the world based in sense data and pragmatics, and that based in narrative, poetics, and trust. Given its persistence in popular and academic discourse, its polyvalence across disciplines and usages, and the power it continues to command in spite of or because of its rich semantic field, the mythic remains largely unexamined in theology on its own terms and is assumed as part of our cultural and psychic furniture. The absence of a considered approach to what has been called myth, the mythic, mythology and *mythos* has resulted in a lack of clarity about what is intended by the use of the term(s) and what is

distinctive or significant about this way or ways of speaking, knowing, and encountering the world.

Argument

It is the argument of this thesis that the seeking-after-depth that is evident in both the Eucharistic narrative and practice on display in Dorchester Abbey and the fictional play of mythopoieic fantasy represent one human impulse: the desire to glorify and so to participate in God. In spite of the avowed secularity of many authors of fantasy fiction, I argue that as mythopoiesis, it nonetheless participates in a theological orientation that characterises making as such, and that the meaning-revealing quality of such narrative renders it especially transparent to making's theological dynamic. By engaging with fantasy fiction (in its Christian and non-Christian guises), I seek to demonstrate how the theological potential of such fictions reveals something of the theological character of all human making. When considered in the light of a Trinitarian theology of creation, I demonstrate how all mythopoiesis represents a participation in the Christic operations of redemption. As the archetype of our humanity, Christ's mythopoiesis is the end and fulfilment of our own.

In Chapter One, I articulate what is meant by the 'mythic sensibility' that characterises both mythopoieic fantasy in particular and mythopoiesis more generally. By highlighting the 'shamelessly fictive' quality of fantasy fiction, in that it does not pretend to realism and so with an ironic wink to the reader welcomes her into the 'game' that the story is playing, I argue that contrary to the assumption that myths only 'work' when they are unconscious and assumed, mythic sensibilities can be entered into in the same way a player enters a game. The metaphor of the game provides a sense by which a mythic sensibility structures the perceptions of the 'mythic subject' and conditions the meaning of objects, actions, people, and the self. This interpretive quality has, in the case of a mythic sensibility, a kind of 'presence' or *novum* that is surplus to the words on the page: a novel, personalistic hermeneutic that gives the mythic its revelatory, almost magical quality. In order to understand how myth-making in this way can be considered 'creative', the genesis of this personalistic presence must be accounted for.

In Chapter Two, I argue that the genesis of this *novum* in a mythic sensibility can only be accounted for in terms of participation by analogy in God's *creatio ex nihilo*. As mythopoiesis in its most 'basic' form, creation narratives and theologies of creation uniquely embody the mythopoieic character not only of traditional narratives but also of theology itself: a theology of Creation is an act of narration and an act of myth-making. In these terms, Catherine Keller's mythopoieic process theology of *creatio ex profundis*, which identifies created generativity with divine creativity, makes a credible claim to provide a language with which to account for the generativity of our myth-making. In this chapter, however, I demonstrate how by being unable to account for being itself and by failing to be accountable to the Christian tradition in which it claims to stand, this process approach cannot finally serve. Rather, by renewing the Thomistic language of participation in terms of reader-response to the text of God's creation, I argue that our productions are, as interpretations of God's creative act, participants in that creativity, analogically and ontologically.

In Chapter Three, I expand the context of this interpretive participation from Christian theological discourse to all mythopoieic production. By examining more closely the historical relationship between myth and theology, I argue that not only narratives of creation, but all of theology and mythopoiesis are inextricably intertwined. Even in the 'immanent frame' of secular materialism, the theological traces inherent in myth-making remain and that only a theological approach can unravel the dynamics and meaning of our mythopoiesis. By drawing on Milbank's analysis of the origins of secular modernity in a flawed reading of Christian theology, I argue that likewise, 'secular' mythopoiesis in the West can be thought in the same theological terms. If the Christian claim of the supernatural end of all human beings is true, then it becomes possible to situate all human beings (and so all human activity) in terms of that end. I argue that all human making, mythopoiesis included, can be thought most fully in terms of this 'making towards God'. The plurality of this making, however, results in *mythoi* that contradict one another, and a Christian account of this difference must take the witness of the Christian mythic sensibility into account.

In Chapter Four, I argue that from the vantage of Christian theology, difference between mythic sensibilities can only thought in terms of aesthetics and taste. By critiquing Milbank's use of *mythos* to describe the terms of engagement with secular materialism, I argue that his insistence that this relationship must be one of relentless conflict is mistaken. Against Milbank's contention that a *mythos* cannot be refuted, only out-narrated, I argue that contradictory mythic sensibilities instead relate to human subjects in aesthetic and even erotic terms. By using the language of beauty and willing seduction, I argue that a *mythos* calls to the subject even before it is understood, in the dynamics of aesthetic encounter. And so, it is only by an appeal to beauty and the beauty of the world as it is revealed by the mythic sensibility that difference can be bridged or resolved. Returning to the metaphor of the game as a mythic structuring of perception, I conclude this chapter by arguing that the encounter between one mythic sensibility can be disruptive even if it is not violent, and like a spoilsport revealing the inner contradictions of a game, one *mythos* (and most especially the *mythos* of Christ) can precipitate the dissolution of another.

In Chapter Five, I examine the life of Christ as *mythos* and Christ's myth-making as God's participation in and assumption of human mythopoiesis. I argue that the Christian witness represents the claim that the mythic sensibility of Christ opens the redemption of all mythopoiesis, and so the redemption of our vision of the world and human beings. Against Rudolf Bultmann, I demonstrate how the mythic is a necessary part of the witness and mission of Christ. As such, the parabolic teaching of Christ can be understood in terms of a disruptive mythopoiesis, upending and reshaping the way that we see *as*. This mythic, narrative expression is none other than the means by which God became a human being. The name given to that human being, Jesus Christ, becomes the locus of redemption as one is incorporated into that Name in baptism. Rooted in the Trinitarian economy of return, and so encompassing all of Creation, the *mythos* and mythic sensibility of Christ can thus be spoken of as fundamental to all human myth-making, the search of all human beings for fullness of life.

Mythopoiesis traverses the distance between the irony of fantasy fiction and the sincere affections and practices of Christian faith. Though the journey in some sense ennobles the former as a variety of participation in God's creativity, it is no sense intended to denigrate the latter. Rather, by tracing this continuity, I aim to illuminate a feature of God's grace in allowing us to participate in God's own economy of call and response, the gift of being and the emergence of the novel and the beautiful. Rather than reserving this gift to the courtyards of the Church and the heights of 'true art', I seek to demonstrate how, in our most quotidian humanity, we live in and through that grace. By appreciating how mythopoiesis undermines the assumed inviolability of the 'sacred' and the 'secular', I hope to show how the stories we tell in order to encounter the world as meaningful emerge within a theological horizon, shaped and oriented by our inherent desire to praise God, even though we may not use that language or that name. The peculiar sensibility of such narratives, mythic in its quality of revealing the meaningful character of ourselves and the world, emerges from the stories that we make, an aspect of God's ongoing creation of the world and our own mythopoieic nature, and it is with this mythic sensibility that I begin.

I

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Mythic Sensibility and Mythopoieic Fiction

Certain stories act upon us. They shape the way that we see, encounter, and understand the world. In this chapter, I argue that a phenomenological approach to a narrative encounter with the world in terms of the mythic helps to illuminate a certain sensibility that mediates the world to human persons such that it is experienced as meaningful. Understanding the mythic in terms of a sensibility rather than in terms of a genre of literature or a form of cultural expression sheds light on how mythopoiesis is not a phenomenon restricted to archaic societies and the tales of either a bygone age or a culture or religion not our own. Among the most visible places of such mythopoiesis is so-called 'mythopoieic literature', fantasies that actively play with the sense of the possible, with narratives shaping the lives of characters, and what can be brought to the surface when meaning and being more closely and obviously co-inhere.[15] The fictions of J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, and others help demonstrate the dynamics of this mythic sensibility and how it continues to operate even in what Charles Taylor calls the 'immanent frame' of secular materialist culture.[16] I conclude the chapter by arguing that a phenomenology of play, both in terms of the ludic fancy of the

[15] In the literature, one finds both spellings: *mythopoeic* and *mythopoieic*. Except where quoting, I have opted for the latter spelling for better harmony with this thesis' concern for *poiesis*. This spelling also has the added benefit of holding to one side the question of *poetics*, which though related is distinct enough from the central concerns of this thesis that I do not wish to generate confusion.

[16] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 542.

mythic and fantastic and the perception-shaping power of a game's rules over the players, opens up the way that stories act upon our perception of the world and the meaning that we encounter.

I. Imaginative Structures

In his essay on the Bodleian Library's 2018 exhibit of Tolkien's letters, paintings, and manuscripts, Rowan Williams conducts readers through the imaginative *copia* of Tolkien's 'legendarium' toward urgent critiques that might shed light on the crises of the present age. Williams notes that in spite of some of Tolkien's conservative or even 'bourgeois' positions in life, *The Lord of the Rings* nevertheless speaks to the wounds inflicted on the common good by 'unexamined power and the tyranny of profit' and to the perils of the relentless drive of modernity towards the spoiling and wastage of what cannot be shared and so must be bought and sold.[17] Far from representing an escapist fantasy, Williams reminds us that Tolkien's masterpiece is not unlike the great mythological narratives that are woven through human culture:

> As [Tolkien] made clear, part of his ambition was to provide something like a mythology for England [...] The narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* and the 'legendarium' of *The Silmarillion* and other writings are presented as a set of imaginative structures in and through which people can think and feel with the same consistency, intelligence and growing wisdom as they did through the stories of Olympus, Troy, Asgard or the Arthurian cycle.

Tolkien's 'presentation' of *The Lord of the Rings*, inaugurating the modern genre of mythopoieic fantasy, was in part a response to the disenchantment of the modern world.[18] The seeming triumph of materialist modernity in the wake of the first and second World Wars, the seemingly relentless march of technological advancement, and the incipient decline and collapse of public participation in Christianity described for Tolkien a public desperation for

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[17] Rowan Williams, 'Master of his universe: the warnings in JRR Tolkien's novels' in *The New Statesman* (8 August 2018). https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/08/master-his-universe-warnings-jrr-tolkien-s-novels (accessed 4 September 2018).

[18] Peter M. Candler, Jr., 'Tolkien or Nietzsche; Philology and Nihilism' in *Tolkien Among the Moderns*, ed. Ralph C. Wood (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 97.

the imaginative potency of mythic narrative and the sense of a meaningful cosmos. Tolkien's stated intention for *The Lord of the Rings* was to provide a mythology for England, and so his novel is shot through with a quality of numinous suggestion of the supernatural and a depth of history and significance for every place and every action. This quality has invited readers over the decades to a strong association with the fiction, to the extent that some of Tolkien's intention has been borne out: When I look out on the bleak landscape of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in southern California at sunset, with its broken, rocky hillsides punctuated by boulder falls and scrub vegetation that seems to be clinging to life as roots dig deep for water, all I can see is Mordor. Perhaps as a Christian I ought to see the wilderness of Kedar or the rough hill country where Jesus spent his boyhood if I am not going to see this desert at this time. But the mythic signification of wilderness, the suggestive topography of shattered land and baking decomposed granite and sand impresses itself upon a mind formed in the narratives and hermeneutical imagery of Western, Anglophone culture to the degree that I can only see *as*. I can only see as my vision has been formed by the mythic resonances lurking in my language (desert, deserted, deserving, just deserts) and the mythic presences that have shaped my seeing. That Tolkien's works are manifest fictions has no bearing on the impression I receive upon encountering the wilderness of California's desert valleys: the thirst, the desperation, the overwhelming vastness are not only *what* I see, but also *how* I see. I do not merely see sand and rock and cracked mountains: I see these things as instances of the fictional but very real desert of Gorgoroth over which Frodo and Sam journey at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. This capacity to shape a reader's vision and encounter with the world is what might be called a 'mythic sensibility.'

As a Christian, Tolkien's theological sensibilities cannot be completely distinguished from the mythic in his work. This intertwining of literature and a meaningful encounter with the world has traditionally been thought in terms of religious traditions and discourse, and the recognition of the theological potential for narrative is not a new one. Not only was Jesus Christ a participant in a rabbinic tradition of storytelling and a gifted and potent storyteller

himself, but since the introduction of stories into preaching by Franciscans in the thirteenth century,[19] they have been a mainstay of the Christian homilist's arsenal through to the narrative theologians of the 1990s and early 2000s.[20] Tolkien himself and his circle were well aware of narrative's power to make present and alive the good news of the Gospel. With this in mind, we can consider the force with which *The Lord of the Rings* struck the public imagination and which it continues to exert on novelists, film-makers, game designers, and visual artists as both testimony to the potency of Tolkien's creative vision and perhaps as well to an underlying drive or hunger in the public's imagination. The arrival of Peter Jackson's film versions inaugurated a new era of fantasy film-making, bringing audiences not only the Harry Potter films, but also more emotionally and psychologically ambiguous films such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and Dave McKean's *MirrorMask*, all revelling in what Neil Easterbrook calls the 'shamelessly fictive'.[21] Since the stories and myths of the Old and New Testaments no longer structure the imaginations and hermeneutical vision of many (or indeed most) in post-Christendom Europe and North America, the increased visibility of the shamelessly fictive and the rise of the 'shamelessly mythic' invites consideration. The popularity of *Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, the *Star Wars* and various comic book superhero films all attest to the hunger of the public for explicitly mythopoieic fiction. The hollowing out of trust in the institutions of religious life has become a byword, and yet the avowedly theological character of Tolkien's writing and much of the writing that followed in his footsteps, puts the question to claims that the public has grown quite away from the wonderings and the desires with which they once turned almost universally to the Church for

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[19] The specific use of stories in sermons was begun in by Franciscan with the use of illustrative *exempla* in order to evoke the theme and affective qualities of the sermon's message. See O. C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 218ff.

[20] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1977). Gale Heide, *System and Story: Narrative Critique and Construction in Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009). Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). John Navone, S. J. *Seeking God in Story* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990). Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, eds. *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

[21] Neil Easterbrook, 'The Shamelessly Fictive: Mimesis and Metafantasy' in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 18/1 (2012), 199.

answers.[22] This 'mythic turn' represents a shift in the public's relationship to questions of faith and opens new questions about what makes for religious discourse at all. Mythopoieic fantasy is one of the most visible locations of the exploration of this hunger for narratives which reveal the world to be meaningful.

Williams notes in his essay that 'myths have no authors.' This is certainly true of the *mythoi* of history and many of the present day: composition has come in the re-telling, and no single author can claim ownership of the Greco-Roman myths any more than any one person can claim authorship of the myth of the American Dream or the creation narratives of Genesis. However, this mythic sensibility nevertheless continues to make itself known even in authored fiction. Recalling that one of Tolkien's aims in the weaving of his legendarium was to create a mythology for England, Williams opposes this aim to the composition of 'fantasy novels,' regretfully concluding that *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and the rest are, in the end, more novel than myth. The hard line that Williams proposes between the mythic and the novel is finally hard to maintain too absolutely, as they both share a certain presence as we approach both the fiction and the world and which opens even 'secular' literature to the religious and even the theological. This mythic sensibility binds the hermeneutic presence that illuminates the most ancient of myths (as well as the cultural narratives that continue to give meaning) to the shamelessly fictive mythopoiesis of the contemporary mythic turn. As Graham Ward notes of literature's inability ever to be entirely secular,[23] so, too is mythopoiesis, however pedestrian or fantastical, never wholly distinct from faith, poetic or otherwise.[24] It is not simply that we are unwilling to encounter the world 'as it is' and so we

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[22] He wrote to a priest friend, '*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously at first, but consciously in the revision.' Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), n412.

[23] Graham Ward, 'Why Literature Can Never be Entirely Secular', in *Religion and Literature* (Summer 2009), 21-27.

[24] Coleridge's rumination on 'poetic faith' in his *Biographia Literaria* touches on the reader's ability and willingness to suspend disbelief in the supernatural. Literary theory has expanded the idea to all fictionality, but the original context highlights the importance of imagination and faith in the dynamics of mythic sensibility. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Biographia Literaria' in *The Major Works*, ed. J. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 314.

introduce otherwise superfluous and fanciful characterisations in some regrettable pareidolia, in a wilful reversal of the modern claim to 'the removal of the superfluous and additional'.[25] As will be explored further in Chapter Three, the mythic is not additional upon a pre-existent 'neutral' world which 'really' exists underneath the mythic narration. Rather, myth-making, by which (both consciously and unconsciously) we tell stories by which to understand the world, emerges as a constitutive dimension of our approach to meaning. Mythopoiesis is neither restricted to the anonymity of the furthest reaches of our species history[26] nor to the pages of the 'mythopoieic fantasy' that followed in Tolkien's wake. However as the most 'shameless' location for our myth-making ways, mythopoieic fantasy offers an entry-point into the question of how the mythic sensibility appears. This most visible manifestation of mythopoiesis offers a useful backdrop to the theological questions which emerge from reflection upon the drive to tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful.

Making Myths

A mythic sensibility combines two distinctively human faculties: imagination and meaningful encounter.[27] Irrespective of the fictionality of the story, engaging narratively involves an imaginative capacity.[28] Mythopoieic fantasy dwells intentionally on both of these dynamics, carefully constructing 'imaginative structures' in such a way as to highlight their imaginative nature (often employing the tropes of folklore to point up their 'shamelessly fictive' character), provoking the reader's imagination and perhaps conditioning her encounter with the world outside the text. Appealing to Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, literary critic

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[25] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, Second Edition, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 9. Unless otherwise noted, future references to John Milbank will be to *Theology and Social Theory*.

[26] Though for a thought-provoking investigation of the furthest reaches of our mythic history, see Witzel, E. J. Michael, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[27] The famous experiments with Koko the gorilla and other primates suggest that, like most all faculties, imagination and meaningful encounter probably exist on something like a spectrum in the animal kingdom. However, they are so important to human experience that their consideration seems both vital and unavoidable. See M. L. A. Jensvold and R. S. Fouts, 'Imaginary Play in chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes)' in *Human Evolution* (8, 1993), 217-227.

[28] Discussed by Stephen Crites in 'The Narrative Quality of Experience' in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39/3 (Fall 1971), 292-311. Oliver Sacks recounts the story of a patient who had lost the ability to narrate his own life, and so lost a sense of his own identity; narratability is necessary for a sense of who 'I' is, the one whose story it is. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 23-42.

Chris Brawley suggests that beyond mere escapism, mythopoieic fantasy is 'a subversive mode of literature [intended] to revise our perceptions [...] and, the distinguishing feature of these authors is [...] an inculcation of a certain religious or mystical "feeling" of the numinous in the reader.'[29] Like myth itself, mythopoieic ('myth-making') fiction presents the taxonomist with a challenge who to provide an exhaustive categorisation. However, by connecting those works of (especially fantastic) fiction which draw heavily on the same affective qualities of myth as it appears outside of fiction, Brawley is able to point the way toward an idea of the mythopoieic. In *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*, Brawley explores the potential of mythopoieic fantasy to enable readers to shift their perspective on and understanding of the world they inhabit. As we will see below, this revision of perception is a crucial characteristic of mythic sensibility. For Brawley, a myth is primarily a story that has the power to condition or even to alter our perceptions of the world. It operates in a way analogous to the perspective-framing and meaning-engendering experience of religious faith, Otto's 'feeling of the numinous'.

According to Brawley, the imaginative worlds of Tolkien, Le Guin, and others have superseded the imaginative world described in the Christian Bible, and his aim is to describe how, following the failure of Christianity to prevent ecological catastrophe, the public has sought to 'scratch the itch' of religious 'feeling' in the context of mythopoieic fantasy, and to examine how, in ways analogous to religious myth, it serves the subversive, frame-shifting function once performed by Christian myths and religious culture. His account of the mythic is compelling for its description both of how myths shape (or re-shape) perception and for its observations on the dynamics of fiction that overlap with more traditional religious mythology. However, the scope of his work and the limitations of his methodology fail to acknowledge the other kinds of myths and the other kinds of presences which shape our perception of the world and which do not necessarily reflect or inculcate any 'religious' feeling whatever. Or, put another way, Brawley does not account sufficiently for the religious quality

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[29] Chris Brawley, *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2014), 9.

of all myths: even apart from the shamelessly fictive myths of mythopoieic fantasy or the overtly 'magical' qualities of what is commonly identified as the mythological, Brawley himself is operating from within a certain narrative of scholarly distance from his object of study: myths are safely stowed away now in texts, to be approached or adopted at the reader's leisure. The mythic, however, is neither safe nor stowed, either in texts or in the past. Rather, according to philosopher Alecksei Losev, it remains present, and powerful, and an unavoidable dimension of human understanding.

By the account of Alecksei Losev, a myth is a 'miraculous personalistic history expressed in words'.[30] Common usage places myths somewhere between Brawley's fantastic stories or fairy tales and the outright lie. Losev, however, takes myth not simply to be a story or a fairy tale, but rather ias a fundamental category of human understanding and the means by which we meaningfully interact with the universe. By 'miraculous personalistic history', Losev means, among other things, that the mythic has a narrative quality (history), it bridges the gap between the objectivity of the world and the subjectivity of the human orientation for meaning (miraculous), and it is intimately bound up with human personhood, both in itself and for the human being who is 'subject' to it (personalistic).[31] The myth becomes for Losev, in effect, a presence, as a face presents the human person. It is a story by which a human being relates in a human way to the world and her experiences; it is the story by which, as Ward puts it, we see *as*.[32] Our perception of the world is always already mediated by our past experiences, the language(s) we speak, our mental state, and so on. All of these priors determine not only how we react to new circumstances and new stimuli, but also how we perceive any given stimulus or situation. An assemblage of wood is seen *as* a table or an altar or a workbench. A congregation of people is seen as a rock concert or a brawl or an initiation. This seeing *as*

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[30] Aleksei Fyodorovich Losev, *The Dialectics of Myth*, trans. Vladimir Marchenkov (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 185.

[31] Myth exhibits aspects of personality: it advocates values, it acts as an interlocutor, and each myth is distinctive in its attributes and attitude. Myth is also an important part of how we develop our own personality and sense of self; it is integral in the formation and *trans*formation of the person. I will discuss this further in Chapter One and Chapter Four of the thesis.

[32] Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 49.

becomes enriched with value in part on the basis of the stories by which we live, the myths, as Losev puts it, to which we are subject. Having been baptised into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, all strangers, and especially all who suffer, are seen and cherished as Christ himself. Having lived for one's life in the sacraments of the Church, all bread and wine become imbued with more profound significance and are seen to be at least potentially holy. Having read and been moved by Le Guin's novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, all sea-battered islands share something of the quiet power of Gont and Roke. Having recognised something powerfully true in *The Lord of the Rings*, all forests become Fangorn, and the fortunes and burdens of the very small take on new value and meaning. That these stories can shape our perceptions of the world and our understanding of our own experience is, for Losev, their mythic quality. That myth characterises our approach to the world allows that if the myth changes, the approach will change as well. And it is here that Brawley's understanding of myth intersects with Losev's. Myths for Losev are given rather than made, in concert with Williams' observation that 'myths have no authors'. Even the Gospel writers (if they were individuals at all) are, except by tradition, anonymous. Though myths traditionally do not have creators in the same way that a novel or a painting has, they do not come from nowhere. They are shaped by a community of 'subjects' over countless retellings. This communal mythopoiesis is appropriated in the mode of the modern novel by the authors of mythopoieic fiction, and it is this creative and innovative quality of myth-making that is of special concern to them. The continued elaboration of the mythopoieic process by authors evinces a human need to create such narratives where none exist or where none satisfy.

Because Losev's account of the mythic is primarily a phenomenological one, he makes no provision in his study for the sociality of myth. He rightly insists that myths make claims upon the mythic subject, but this relationship is, for Losev, always a binary one between the myth and the individual. From a theological (as well as philosophical and linguistic) perspective, this mythic solipsism is impossible. The mythic subject is not a radical individual, but rather always a member of a culture, nation, religion, tribe, language community, and more. Indeed,

as Edward Schillebeeckx notes, 'everything about a person, including his or her inwardness, is social'.[33] In contrast with a simple Kantian interiority absolutely cut off from the outside world, Schillebeeckx offers a sense of the inward life which is always already bound up in the social: 'Becoming human is acculturation.'[34] René Girard calls this dynamic 'interdividuality'.[35] As interdividuals, we are always already bound up with others: we learn from them and we learn through them how to be human, even before we are aware of any difference between 'I' and 'you'. The role of language alone in Losev's formulation 'miraculous, personalistic history expressed in words' must place myth within the sphere of the social, as the very words used to give the 'history' are artefacts of a social condition. We receive our words from our always-already pre-existent language community, and we learn to think through them. We receive through language a set of interpretive frames which precede and follow us.[36] So, while for Losev (as for the experience of the mythic subject) myths are without origin and autonomous ('myths have no authors'), emerging from his account we find a reliance on others for the initial and continuing articulation of the myth which structures the subject's view of the world. Not only is the subject's relationship to the myth conditioned by her relationship to other human beings, it helps teach her to which social groupings she belongs.

Mythic Identity

Even today, decades after the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, long after those first childhood readers have become adults with children of their own, one can still hear the question asked, by one adult to another, 'Which house are you?' Never mind that it is a question without a proper answer: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to whose houses the question refers, does not exist. Nobody believes that it exists. None of us is ever going to sit under the Sorting Hat to learn our wizardly identity. And so the preoccupation

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[33] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 47.
[34] Schillebeeckx, 47.
[35] Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 137, n.2.
[36] Schillebeeckx, 15.

with its answer is curious to say the least, not least for the extent of its appeal and the intensity with which its answer is contested. This intense sense of connection with a House is not simply the expression of a desire for affiliation or belonging. Each of the Hogwarts houses not only gives the young pupil in the novels (and the devoted fan in the everyday world) a name and a social circle, a colour and a mascot: the Sorting Hat also gives to each house member a set of ethical principles, a suite of personality traits held up as cardinal virtues, and a justification for certain kinds of conduct. Gryffindor prescribes a programme of bravery and forthrightness while Slytherin advocates ambition and cunning.[37] For many who have grown up with the novels and the films, the moral architecture of the Hogwarts Houses has become a compelling means of understanding and expressing the relative merits of certain ways of life. Even the generally wicked Slytherin have their champions among the otherwise virtuous and law-abiding public who value (with varying degrees of irony) its priority on getting things done, whatever the cost. The moral universe of this imaginary magical boarding school has become a way of understanding the world for those who have become subject to its account, a story 'to think and feel with'.

That every fan knows the stories to be *fiction* is not consequential to the power that they have over the fan's view of the world. For a reader under Rowling's spell, the world is painted in shades of Gryffindor crimson and Slytherin green. Rowling herself, author of the fictions, participates in the real-world myth-making. Following the 2016 general election in the United States of America, many witnessed with alarm the xenophobic policies which Donald Trump began to enact and saw echoes of the *Harry Potter* arch-villain Voldemort, alumnus of Slytherin House, whose own 'anti-muggle' ideology forms the backbone of the series' conflict. When one Twitter user quipped, 'Slytherin Alumni go far! CUT TO MONTAGE of Jared

[37] The very real distress experienced by real-world fans who are sorted into the 'wrong' House using a web-based sorting app is testament to the deep affinity many have for the virtues upheld by their House of preference. For a lengthy conversation between fans about sorting using the 'official' sorting quiz, see https://www.quora.com/If-Im-unhappy-with-my-Pottermore-Sorting-Hat-quiz-result-is-there-a-way-that-I-can-re-take-the-test (accessed 17 February 2021).

Kushner, Eric Trump, Donald Trump Jr',[38] Rowling replied, 'You've got to get the letter before you put on the hat.'[39] The moral architecture of the House *mythos* expands to include pathological categories: The administration's poorly-conceived, uninspired, and generally dreadful policies do not allow its members, however awful, even to enter the creative and magical world of the *Harry Potter* 'wizarding world'.[40]

It might be overreaching to read the Hogwarts house system on an epistemological level with the myths that have characterised more 'organic' or historically-rooted cultural and religious perspectives, if for no other reason than that the scheme of Houses is of such limited scope. Indeed, the broadly-composed and broadly-intending myths of Williams' author-less variety are indeed wider in their embrace of the human condition. Myths ultimately aim to universal application. The 'myth' of the Hogwarts Houses could be viewed as what Milton Scarborough calls a 'mythlette'. Scarborough develops an understanding of myth rooted in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, framing myth as an 'intention' or a phenomenological 'orientation for human existence.'[41] Unlike the 'perceptual, affective, motor, and linguistic intentionalities' which otherwise structure our experience of the world, 'myth intends the life-world as a whole.'[42] Myth, as Scarborough understands it, is not contextual: it is all-encompassing. He distinguishes between 'myths' which are concerned with 'the whole of the life-world' and 'mythlettes' which are individual narratives within a more comprehensive 'myth.'[43] For example, the mythlette of Persephone, which both describes the origin of the

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[38] Oliver Willis, tweet on Twitter (27 March 2017, 5:23 GMT): https://twitter.com/owillis/status/846336901057523712 (accessed 27 February 2018).

[39] J. K. Rowling, tweet on Twitter (27 March 2017, 5:33 GMT) https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/846339432152215552 (accessed 27 February 2018).

[40] The relationship between *mythos* and author has become fraught in recent years as contact between writers and their fans have grown more frequent and authors continue to add to their works after publication. In the case of Rowling, controversy has emerged over her comments regarding transgender and transsexual people, even going so far as to declare that there are none in the 'wizarding world'. These attitudes and comments have shattered the *mythos* for many fans, who had previously read the texts as liberating for those like themselves who suffered marginalisation on the basis of their sexual or gender identity. See, for instance, Adam Bloodworth, 'This Is How Trans Harry Potter Fans Feel About JK Rowling's Recent Tweets', post on *Huffington Post* (10 June 2020): https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/this-is-how-trans-harry-potter-fans-feel-after-jk-rowlings-tweets_uk_5edf4b14c5b6d09ac35f9521 (accessed 1 March 2021).

[41] Milton Scarborough, *Myth and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 84.

[42] Scarborough, 85.

[43] Scarborough, 87.

seasons and through the Eleusinian Mysteries gave adherents a structure by which to understand death and rebirth, exists within the wider myth of the ancient Greek cosmos. As a mythlette, the Hogwarts' Houses do not aspire to the comprehensive claims of *mythoi* such as the creation stories of the *Timaeus* or Genesis.

The myth of the Hogwarts Houses also differs from 'organic' myths in that it is the sole creative product of one person. Rowling is, of course, a member of a culture, a literary tradition, and a language community. As a white, educated woman from the developed world, her creations are embedded in (even when they might aim to undermine and critique) the assumptions and structures of her culture. The boarding school experience of Hogwarts' pupils draws directly from a nostalgic tradition of English public school fiction, and Hogwarts owes the most profound debt to Le Guin's School for wizards on Roke in her Earthsea novels. Likewise, Ron, Harry, Hermione and the rest are recognisable types, and they are surely based in Rowling's experience of childhood and the children in her life: they are not *sui generis* anomalies, but instead participate in the shared history and discourse of which Rowling is a part. However, the particular narrative devised by Rowling is a unique production to which she alone can lay final claim. This differs from the shared quality of organic myths, which though they may achieve a canonical articulation at the hands of an individual, a Hesiod or a Homer, the stories themselves are the shared property of a community or culture. This shared character is part of what makes organic myths powerful: that they are shared enables them to function as a common bond for members of the community. Even though traditional myths may only be recited or performed at certain sacred moments by certain authorised individuals, those individuals would not make any claim to their authorship: though they are, also, the articulations of human beings, organic myths attain the character of being origin-less or given. This is a part of what is intended by the Christian doctrine of scripture as divine revelation: though penned by human hand, they have an ultimacy and a contingency that renders them independent of any author and authoritative on their own terms.

So, while the account of virtue provided by the *Harry Potter* novels does not aspire to the universal character of a more comprehensive mythology, and though it is the product of one mortal hand rather than a common, immortal one, it still demonstrates something of the interpretive sensibility of a 'naturally-occurring' myth. Like the myth of Persephone, as enacted in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which offered initiates not only a description of the origin of the seasons, but also a life-shaping lens through which to understand the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the *Harry Potter* novels offer readers an interpretation both of society and themselves. Eleusinian initiates encounter the world as given and understand it through the myth expressed by the rites of the Mysteries.[44] Readers of *Harry Potter* likewise encounter themselves and others through the myth of the Houses and understand them as value-imbued and meaningful. While this interpretive encounter in the *Harry Potter* novels can be powerful, especially for the devoted fan, it stops short of approaching the transcendence to which the Persephone myth and some other bearers of the mythic sensibility gesture. So, though limited, mythopoieic fantasy can be seen to exhibit the same dynamic of interpretive presence as more general and widely-intentioned myths.

II. Shaping Our Seeing

Mythopoieic fantasy is concerned not only with myths, but also with making, *poiesis*, which is, according to Tolkien, in fact a re-making: of what has been lost, corrupted, or misunderstood. This sense is rooted in Tolkien's understanding of one of the powers and purposes of the fairy story (to which fantasy and the mythopoieic are closely aligned): the happy ending, the 'eucatastrophe' of catharsis and revelation that serves to re-frame the perceptions at the story's climax, both with regard to the story and to the world: 'in the "eucatastrophe" we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater — it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world'.[45] As a thoughtful and practicing Catholic layman, Tolkien conceived of his work as a participation in the divine creativity, and as such

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[44] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Anchor, 2009), 54-57.

[45] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 64.

aspired for it to bear something of the revelatory power of the 'natural' and sacred myths of history, and most particularly, of course, those of Christianity. For Tolkien, the creativity entailed in his work developing the geography, history, and myths of Middle-earth was not only that of the artist but also that of the theologian.[46]

We can observe two layers of myth-creation in the structure of *The Lord of the Rings*: both the myths endemic *to* the narrative, which are known to the characters of the novel (such as the stories of Eärendil, traveling through the void bearing a Silmaril on his brow) and the myth constituted by the text *of* the narrative: *The Lord of the Rings* as myth itself. It can be said to be 'mythopoieic' both in the sense of making myths of which its characters are subjects and in the sense of being made as a narrative with which the reader can interpret the world external to the story. The text gestures to something beyond itself in the same way that more traditional mythic texts do. Put another way, not only does *The Lord of the Rings* contain myths, it bears a mythic presence itself, a numinous sensibility in the deep woods of Fangorn, on the hopeless slopes of Mount Doom, and in the unlooked-for adulation of the humble on the Fields of Cormallen after the fall of Barad Dûr. The same duality of endemic and constitutive myth can be found in the myths of the *Earthsea* novels of Le Guin: the heavy, earth-bound mystery of the Place of the Tombs of Atuan and in the blurring bounds of earth, sea, knowledge, and unknowing at the edge of all things in *The Farthest Shore*. Though it is at times deferred, and the subjectivity of the myth is obscured by distance or by the intent of the author, the sense of a knowing presence is not absent from these fictional myths. Like the experience of presence reported by anthropologists who have spent time in the dark with Palaeolithic cave-paintings, very real yet with unknowable content, the subject still finds himself recognised by the otherness of the mythic.[47]

Myths are indissociable from origins. Though he is reticent to offer an exhaustive definition, when Mircea Eliade does attempt to draw some lines around what he means when

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[46] Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2015), 412, 422.

[47] Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, (2011), offers a compelling example.

he talks about myth, they reveal a form of story concerned with the meaning to be found in beginnings:

> [...The] definition that seems least inadequate because most embracing is this: Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of the Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation' it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural beings. [...] myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness [...] of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred [...] into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today.[48]

These origins, then, are not primarily concerned with answering the question *how* as it is posed by the empirical sciences, but rather with the *what* of human experience. Like Losev, Eliade prefers a phenomenological approach. The mechanics and procedure are not at issue so much as, by narrating the origin, one narratively experiences the meaning of the thing originated. *Being*, in the mythical sense, is identical with *meaning*, and that meaning is experienced primarily in conducting oneself according to its account: 'Because myth relates the *gesta* of Supernatural Beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities.'[49] By patterning our lives after the account of a myth's narrative of origin, we are able both to approach the supernatural and to transcend the limited horizons of strictly material reality (whatever that might be) as well as experience the world in truth. Karen Armstrong synthesises Eliade's description into the succinct formula that a myth is the story of 'something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time' and the truth of which is discoverable only by acting upon that story through what she terms a 'program of action.'[50]

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[48] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), 5-6.

[49] Eliade, 6.

[50] Armstrong, xi-xii.

The union of narrative and action encompasses much of what is meant by the mythic sensibility. The myth not only describes the world but it also describes the subject of the myth (that is, the reader, the hearer, the devotee). The degree to which my actions bear out the archetypal and model actions of the myth is the degree to which I am judged good or not in the myth's lights. Performing the ritual correctly, conducting myself correctly in society: these are the fruit of the myth and the means by which I am able to understand my life and my self as meaningful or not. Though Eliade and Armstrong are primarily concerned with myth as it relates to explicitly religious practice, this judgment on the subject is equally true of secular myths such as the myth of the American Dream: hard work leads ineluctably to material success, and sustained poverty is equated with laziness and lack of virtue. Though transcendence and the supernatural are categories associated closely with religion, the kind of value placed on material success in American culture and the status accorded to those who possess it, especially when it can be framed in terms of a 'rags to riches' narrative, is not unlike Otto's *numen*, representative of the transcendent impinging upon the immanent. The myth of the American Dream reveals the world to be meaningful by way of hard work and material security: your life has value and meaning when it conforms to these patterns and is meaningless and desperate if it does not.[51] Material security is identical with happiness and the Good Life.

Armstrong notes that 'the only way to assess the value and truth of a myth [is] to act upon it,' and that 'if we failed to apply it to our situation, a myth would remain abstract and incredible.'[52] In enacting it, the myth becomes real and it lays a claim on our actions. In this sense, the mythic sensibility takes on something of the character of a game. The intentions, goals, rules, and scope of the game dictate what the players want, how they go about trying to achieve it, and the space in which they pursue these aims. Johan Huizinga describes it in this way: 'Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across

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[51] One has only to think of the reflexive attitude of many Americans to the lives of the poor in the developing world: conditioned by unnumbered television commercials calling for donations to help African children, the people of Africa are assumed to live lives of wholesale privation and to be entirely without joy.

[52] Armstrong, xii.

another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. [...] Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it "spoils the game", robs it of its character and makes it worthless.'[53] The spoil-sport, in fact, illustrates the game-like, fictive nature of myth as it appears in wider cultural frames. For example, regarding the Houses of *Harry Potter*, to mock a spellbound fan by telling them how childish it is to identify so deeply with a children's book or simply to dismiss their affection and affiliation out of hand on the basis of the whole construct being fiction 'spoils the game' (and likely would lead to hurt feelings). Similarly, to view the ritual acts of the Christian liturgy outside the 'rules of the game' by which they are played is to spoil it. Demanding to slice into the Host in order to find the flesh inside is a violation of the rules and a spoiling of the game. As Huizinga points out, conscientious objectors spoil the game of noble warfare and revolutionaries spoil the game of a changeless social order. However, it is not only the order created by the horizons of the myth that render it game-like.

Play is also inherently imaginative and creative. Not only are the rules fictive, in the sense that they are contingent to the game and not necessary to human existence, but games themselves almost always involve a further imagined component.[54] Whether it is the importance or value placed on the goal (within the horizons of the game itself, the outcome is of utmost importance and is unrelated to any external reward or profit to be had) or it is an imagined world of faeries and wizards which constitutes the game's setting, a certain playfulness with the conditions of reality is necessary for the game *as game* to function. Within the boundaries of the game's order, the world is to be discerned in a certain way. Certain places are taboo, whether they be beyond the boundary lines painted in the grass or behind the doors of the Holy of Holies. A myth establishes a relationship between the subject and the world in which we live in the same way that a game establishes a relationship between

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[53] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), 10.

[54] Play is vital to the concept of myth in more ways than discussed in this thesis. The playfulness with 'reality' is exhibited both in traditional mythic narratives (the combination and re-combination of species and natural forms, creative and inventive magics, etc,) and in the being-played aspect of being 'subject' to a myth. Chapter Two will develop at greater length both the mythic and interpretive role played by the 'play concept'.

the player and the world in which it is played. Certain people have privileged status, in the role of referee, captain, priest, or prophet. Though these roles exist only on the terms of the rules of the game/myth, which is to say in the imaginations of the participants rather than in any given or a priori way, within the context of the game, their reality is absolute. In its enactment, the myth shapes its subjects' apprehension of the world and it conditions its subjects' interpretation of it. In this sense, the game becomes the real agent.

Hans-Georg Gadamer observes how the game, in fact, *plays* the *players*. The game itself takes on the status of a subject: 'all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game is the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. [...] Whoever "tries" is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game [...] is not the player but instead the game itself.'[55] The subjectivity of the game is of crucial importance in the development of our concept of the mythic sensibility. Gadamer is primarily concerned with play as it is 'transformed into structure' in the form of a work of art.[56] However, taken in the context of interpreting our experience of the world and the self, Gadamer's observation becomes equally applicable to the mythic sensibility. The work of art and its interpretation entail the viewer/interpreter's participation in a game structured by the work of art's self-presentation. For instance, appreciation of a stage play requires that the viewer participate according to the rules of the game the play represents: the actors are to be taken for the characters they portray, the set is to be taken for the setting of the story, and the world of the play itself is (usually) to be taken as entirely distinct from the world outside. The game of 'play-watching' is the necessary condition for understanding what the play means and what it is saying. In the human being's interpretation of the world, myths can be understood as this same kind of game. Possessed by the rules and the structure of the game, the subject interprets her experience according to those rules and the imaginative world created by them. The encounter with the world entails an encounter with the subjectivity of the myth, the subject which both interprets the world to the human being and which interprets the human being to herself.

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55 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 106.
56 Gadamer, 110.

Conclusion

Beginning in *The Wee Free Men*, Pratchett offers his take on the mythic dimensions of childhood, charting the growing up of Tiffany Aching as she learns how to be a witch. It turns out that witching in the Discworld looks a lot like George Herbert's ideal of the Country Parson: going round the houses, offering a listening ear and pastoral care, and mediating the supernatural to a grateful populace. The most senior of the witches of the mountains, Granny Weatherwax, offers Tiffany advice on how to help the people she serves, and like many things to do with magic, pastoral care, and the development of a meaningful relationship with the world, the advice comes down to the kinds of stories that Tiffany tells. Stuck on the importance of telling the 'truth' (that is, the truth as logical inquiry and empirical science would have it, the *logos*-centric approach), Tiffany bridles at Granny Weatherwax's methods: 'but you told Mr. Umbril the shoemaker that his chest pains will clear up if he walks to the waterfall at Tumble Crag every day for a month and throws three shiny pebbles into the pool for the water sprites! That's not doctoring!' Granny replies, 'No, but he thinks it is. The man spends too much time hunched up. A five-mile walk win the fresh air every day for a month will see him right as rain.'[57] The stories we tell reveal the world as meaningful in ways that change our behaviour and change the way we value things. Mr. Umbril lives in the conditions of a *mythos* that includes water sprites but not bacteria: the stories he has been told about the composition of the world has made certain actions understandable and others incomprehensible. The story Granny Weatherwax tells participates in the *mythos* to which he is subject so that she can draw out the most healthful meaning to the world and Mr. Umbril's actions. Tiffany, too, learns to be less confident in the line between *logos* and *mythos*, as the two bleed together in an act of meaning-making and care. This is the play of mythopoiesis.

Myth-making is neither a thing of the past nor a matter of deception. Rather, it represents a fundamental aspect of the human encounter with the world: we tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful. Mythopoieic fantasy is arguably the most visible locus of

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[57] Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 202-3.

myth-making in the present age. Authors of mythopoieic fantasy such as Tolkien, Rowling, and Pratchett each in their own way testify to the power of stories to shape our encounter with the world, and mythopoieic fantasy more than other genres of fiction explicitly explores the possibilities of playing with the contours of our mythic sensibilities. Reflecting on Eliade's account of myth as disclosing the meaningfulness of the world, especially as discovered through action, we can discern a sense in which the mythic concerns that meaning-full encounter world and encounter with the self. There is also a sense in which finding both the world and the self to be meaningful also offers intimations of something transcendent and possibly holy. Gadamer's use of the idea of play and presence in the interpretation of the work of art and applying it to this myth-mediated encounter with the world reveals how a *mythos* functions as an interpreter, disclosing the meaning of the world and the self by means of the rules of its 'game'. The *mythos* interprets the world to the subject and interprets the subject to herself. Our encounter with the world is mediated by such mythic sensibilities which manifest to us as a hermeneutic presence, interpreting the world in terms of the mythic narrative. Mythopoieic fantasy helps demonstrate how such mythic sensibilities are more or less naturalised, more or less 'shamelessly fictive', and so more or less available to scrutiny and critique. The *mythoi* bearing such mythic sensibilities are themselves made things, however artificial or natural they may appear.

In the liturgy of Holy Communion, the gifts of the people are often commended to the altar with the words, 'All things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee.'[58] Losev speaks of the mythic as 'miraculous' and 'personalistic' inasmuch as it appears to the mythic subject that the *mythos* exists of itself and connects the subject's experience to history in a meaningful way. In the course of the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis, something new has emerged which reveals the world as meaningful in a new and exciting way. The hermeneutic presence of the myth is experienced as a new thing, beyond the materials given, a *novum* resulting from the act of mythopoiesis. In light of the commendation of the gifts quoting 1 Chronicles,

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[58] These words do not appear in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England, though they are included in the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* in the Episcopal Church, and the form is used in many Anglican Churches.

Christian reflection on mythopoiesis invites the question, 'does the *novum* found in myth-making also come of God?' Or, put another way, how is a Christian theology of mythopoiesis to speak of the relationship between human making and God's gift of being to the creation? This is the subject of the next chapter.

II

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Mytho/poiesis

The making from the unmaking,
The ending from the beginning,
Who shall know surely?
What we know is the doorway between them
That we enter departing.
Among all beings ever returning,
The eldest, the Doorkeeper, Segoy.[59]

— From *The Creation of Éa* in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu*

The first thyng Tak did, he wroten hymself; the second thyng Tak did, he wroten the Laws; the thyrd thing Tak did, he wroten the World; the fourth thyng Tak did, he wroten ay cave; the fyfth thing Tak did, he wroten a geode, ay egge of stone; and in the gloamyn of the mouth of the cave, the geode hatched and the Brothers were born [...the first Human and first Dwarf...] Then Tak looked upon the stone and it was trying to come alive, and Tak smiled and wrote: 'All things strive' [...] and for the service the stone had given he fashioned it into the first Troll and delighted in the life that came unbidden.[60]

— From *The Things that Tak Wrote* in Terry Pratchett's *Thud!*

When God began to create the heavens and the earth...*
*Or *in the beginning God created*

— Genesis 1.1 (*Common English Bible)*

Mythopoiesis is myth-making. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how a mythic sensibility can be spoken of as a kind of hermeneutic presence, and mythopoiesis as the emergence or appearance of this novel presence interpreting the world as meaningful to the

[59] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 186.
[60] Terry Pratchett, *Thud!* (London: Corgi, 2005), 438-439.

subject. In this chapter, I argue that the '-making' of myth-making is truly the emergence of something new, and that as such it is in some way accountable to divine creativity. Employing Thomist language of analogy and participation, I situate the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis relative to God's ongoing act of creation in a way that is responsible to the Triune witness of God in the Christian tradition. This approach also clarifies the mythic character of theology itself. Speech about creation is, by almost any use of the term *mythos*, the act of mythopoiesis *par excellence*. In terms of mythic sensibility at least, it is a recursive mythopoiesis: the *novum* that emerges from its making is explicitly and directly concerned with creation itself, with origins and the origin of origins. A theological approach to the 'making' of myth-making thus invites a considered reflection on the theological dynamics of creation and its relationship to human making, and mythopoiesis regarding creation presents a suitable starting point for considering the generativity of mythopoiesis and the relationship of that generativity to creation, an action traditionally reserved to the Godhead alone. That creation and making are often seen as instances of the same kind of action, to the extent that we now happily speak of human creativity in the same breath as divine,[61] indicates the degree of misunderstanding at play in this question and obscures the consequences of a too-easy identification of human and divine generativity. Distinguishing them entirely risks rendering human making as unconditioned as God's creation and so setting human beings apart from God and apart from the world in a way not reflected in experience and the witness of the tradition: we are inextricably bound up with the world. However, eliding human making and divine creation too completely results in a reduction of God to our own, human level and cannot account for why there is something rather than nothing. A language must be found which does not confuse what humans do and what God does, while also not reducing what we do to mere repetition: how do we account for what emerges beyond the material and beyond the form? In mythopoiesis, a *novum* is encountered, something new which speaks beyond the words themselves and which carries

[61] As Trevor Hart notes, and will be explored below, this is a recent development.

meaning and interprets the world. This chapter seeks to give an account for that *novum* in such a way as to be able to speak of the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis in the light of the Triune God.

Theological discussion of creativity has been influenced in recent decades by the development of process theologies rooted in Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. The chapter thus begins with an assessment of the process theological approach to the question of creation and humanity's relationship to God's creative action. By a close examination of Keller's *Face of the Deep*, I observe how, despite its manifest attractions to a theology of mythopoiesis, Keller's process theology is unable to account for the *novum* of human making while preserving the witness of the creedal tradition of Christian faith or falling into a dangerous nihilism. As an alternative, I propose a revisitation of the Thomist language of participation and analogy, rooted in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which offers a more robust means of speaking of the emergence of novelty in mythopoiesis while taking account of the contingency and limitations that characterise human making as opposed to divine creativity. I argue that only in this way can we understand how through limited, finite human *making*, we are able nonetheless in relationship to God's eternal *creation* from nothing. Understanding the *novum* of mythopoiesis in these terms then informs how our myth-making, regardless of its explicitly 'theological' content, always remains rooted in God.

As discussed in Chapter One, the mythic sensibility of Tolkien's mythopoiesis, shamelessly fictive though it may be, has changed me, or even better it has *formed* me, allowing me to see the world in a certain way. This is powerful imaginative magic. To shape the vision of another is the stuff of illusion and enchantment in the fairy stories and fables that form the base strata of our literary imaginations, as much as it is the province of pedagogy and parenting. The newness which these fictions bring into the world, configurations not seen before but no less powerful for their novelty, suggests a kind of creative power not unlike the creative activity which is the condition of being for the world itself. Though starting with given materials, this myth-making results nevertheless in a *novum*, a surplus to the given. In what sense are we able

to understand the imaginative novelty of these mythopoieic *makings* in the context of the divine *creation*?

If Eliade is right, and myth tells 'how a reality came into existence', however great or small, then the concern for beginnings which underlies much of the so-called debate between science and religion must come as no surprise. What is ultimately at stake is an account of the meaning of the world. Like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, we find ourselves seeking ever deeper and further back into the roots of things, for 'there must be great secrets buried there which have not been discovered since the beginning.'[62] There is a sense that if only we can approach the origin of a thing we will come away with an essential understanding of it, that if we can approach the start, we will have a fuller sense of how things have gone on. However, like Gollum, we may find ourselves seemingly at the root of things, beneath the mountains and far from the sun, only to find ourselves lost and with no way out: our way of telling the beginning of things no longer speaks truly and we have encountered a dead end. How we tell the story matters. Paul Ricoeur observes that 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.'[63] That is, as we shape events (historical or mythical) into a narrative form, they accrue value and meaning for us. In this sense, any account of origins is bound to contain at least the seeds of a mythic sensibility. As such, the narrative account of beginnings becomes at least as much a *way of seeing* the world as we find it as it is a way of accounting for the state of the world as we discover it today. It is the work of historians and cosmologists to excavate and to describe the emergence of things, how they have come about and the implications of their arrival for future events. But the tools of material evidence and physical causes fail us as we approach the related but distinct question of origin. Instead, the accounts given of the *why* behind not only history but of being itself open out into philosophical and theological narration. And the conditions of beginning narrated by a

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62 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 54.

63 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, *Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.

mythical account of origin bear much of that weight as well: how we speak the beginning of all things determines how we *see* them, how we *value* them, how we relate *to* them.

In the epigraphs to this chapter, we find two fictional mythemes and one historical mytheme, each expressing both an account of the beginning of things and a way of seeing the world in light of that account. *Tehanu* tells the story of a traumatised girl who is taken in and cared for by Ged and Tenar, the protagonists of Le Guin's first *Earthsea* novels *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *Tombs of Atuan*. Along with the third volume in that collection of novels and short stories, *The Farthest Shore*, we find a world largely taken up with the stories, fears, and quests of men. In *Tehanu* Le Guin sets about revisiting and re-inscribing her world with the perspectives and experiences of women, and in so doing touches on its origins and the sources of its being. Though never given in full, *The Creation of Éa* is a song which forms a creation myth for many, and here Therru (the wounded girl at the centre of the story) gives her recitation of the song. The paradoxes of its opening lines are revisited in the later events of the novel as we encounter Segoy (the creator, the first, a dragon) in physical presence, and Therru herself is revealed to be a dragon in human shape: the closed circle of beginning and ending and beginning again is made manifest. This cyclical being stands largely in contrast to the linear narratives of power which motivate the men of the previous three books, and is offered both to the characters as well as to readers as a disruption of their perceptions, an invitation to encounter the mysterious becoming of the world.

In similar vein, *The Things that Tak Wrote*, an account by dwarfs in Pratchett's *Discworld* novels of their origins and that of humans and trolls, forms the centre of controversy in *Thud!*, a novel of duelling orthodoxies and the perils of historiography. The version quoted comes at the novel's climax, as the troll-hating reactionaries of dwarfish society discover that in the myth's original form, their god, Tak, blesses the life of their own mortal enemies: 'for the service the stone had given he fashioned it into the first Troll and delighted in the life that came unbidden.'[64] In place of a rigid hierarchy of peoples, this re-fashioning of the myth

[64] Pratchett, *Thud!*, 438-439.

disrupts old certainties as what was unintended is celebrated and is more beautiful for the surprise it brings. As a textual people (not unlike Christians), the discovery of a more primordial text with a perspective so at odds with their politics and theology begins a cascade of desperate and violent retribution as they find themselves unable to square the view of the world they have inherited from tradition with the challenge produced by this new mythic hermeneutic.

We find an analogous conflict of interpretation in the third epigraph quotation, representing a difference in opinion over how to translate the first verse of the Old Testament. The consequences for this re-narration of creation, placing God's first action *in medias res*, could be far-reaching, changing the way that Christians see the world as meaningful and as God's. The stories that we make become the means by which we encounter the world and one another, and the way we tell them changes the terms of that encounter. When re-told, the myth speaks something new, in much the same way that a work of art surprises with the novelty of its form, of its realism, or of its mysterious depth. Myth-making in this light is as often as not a re-making, a re-telling of the account of origin in order to speak to a new time or a new circumstance. The perilous activity of re-making a myth is fraught with danger, as inevitably things are both lost and gained in the re-telling. The opportunity to capture something new of the mystery speaking through the *mythos* is only taken knowing that something vital may be sacrificed in the process. In seeking after language for speaking of the emergence of the new in mythopoiesis, one is engaged in a kind of re-narration, and the success of that re-narration is contingent upon what one is willing and unwilling to lose in the telling. The full consequences of this calculus will be discussed in Chapter Four, but we may begin with a case study in the form of Keller's process theology re-narration of the creation, which reveals the perils of mythopoiesis even as it embraces the possibilities of a mythic approach to theology. Inevitably, such mythopoiesis must be answerable to the rest of the Christian tradition if it is to remain Christian theology.

I. Process and the Deep

Ostensibly, process theology appears to offer an attractive means by which to understand the relationship of human making to divine action in history: mythopoiesis can be understood in process terms as coterminous with the ongoing divine creative action, and the mystery of the 'interpretive presence' is resolved by appeal to the presence of God's own self. Beginning with Charles Hartshorne and continuing through the work of theologians such as John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Keller, the process theological approach to creation seeks to answer the questions posed by the perceived violence, innocent suffering, and contradiction observed to be inherent in traditionally orthodox doctrines such as creation *ex nihilo* and God's ontological difference from the World. Protesting on the grounds of the problem of evil, methods of biblical exegesis, and Christianity's ongoing legacy of patriarchal violence, process theologians have proposed instead a model of creation from the primal chaos, which they contend better explains the existence of evil in the creation, is better-founded in scripture, and does not fall prey to the tendency towards violence and the ascription of violence to God, which they have observed in the traditional doctrine of creation from nothing. A responsible Christian theology of mythopoiesis cannot leave these challenges unanswered. While there is a diversity of approaches to the process account of creation,[65] Keller's *Face of the Deep* offers an exceptionally compelling mythopoieic theology of creation, creativity, and human participation, exemplifying the best of the process theological tradition, and a close reading of her arguments in favour of *creatio ex profundis* reveals both the assets and liabilities of process theology in accounting for the *novum* of mythopoieic making and situating it in relation to God's creative act.

Face of the Deep is an extended reflection on and explication of the first two verses of Genesis, arguing that the deep (*tehom*) over which God's spirit moved in the beginning was lost to theology, to the detriment of all. This is essentially a mythopoieic critique: the mythopoiesis of orthodox theology is faulty in its effacing of the Deep and the consequences

[65] For a selection, see Thomas Jay Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation:* Creatio Ex Nihilo *and its New Rivals* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

that flow from this decision. Keller takes the reader through a history of the first articulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and into dialogue with both Augustine and Karl Barth, whose writings are recruited into the articulation of *tehomophilic* and *tehomophobic* theologies respectively. Having charted the rise and fall, resurgence and rejection of the Deep, Keller traces *tehomophobia* in Melville and in Job, excavating literary and Biblical implication in patriarchal power and violence. Finally, in dialogue with quantum physics, traditions of negative theology (including Donysius, Nicolas of Cusa, and the *Cloud of Unknowing*), midrash, and the great twentieth-century hermeneuts, Keller explores the surfaces and depths of what a *tehomic* theology could look like as a remedy to the shortcomings she observes in the tradition. By engaging across methodologies and genres of knowledge, Keller aims to demonstrate both the pervasive effects of misogynistic/inorganic/patriarchal/*tehomophobic* theology and mythopoiesis as well as the ample resources available to a *tehomophilic* alternative. Keller challenges her readers not to fear the dark/feminine/rejected/complex/unknowable depths but rather to see in them the endless possibility of divine (and so worldly) becoming.

Beginning with beginning, but eschewing the language of origin[66], Keller reflects on the seemingly unoriginate *tehom*, over which God's spirit hovers or broods in the beginning of creation and from which or in which or within which God proceeds to make the world. As a theologian in the process philosophical tradition of Alfred North Whitehead, Keller advocates an understanding of God's action with regard to the world as one of Whiteheadian 'beginningless process'.[67] Aligning the erasure of the Deep from later accounts of creation *ex nihilo* with the patriarchal voices which have governed Christian theology through its history, Keller situates her project within the discourse of feminist theology. Identifying the ways in which the 'darksome deep' has been denigrated through history with the figures of 'formless monsters, maternal hysteria, pagan temptation, dark hoards, caves of terror, contaminating

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[66] For Keller, *origin* bespeaks a violent disjuncture and a monarchic, patriarchal will. *Beginning*, however, is always ongoing, always *in medias res*. In leaning heavily on this distinction, Keller sets her rhetoric up to confuse immanence and transcendence, earthly conditions and divine realities.

[67] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep* (London: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

hybrids, miscegenation and sexual confusion', Keller situates her work at the intersections of racial, Queer, and postcolonial projects as well.[68] As a mythic sensibility, the Deep for Keller becomes the site of all that Western, European, white, patriarchal Christianity has discarded, erased, effaced, or ignored. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* becomes a Christian theological sensibility that is more concerned with purity than a fruitful hybridity and which seeks after an ontological and so also epistemological, doctrinal, and above all theological *tidiness*. The Deep, argues Keller, is messy, fluid, generative, un-tamed, and multiple. How much better a representation of the messy, fluid, always-in-process world in which we find ourselves is creation out of this Joycean *chaosmos* than is the stark origination of a creation from nothing, at the behest of a sovereign (masculine) will belonging to an omnipotent He-God Creator.

From the perspective of a theology of mythopoiesis, Keller's *tehomic* creation *mythos* grants the myth-maker license to approach the novelty of our *poiesis* on equal terms with the eternal becoming and creativity of God. Mythopoiesis brings about that which is new because it is identical with the eternal emergence of the new that is God/God's nature. The fluidity and multiplicity of *tehom* becomes fertile ground for speaking of the transformability of so much mythic imagery and the very ludic dynamics of mythic sensibility outlined in the previous chapter. It is tempting to adopt Keller's language of untidy generativity, divorced from conceptions of purity and being 'good enough' to speak of the wild diversity of mythopoiesis and its manifold appearance in both beneficent and destructive guises. However, in order to aid in the production of a *Christian* theology of mythopoiesis, in light of the God witnessed to by the tradition, a closer examination of the methods underwriting Keller's process account is required.

Reading the Biblical Text

As Ward notes, 'work on Christian doctrines, in systematic theology, is not about creating certainties or proving things to be the case; its concern is whether talk about God can

[68] Keller, xvi.

adequately attest to the work God came into the world in Christ to perform.'[69] Addressing the violence of the world and the emerging unwillingness on the part of the violated to endure it, Keller rightly critiques the patriarchal rigidity of a certain kind of Christianity which has dominated the imaginations of many Western Christians, and has been implicated in that violence, and she seeks to re-narrate a theology which, by her own account, is at least partially Christian. Even as she makes a concerted appeal to the Bible, however, and seeks to offer a mythic account of the beginning of things which includes human generativity at its core, the ways in which she engages scripture and the emphasis on a process account of God and the world leaves her theology not quite Christian and too reliant on a primordial and eternal chaos which is unable finally to speak. Echoing (though not thoroughly reading) Gerhard May's magisterial *Creatio Ex Nihilo* (a widely-cited historical account of the development of the doctrine of creation from nothing), Keller suggests that the traditional theology of *creatio ex nihilo* is insufficiently grounded in the Bible, as opposed to what she proposes as a more scripturally-defensible *creatio ex profundis*. As a result of its insufficient attention to the Bible, Keller argues, *creatio ex nihilo* became complicit in patriarchal violence contrary to the feminine Deep which it effaced. However, by engaging the Bible as she does, Keller does not adequately attest to 'the work God came into the world in Christ to perform', instead opting for a contrived image of the God of tradition. By rejecting this image in the name of answering the questions of innocent suffering and patriarchal violence, Keller ends up unable properly to account for why there is something rather than nothing and how the origin of all things is intimately bound up with its salvation in the Incarnate Christ.

Keller is not alone among process theologians in bringing an exegetical critique to *creatio ex nihilo*. Namely, they observe that the doctrine of creation from nothing is not to be found in the Bible. Instead, creation from chaos is held to be more faithful to the Biblical text. As Cobb and Griffin note, 'Process theology affirms instead a doctrine of creation out of chaos (which was suggested not only by Plato but also by more Old Testament passages than those

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[69] Graham Ward, 'Receiving the Gift', *Modern Theology*, 30/3 (2014), 74–88.

supporting the doctrine of creation out of nothing).'[70] Keller takes up this process-theological torch and runs far with it. Her whole text can be understood as a close reading and unfolding of Genesis 1.1-2. However, as a work that positions itself as (at least) Christian theology,[71] *Face of the Deep* makes very great hay from these few verses of the Old Testament while making only scarce reference to any others and virtually no mention of the New Testament at all.[72] Keller attempts an inoculation of her case against a Gospel-based critique (not only of her critique of *creatio ex nihilo* but also of her assessment of divine power) by attempting to situate the Johannine prologue among 'Jewish texts of the *logos*/*sophia*', citing an unpublished paper given by Daniel Boyarin.[73] However, in this case, the work of repositioning early Christian discourse within the ambit of Jewish theological conversation is used in order to minimise or even erase the distinctive contributions of an explictily Christian perspective. Though Boyarin, Amy-Jill Levine, and others have made much-needed contributions, emphasising how Jesus' outlook and that of first Christians is rooted in the Hebrew imagination and that the Gospel stands in continuity with the Hebrew Bible,[74] for a work of Christian theology not to engage with the decisive moment of divine self-disclosure in the Incarnation works a fatal undermining of its status as a work of Christian theology. Her stated goal of doing theology from a place of a '"Judeo-Christianity," beyond both melting pot and identity politics'[75] is found to be an impossible no-place: Christian thought is irrevocably changed by and bound to the event of the Incarnation.[76]

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[70] John B. Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 65.

[71] Keller, xvii. Keller is, at times, rather vague about her own faith commitments and those which bound her project.

[72] The only New Testament passage cited comes in a passing reference to and summary dismissal of the prologue to John's Gospel.

[73] Keller, 45.

[74] For instance, see Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr., John Dominic Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 2006) and Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[75] Keller, xvii.

[76] This trend is also to be observed in process theology more broadly. Cobb and Griffin's *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition* reflects the tendency of process theology to tend towards non-theistic conceptions of Buddhism as well.

By omitting to engage with the bloody, bodily *mythos* of the Gospels, Keller invents a version of *creatio ex nihilo* that is simple, clean, and pure: free from the contamination of the fluid, the feminine, the salty, and the flowing. Keller not only re-mythologises the creation in terms of *creatio ex profundis*, she re-narrates the *creatio ex nihilo* in terms congenial to her constructive project. This is, of course, always going to be the case with mythopoiesis: as the sensibility of the *mythos* in question asserts itself, it will position all other accounts and mythic sensibilities relative to itself: her rendition of the *ex nihilo* has no space for the crucified body of Jesus, with the pregnant body of Mary, with the tear-streaked face of Mary Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning, with the spear-pierced flesh of the resurrected Christ, because these are reserved to *tehom*. In these very messy, bodily locations, the words of God and the Word of God encounter one another and even become one another.[77] As we seek after a way of speaking of God, we cannot avoid the consequences of this bodying-forth of God in flesh and encounter of God with flesh. Keller's re-narration positions itself as an interruption or a spoiling of the 'rules' of the mythic account of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, by not fully absorbing the account as it was given, her mythopoieic critique comes up short. A theology of creation which does not take adequate account of the Christological shape of God's self-disclosure is bound to fall victim to the purifying tendencies of the residual neo-platonism of some early Christian accounts.[78] Alternatively it can succumb to the reductive pull of the panentheistic move of Keller's process theology, making the difference between God and creation indistinct, and so rendering the saving work of the Incarnation of marginal value. With the lines between God and nature blurred in this way, it becomes difficult to understand how Keller's God can save. If such a God is nearly identical with the up-swelling tide of *tehomic* generativity, which is itself a feature of the world, it is impossible to see how such a God can offer real transformation. The scandalous and baffling fact of God's *entering* creation in Jesus while remaining distinct from it is the core of the Christian account of salvation. A

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[77] Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 35-37.

[78] In this context I am thinking not only of the not-quite-incarnate Christ of Docetism but also of such Christologies as the Valentinan Christ-Sophia dyad whose nature is somewhat more divine than human.

God who is implicated in the ongoing creativity of the world in a Whiteheadian antithesis cannot accomplish this,[79] and in fact stands in need of salvation themselves. It is not only a failure to engage with the New Testament that renders Keller's account untenable, but indeed her engagement with the very verses she holds up as the root of her appeal.

Keller grounds her argument in the accurate observation that the weight of the scriptural witness (at least as far as it goes) is behind an understanding of God's creating the world not from nothing but from ready-to-hand 'unformed matter'.[80] She also uses this as her central argument for the patriarchal violence inherent in an (extra-Biblical, from her point of view) account of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, Keller winds up in conversation not so much with the Bible as both Christians and Jews have read it, but rather with the Babylonian *mythos* of the conflict between Tiamat and her grandson Marduk which forms one historical sub-stratum of the Genesis 1 account.[81] The fruitful results of such intertextual dialogue are obvious and undeniable. However, her greater willingness to engage across traditions, to privilege a putative meaning *behind* the text over the meaning of the text as it comes to us in history does not strengthen her case. By appealing to a meaning found *under* the text, though sourced from an older work, Keller de-historicises the Biblical account and so renders it unable to speak from its own time. Though she is at pains to excavate the theomachy that marked the Babylonian version, and so implicate YHWH in the violence of Marduk against Tiamat, this reading hardly seems justified in the face of the shift away from violence made by the Priestly creation story. The priestly creation story of Genesis 1 is itself already a re-narration and re-mythologisation of the *mythos* in which Keller seeks to implicate it. It is precisely the *lack* of violence in the Genesis version which marks it out, and for the Exilic community would even have been one of its most deeply consoling features: *unlike* the squabbling and fractious gods

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[79] 'It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many [...] It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God. God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme test of transforming disjoined multiplicities, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast.' Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979), 347-348.

[80] Keller, 15.

[81] Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David Green (London: Continuum, 2004), 7.

of our captors, the One God of Israel is free from violence, reliable, and able to create peacefully. The orderliness of the Priestly creation story is not opposed to the fruitful-though-messy chaosmos of Keller's tehomic theology. Rather it is opposed to the arbitrary violence of a world in which more powerful nations could conquer at will and carry away swathes of your people, in which roving bandits could plunder your flocks with impunity, and in which most would have no recourse in the case of a violated oath or broken promise. By removing the Genesis 1 story from its context of critique, Keller de-historicises it and so robs it of its own critical voice with respect to both the myths and the politics of Babylon. To found the universe on a narrative of order and peaceful creation is a radical move, roughly akin in the face of a world of violence and environmental catastrophe still to insist that the universe is founded on God's sacrificial love. By insisting that the God of the *ex nihilo* is a tyrant, this process account of creation ends up effacing the very Biblical sources which declare God creator, sustainer, and saviour of the world — not in power *over*, but rather in power *for*. The world depends on God not as an abused partner depends on her abuser,[82] but rather, analogically, as a child depends on its mother for existence, as a wine depends on its vintner and the vines from which it has come.

Contingency

This kind of question, that of dependence and contingency (rather than co-dependence and control) is the fundamental assertion behind the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Where *creatio ex profundis*, for all its generativity, ultimately fails is in its inability to give an account for why there is anything at all. If the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis is to be included in an account of a mythic sensibility's interpretive presence, it must be responsible to this question. To assert that creativity 'just is', even by appeal to scripture, defers the question of being itself, and so defers an answer to the question of the emergence of the *novum* of mythopoiesis. The passibility of every observed object and phenomenon suggests the non-necessity of the created world. Not only does the new emerge, but it passes away as well. The suggestion of an eternal

[82] Keller, 90.

process, an always-already becoming, does not answer the ontological question of being. Though the process God is made complex, fluid, and intimate in contrast with the construction of a sterile, patriarchal God of tradition, in the end, the God who creates *ex profundis* seems to be just one agent among agents, one maker among makers: the original, originary maker, perhaps, but still a maker. Keller's account of a God whose being is creativity, and so who must never have have not been creating, thrives within the deeps of Keller's idiosyncratic *tehomic* discourse but it does not succeed in answering better than *creatio ex nihilo* the question of the passibility and passage of all things. Because the *ex nihilo* is not primarily an answer to the question, 'how did we get here?' but rather to the question, 'how is there anything here at all?' In her marshalling of the Biblical text to her cause, Keller concerns herself mostly with the *how* of creation: questions on the order of 'with what tools?' and 'from what materials?' Throughout her critique of attempts on behalf of the *ex nihilo* to appeal to Biblical accounts, Keller repeatedly invokes the classical dictum that 'nothing comes from nothing'. This 'nothing' becomes for Keller *illud nihil*, a reified void more sterile and despicable than the Deep ever was for the most purifying and spiritualising patriarchal theology.[83] Still caught in the question of mechanics, the process critique falls into a battle with a straw man. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* holds within the process of the created world, as both classical philosophy and quantum physics will attest. It does not, however answer the question of the contingency of matter itself. *Creatio ex profundis* defers the question of being to a moment beyond its possible consideration, confusing 'the question of cosmic beginnings [and] the question of creation.'[84]

Whitehead is not wrong in pointing out that all in the world is process, all is becoming. As David Bentley Hart puts it, 'All things are subject to time, moreover: they possess no complete identity in themselves, but are always in the process of becoming something else, and hence also in the process of becoming nothing at all.'[85] The problem with Keller's Whiteheadian

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[83] Keller, 57-60.

[84] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God:Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 102.

[85] Hart, 92.

argument, however, is that God is not in the world in the sense required. The God of the Christian witness is not one item among others within the set of things called 'the world' and so subject to the laws of things subject to time.[86] Central to Hart's account of the content of the name 'God' as it has traditionally been employed in Christianity as well as in what he calls the 'great theistic faiths' is the *givenness* of being and the givenness of the world. We must be careful here to speak of gift and givenness in such a way as to emphasise the gratuity of being and not an arbitrary whim on the part of God. An important pillar of the feminist critique as Keller represents it is the parallel of the world's dependency on God and the subjugated racial/ethnic/sexual minority or female on the warrior/king white/straight/Western male. A theology of gift which relies too heavily on an anthropomorphised male God graciously bestowing the gift of being on a receptive and grateful subject would only serve to reinforce this kind of politics. The *givenness* of being, however, is a basic quality of creaturely existence. None of us is self-caused, and I cannot account for my own experience of being. If Keller, Whitehead, and the classical philosophers are right that within nature *ex nihilo nihil fit*, then my being must come to me from elsewhere: as I need not be, my being is contingent. And as Trevor Hart puts it, 'the contingent is always contingent on something *else*.'[87] Keller is right to give expression to the voice of the subjugated in decrying how this logical dependency can and has been metamorphosed into the archetype of a political or physical dependency in justifying human structures of dominance, and a Christian theology of myth-making looking to critique the oppression caused by demonic mythopoiesis is attracted by this voicing of the subaltern. Given the liberative counter-narration of the Gospels and the prophetic tradition within scripture and the history of the Church, this appropriation of a logical dependency to enforce a political one can justly be denigrated as counter to 'the work God came into the world in Christ to perform'.[88] Such a critique, however, cannot cover over the knock-on effects of a wholesale rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*. Only by keeping God's activity and human activity

[86] During the Earthly life of Jesus, this claim takes on a different character and is the main subject of theologies of the Trinity and Incarnation.

[87] Trevor Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity, and Artistry* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 99.

[88] Ward, 'Receiving the Gift', 74–88.

distinct-and-in-relation can God's saving action be preserved while also affording human action its own dignity and distinctiveness. If the 'making' in our myth-making is identical with God's creativity, then it is merely a new Docetism, God making through us with the human person effaced.

Kathryn Tanner goes some distance in articulating the ontological distance between God and the world (reflecting the fact that the world need not be) by foregrounding God's transcendence. This strategy runs directly counter to Keller's appeal for a radical immanence or 'apophatic panentheism.'[89] If God is truly 'other' and not to be found in creation, then God's qualities are not readily mappable onto human relations.[90] Even if one were to suggest that human beings were sortable by some inherent 'degree', hierarchically ranked by nature (which I do not), this hierarchisation could not be done in the name of the transcendent God who does not exist on a shared axis of qualities with created beings. Once again the question of the analogical character of speech about God arises: we do not speak of God as good, powerful, beautiful, and the rest in quantity greater than creatures, but by analogy with creatures.[91] At least as important as what we say about God is what we cannot say, as Dionysios has taught us. Keller's chapter on negative theology is among her most persuasive. Engaging deeply with the tradition, she finds many resources amenable to her cause and salutary to an overly-enthusiastic positive theological discourse. In the end, however, even through the darkness of Nicolas of Cusa, Dionysios, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Keller's God remains steadfastly bound to the immanent and material, bound as she is to affirm Whitehead's antithesis, 'It is as true to say that God creates the World as that the World creates God.'[92] This mutuality between God and the World not only puts a coherent doctrine of creation into question, it brings any meaningful doctrine of salvation

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89 Keller, 219.

90 Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66.

91 Or, on von Balthasar's account, we speak ultimately of these things about creatures on analogy with God. See Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, eds. Joseph Fessio S.J. and John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982).

92 Whitehead, 348.

into peril. By rendering Creator and Created mutually-dependent, we find that God becomes dependent upon us for God's salvation:

> God would then need us to save Godself. Not a bad idea, some might say. But then that is not 'God' as Christians have understood the word 'God', contingent being is conflated with necessary being, and the temporal with the eternal [...] such a conception of God who needs to be saved through us, through creation, is not the fount of endless, gracious love but a total tyrant.[93]

God's transcendence is what preserves both our freedom as free creatures from such divine tyranny and God's freedom as free creator to bring into being that which was not before, including such things as reconciliation, renewal, and life — the very stuff of salvation. Only the transcendent God affirmed throughout not only Christian, but also Jewish and Muslim theology is in a 'position' to save. And it is at the locus of salvation that Keller's process account becomes truly problematic for a Christian theology.

The God reflected in her *tehomic* theology is a powerful and poetic image of the outworking of the generative deeps welling up in creation. In seeking to ground language of human making in the eternal creativity of God, Keller's process account is attractive. By eliding the difference between human and divine action, human action seems to be elevated and situated in an eternal process of becoming and novel emerging. The *tehomic* deeps suggest the infinite variety of mythopoieic novelty and to identify the emergence from those deeps both with human and with God's action seems a viable path in some ways. This God, however, seems ultimately powerless to save, to act, to *create* in a way fundamentally different to the *poiesis* which characterises the generativity of the world. The panentheism which Keller advocates, and which is typical of process theology, does not finally distinguish between the creation and making: all is making in a world of an eternal interpenetration of God and world. By denying God true creativity, the ability to donate being to that which otherwise would not be, panentheism results in something other than the God attested by the life, death, and

[93] Ward, 'Receiving the Gift', 85.

resurrection of Christ, unable to bring about the truly new which is saving.[94] Thus, if Christianity is taken to rely on the saving acts of God in Christ and that the God in question is held to be the font of being itself, then the process way of speaking of human and divine creativity cannot finally be a Christian form of speech. As meta-mythopoiesis, therefore, Keller's process *mythos* cannot serve. How, then, *are* we to speak of this relationship?

II. Creation *Ex Nihilo*

The language of creativity is often associated with the production of art. 'You're so creative,' artists are told. 'Where do your ideas come from?' they are asked. Though mythopoiesis is not synonymous with art, both represent the emergence of novelty into the world. Dorothy L. Sayers draws a parallel between the imaginative act of the artist and the creative act of the deity: the *poiesis* involved in art may be 'the nearest approach we experience to "creation out of nothing," and we conceive of the act of absolute creation as being an act analogous to that of the creative artist.'[95] As we consider the relationship of myth-making, at all levels of 'artistic quality', it is tempting to place the 'creative' moment of invention on a level with God's action in the creation of the world. Even when the artist humbly attributes her ideas to the world, to her relationships, to her keen artist's eye, there remains a sense that the novel remainder is somehow conjured by the artist's genius itself. Indeed, the derivation of *genius* as the individual's attendant deity retains some of the originary power suggested by the imposition of the verb *creare* onto the artist. Before we can properly consider why such an application has been contentious, both theologically and in the attempt to understand what we mean by the *poiesis* of mythopoiesis, we must consider what Christian theologians classically have meant by 'creation' at all.

The foundational creation accounts in the Christian tradition, namely those found in the Genesis and the the Gospel of John, do not unambiguously declare the world to be created

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[94] Process theology in general has difficulty speaking of sin and redemption, as the 'fellow sufferer' God simultaneously causes and undergoes the change that causes suffering, and is so unable to intervene in the world for which s/he is in relationship.

[95] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), 23.

from nothing. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as we know it today emerged over time through the agonistic process of argument and refutation, often as a means to demonstrate another doctrine entirely.[96] Irenaeus, who first among the teachers of the church who would be acknowledged in time as 'orthodox' asserted the *ex nihilo,* not for its own sake or as an answer to the question of creation, but in an argument over the sovereign will of the Father in history.[97] Theological development once again becomes coterminous with re-making a *mythos*. According to Gerhard May, 'only after the turn of the [first] century did creation begin, in gnostic circles, to be a theological problem.'[98] Until the first century, accounts of the creation were not concerned with the question of ultimate origins: the goal was not to describe in forensic detail the means and mode of the appearance of the world of space-time as we now know it. Rather, the goal of creation narratives in both the Old and New Testaments was to describe the relationship of that world and we creatures to God, its creator.[99] The focus, in other words, was not on the past, but on the present: 'The creation faith [as opposed to the 'Easter faith' of Christians in history] does not stand at the centre of the history of dogma in antiquity [...] For primitive Christianity God's creation is action in history.'[100] Theologies of creation were made in order to relate the meaning of the world's being to the meaning of our continued being in history. Thus the shape of that theology, the matter and manner of its telling, will have an impact on its meaning and its implications for the believer. The contentions between those Christians we now identify as orthodox and those now known as gnostics over the shape of that creation narrative (Do we speak of God as craftsman or of God

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96 Gerhard May's *Creatio ex Nihilo*, widely held as the authoritative account of the origin and derivation of the mature Christian doctrine of creation from nothing, traces the doctrine from the very tips of its roots, through the early Church's struggles with and against the neo-Platonist accounts of creation infused with Christian sensibilities among the gnostics, and into its mature or 'final' formulation by Tatian in the second century.

97 Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 174. The two issues are, of course, related, but for Irenaeus the *ex nihilo* was not the stake in the argument. Rather, notwithstanding the important feminist critiques which, centuries later, would be made of the Church's patriarchal images of God, the *ex nihilo* was the means by which Irenaeus made his case for the Father's sovereignty more generally.

98 May, 1.

99 Though as we shall find below, the Johannine creation narrative can, perhaps, be read simply in terms of a *creatio ex nihilo*.

100 May, 25-27.

as source of emanation? Do we speak of God as directly or indirectly responsible for being?) were as much concerned with formation as with abstract doctrine: the insistence that theology matters to the life of the Christian was implicit. The disciplining of our language impacts the disciplining of our lives. Thus, as we will continue to observe, the way we speak about creation matters not only for its implications in other moments of theology (systematics) but also for the making of disciples (formation). In the formation of disciples (the ultimate aim of theology?), the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* points towards a relationship of radical dependence of the creature on the creator. Quite literally, creation *ex nihilo* posits that it is either God or nothing.

As Ian McFarland points out, the term 'nothing' is possessed of a 'peculiar logic':

> The lack of any creaturely parallel to creation from nothing makes the phrase open to various forms of misunderstanding. In addition to the risk that the grammar of the prepositional phrase 'from nothing' may suggest false analogies with the various ways one entity can be made from (i.e., out of) another, the radically privative character of the doctrine constitutes a serious impediment to positive descriptions of God's creative work: rather than illustrating what it means to say God creates, the doctrine functions mainly to rule out the possibility of providing any such illustration.[101]

The 'peculiar logic' of the phrase 'from nothing' might suggest to the unwary that the 'nothing' in question was in fact *something*, a substantive void out of which, by miracle, *something* is drawn by God in creation like a rabbit from an I-would-swear-it-was-empty hat.'[102] McFarland goes on to explicate instead what is meant in Christian theology, namely that the *nihil* of *creatio ex nihilo* is not a *thing*, a 'substantive *nihil*', but rather refers to a creation in which there is '*nothing but God* [...] *nothing apart from God* [... and in which] *nothing limits God*.'[103] To refer to a creation from nothing is to describe a relationship more than it is to describe a process. In the first of these glosses on 'from nothing', McFarland refers to the fact that 'the existence of the world is to be ascribed to *nothing but God*.'[104] For some,

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[101] McFarland, 87.

[102] Indeed as we will see below, this is exactly how 'the *nihil*' is treated by process theologians in their critiques of creation from nothing.

[103] McFarland, 87, emphasis in original.

[104] McFarland, 87, emphasis in original.

this sole responsibility presents a problem in the form of a monarchical, even tyrannically solitary creator, 'doing creation to' a passive and subject reality. As will be discussed further below, the ascription of sole responsibility to God is not primarily a function of God's overwhelming, masculine, violent power, but rather one of infinite care.

To say that there is 'nothing apart from God' is very much *not* to say that God is all that there is. Indeed the 'point' of creation, if it can be said to have one, in this line of reasoning, is precisely for others to enjoy the being that is God's very nature. McFarland links this aspect of Divine creativity with God's donation not only of being to the creature, but power as well. As we will discover, this double-donation of being and power (understood as the capacity to *do*) is central to a coherent understanding of how it is that human beings can participate in God's creative activity. Far from identifying all things with God in a pantheistic soup, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* insists that though there is nothing apart from God (both logically and ontologically), what is has its being only from God:

> For God to seek to limit creatures' exercise of their power would therefore be in contradiction with the act of creation itself. That there is *nothing apart from God* means that everything that is truly is from God; and given who God is, this principle cannot meaningfully be interpreted as indicating any inherent poverty in created being, but rather as a statement of its inconceivable fulness.[105]

The doctrine of creation from nothing asserts that God's ongoing donation of both being and power to the creation means that God is infinitely present to every creature, and were that not so, the creature would cease to be. Relationship with God, in this sense, is being itself. There is thus nothing apart from God, and apart from God, the creature is nothing.

To say that 'nothing limits God' could also be easily misunderstood: this is the very 'fantasy of absolute power' about what God can and cannot or will not do which so troubles Keller and other process theologians.[106] The temptation to ascribe to God this kind of patriarchal power fantasy leads in the direction both of logical impossibilities and of serious questions of theodicy. Regarding the first, McFarland reminds us of the underlying theme of

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[105] McFarland, 98, emphasis in original.

[106] McFarland, 99.

this discussion: when doing any theology, we are sooner or later subject to the limitations of language. Just as the ambiguities inherent in the phrase '*ex nihilo*' have taken us through McFarland's three glosses, so more generally must the theologian's language be wary of its own limitations. The tradition of apophatic theology attests to some of these limitations. Ward has phrased it so: 'Apophasis is the result of our creaturely limitations in which the knowledge of God that we articulate self-consciously deconstructs itself.'[107] Thus when in consideration of limits on God or the lack thereof and questions such as 'Does God have the power to cease to be omnipotent?',[108] we inevitably find ourselves facing down the limitations of human language, and so also the limitations of human conception. As McFarland puts it, 'asserting God's "inability" to cease to be God is to make a *grammatical* point about the conditions of meaningful talk about God, not an *ontological* one about God's being.'[109]

The question of theodicy in the face of the assertion of no limits on God is a more challenging one. Beyond an unsatisfying assertion of the simple need for faith in God's promises in the face of real suffering, both human and environmental, the theologian's answer must always be partial and reticent. However, McFarland points the inquirer in the direction of the Incarnation, not to provide an easy answer to the critic who calls an omnipotent God 'monster' for allowing suffering, but rather to inform theological speech about what might be said of God based on God's own self-disclosure. Not only are the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bound up in the mystery of God's answer to the question of suffering in history, they demonstrate some of what is meant in 'nothing limits God' by demonstrating further the subversion of the 'grammatical' problem treated above. If the Chalcedonian formulation is taken as given,[110] then the believer is faced with a linguistic paradox: God remained God while also becoming man in Jesus Christ, remaining unchanged while appearing to change.

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[107] Ward, 'Receiving the Gift', 81.

[108] McFarland, 100.

[109] McFarland, 100.

[110] 'the only-begotten Son of God, himself God, who truly became man, our Lord Jesus Christ [...] did not bring about an addition of a Son; for the Trinity remained a Trinity even when One of the Trinity, the divine Logos, [when he] became incarnate', Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 202.

Though a full treatment of the question of the Incarnation is beyond McFarland's book as well as this thesis, the traditional assertion that the man Jesus' limitations in no way impinge upon God's capacities, while also being God's limitations in God's mode of being as the human being Jesus of Nazareth goes some way toward illuminating what can be meant in Christian theology by the claim that 'nothing limits God.' That the Incarnation should be the demonstration of this lack of limit *par excellence* also suggests what is meant in Christian theology by God's 'power': namely 'the power to secure life in the other'.[111] By the reckoning of such theology, the event of the Incarnation, by which God in mystery accomplishes the life of the creation, is nothing less than the centre of history: that which demonstrates most clearly God's nature and God's intent for the creation. As will be considered more fully at the end of this chapter, the Christological dimension of God's power, and so of the creation, is also of central importance to an understanding of how it is that we participate in that creative action.

If the classical formulation of creation *ex nihilo* is indeed the necessary limit on speech about God in creation, reflecting that there is nothing but God, nothing apart from God, and that nothing limits God, then it leaves no room for either a pre-existant matter from which God formed the world as a craftsman forms a table from wood or a pot from clay, nor for any conception of a demiurge by whom the world was made apart from God's impassible otherness. Nor yet does it allow for the idea of creation by emanation from God's being through cascading layers of diminishing divinity. These exclusions from speech about God as creator represent, to a great degree, the context in which the doctrine of creation from nothing was articulated in the first centuries of the church. It was only in dialogue with adherents to these positions,[112] namely those seeking to square a neo-Platonic philosophy with the God of the Christian witness, that Christian theology was able to appreciate the importance of God's identity as sole agent of creation and source of being. The story that had been told of the creation in the Church, rooted in the accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, the Psalms, and the prologue to John's Gospel (among other scriptural sources), had served well until such time as

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[111] McFarland, 106.

[112] Dialogue accompanied by or constituting greater and lesser degrees of vehement rhetoric.

the gaps in its account became problematic to a rich narration, not of the mechanical origins of the universe, but of the nature of the God proclaimed in the Gospel. To speak naïvely of a God who forms Adam from the earth with his hands began to smack too much of the hapless demiurge of neo-Platonic accounts of creation, whose intrusion into the scene would demand that the world be understood as less than the 'very good' that God declares it on the sixth day of creation. If the manifest suffering of the world is ascribed to a less-than-perfect maker of the world, then it cannot be understood as good in the way always affirmed by the Biblical tradition. In order to render Christian discourse in ways appreciable by the educated and those who considered themselves intellectually sophisticated, the early apologists found themselves required to demonstrate how the God of the Bible squared with the God held to be the philosophical necessity of Platonic reasoning. The term 'God' was being renovated as the narrative account of creation was being reflected upon and re-narrated in a great work of mythopoiesis. It is not so much that the traditional account was found to be too embarrassing or provincial as is sometimes suggested by critics of the 'God of the philosophers' in the face of the seeming 'sophistication' of the Greek philosophical tradition. It is rather that as the traditional narrative was recounted it was found not to be saying what it once had said. The context of the speech had changed, and so the meaning of the speech had changed as well. The psalmist's accounts and that of the author of the fourth Gospel attest to the scriptural necessity that God be understood as the sole cause of the world.[113] However the context of those versions of the story had never before asked them the question of the implications of pre-existent matter or the manual formation of the world. The neo-Platonic or gnostic context of the second century gave Christian theologians the opportunity to reframe and re-mythologise the stories in the face of the new context and the new questions being asked.

This myth-making of the theology of creation is not arbitrary or free from the constraints of a relationship to what God is actually doing in creation. As the development of the *ex nihilo*

[113] For instance, Psalm 33.6-9: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.'

demonstrates (in a kind of mythopoiesis itself), new circumstances and new questions require a re-narration of the creation in order to speak answers which meet the demands of the times. However if our account of the origin of everything is lacking, it will distort the language we can use about making. Attempts have been made on all sides of the contestation around narrating the origin of things, both in theological and scientific circles, to re-narrate the creation so that we might see the world aright. Though quite evidently one of history's most gifted scientific minds, when Stephen Hawking declared theology obsolete on the basis of a thorough understanding of the Big Bang,[114] he exposed his and others' lack of understanding of the bounds which must be placed on speech about the creation and of a basic understanding of what is at stake. To hold God's creative act and the Big Bang in parallel as competing or comparable descriptions of the origin obscures both the very different questions the two narratives are trying to answer and the novelty of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* itself. Even sophisticated accounts by physicists, appealing to fluctuations and quantum tunnelling in the primal vacuum (which describe the possible physical origins of the singularity whose expansion describes the development of our universe), assume a primal vacuum in which to find fluctuations and quantum phenomena.[115] Concerned as it is with material causes, even as it provides for the possibility of uncaused effects and entanglements of cause and effect at a quantum level,[116] the natural sciences require a *there* in which such events to occur, and they cannot account for the fact of there being a *there* there at all. It is impossible for science to 'think the *nihil*'.[117] As observed above, the *nihil* in question has less to do with a state of being in which there is no thing, but rather an ontological statement about everything's relationship to God as one of causal dependence.

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[114] Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life* (London: Bantam, 2010), 135.

[115] Simon Oliver, 'Trinity, motion, and creation *ex nihilo*' in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, eds. David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice, and William Stoeger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 133.

[116] McFarland, 150.

[117] Oliver, 134.

III. Participation

Speech about creation is beset with these sorts of grammatical difficulties, and these on top of myriad other grammatical challenges of speaking about God. Is creation, as Colin Gunton puts it, properly understood in the perfect tense, something completed 'in the beginning', as distinct from anything which has happened in history?[118] Or is it something that is also happening in history, given the evidence that '"creation" itself (the output of that action) remains incomplete and a work very much still in progress'?[119] In relating creation to the human action of making, this linguistic challenge is compounded by a history of semantic drift. This drift was underwritten by ideological shifts around the Renaissance, which saw European Christians come to view the world not as a miraculous gift but as something in need of improvement by human will.[120] What changes by the Renaissance is the tendency to call this action, too, 'creation', and eventually to allow that it is something which humans can do as well. Where Hebrew *bara'* was once translated strictly by *creare* and attributed only to God, by the fifteenth century, human beings were said to *create* as well.[121] The generation of novelty, whether in art or the human relationship to nature, came to be viewed as a process co-equal with God's own creative action. This tendency was observable both in the revolutions of agriculture and industry which have their roots in this period of learning and experimentation, but also in the valorisation of the artist, later to be known as the 'creative genius'. Trevor Hart observes:

> The suggestion that in the deliberate refashioning of matter by the human arts there is to be found a direct parallel with God's role as the artificer of the world was well established by the end of the fifteenth century and is echoed in Leonardo's heroizing of the master painter whose mind is transformed into 'the likeness of the divine mind' as his hand summons into being myriad forms, 'not only the works of nature, but infinitely more than those which nature produces.'[122]

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[118] Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 87-89.

[119] Hart, *Making Good*,, 4.

[120] The Biblical witness to God's ongoing acts of making new in history are outlined by both Hart and McFarland.

[121] Hart, *Making Good*,, 186.

[122] Hart, *Making Good*, 192.

By steps, tentative at first but eventually bold indeed, the mantle of creativity is first borrowed metaphorically (human production of novelty is *like* divine creativity) and, by 'a deliberate act of semantic transgression [...] resisted by many at the time as sacrilegious in its presumption', is finally applied literally (humans, and especially artists, *are creative*).[123] In the fullness of time, this human creativity would be seen as a function of our human nature and even the meaning of the *imago dei*. It is thus that Nicholas of Cusa can write 'just as God is the Creator of real beings and of natural forms, so man is the creator of conceptual beings and of artificial forms that are only likenesses of his intellect, even as God's creatures are likenesses of the Divine Intellect.'[124] This univocal attribution of creation to both human beings and to God simultaneously reduces God's action to human 'artifice' and elevates human action to self-causing generation of the new. In both cases, the contingency of all creation on God's action alone is effaced. As a result, the question of *how* human beings can bring forth the new was forgotten or ignored.

Although careful to distinguish the *creatio* of God from the *poiesis* of humanity, there is a sense for Hart that there is not finally any going back once this shift has been made. According to Hart, we are are in some sense participants in 'the unfolding of "creation" and in God's making of new things and making all things new.'[125] He speaks of this model as creation *per collaborationi*. That is to say, the creation is as yet unfinished, and God decides to finish it through the work of her creatures. This model has the virtues that it takes seriously the violence seemingly inherent in the world as we find it and it places upon human beings a serious ethical demand to bring about a world better fitting the divine vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. In answer to the critique of classical *creatio ex nihilo* that it entails a problematic admission that the world as created reflects a less-than-perfect creator (the problem of sin, disease and suffering), Hart takes the position that creation is still in progress and that we can

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[123] Hart, *Making Good*, 2.

[124] Cited in Andrew Davison, *Participation in God* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), 305. Though Nicholas does not go as far as those who would come after him, his move represents a step along the way toward the full-throated identification of human and divine creativity that would emerge later.

[125] Hart, *Making Good*, 331.

speak univocally of creation *ex nihilo* and the ongoing 'unfolding' of creation that we see in the emergence of the new. That is, Hart argues that the *novum* of artistic making is identical with God's *creatio ex nihilo*. In this way, creation and the eschaton are brought into union: the creation is not complete until it is ended. If that is so, and God's creative activity is not finished but permeates the creation through time, then the question at hand is whether human beings participate in that creative action.

Hart's analysis is limited however, by his focus on the positive valence of human making. For Hart, application of the term 'creative', in however an analogous sense, is only warranted by works that are 'genuinely creative',[126] which despite his manifold efforts to broaden the scope of his inquiry, seems in the end to be restricted to the 'elite' work of the craftsman or the artist. The excellence and historical novelty of their works are part of what, for Hart, make them worthy of the analogical mantle of 'creative'. Much of Hart's argument relies on the idea that the world as created (given being by God) is nonetheless incomplete and in need of completion *per collaborationi* by human beings. This making is held to be analogous to the divine making to which Scripture attests and which is constituted by God's ongoing involvement in the bringing of the new into being. As such, human making, to the degree it is held to be 'creative', is only so inasmuch as it collaborates in God's ongoing work of 'finishing creation.' This conception does not take adequate account of both the gracious nature of our 'creative' capacities and the reality of sin in the exercise of such gifts. There is much in human ingenuity and generativity which runs counter to God's desire for the world. The *nova* that are to be found in the making of interpretive narratives is by no means reflective of the glory of God in terms of their ethical, moral, and aesthetic content. The *novum* of an oppressive mythic sensibility is surplus to the materials given, but decidedly not in the service of the Kingdom of God. One danger of discussing creativity is the value judgement that has come to accompany it. As Philip West observes, '"Creation" and "creativity" are [...] not merely neutral, descriptive terms; they alter our attitude to the activities that they designate. To

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[126] Hart, *Making Good*, 339.

designate an activity "creative" is – for good or ill – to legitimate it, not just to describe it.'[127] Is this value attribution justified? Living as we do after the fall, our participation in God's being, whether through life, wisdom, or creative action, is subject to sin and the limitations of our human way of being.

Concerned to distinguish how human language can be applied meaningfully to God, Thomas Aquinas develops from Aristotle the capacity of analogy to bridge the gap between equivocal (words used in entirely distinct senses) and univocal (words used in entirely identical senses) usage of language to describe both creatures and God.[128] To understand how Aquinas' principle of analogy works, however, we must understand his assertion that 'effects resemble their cause.'[129] This is not to say that because a potter is the cause of a pot, that her pots resemble her in appearance, but rather that 'any effect will express something of the character or "style" of its cause. [...] In a somewhat similar sense (although qualifications apply), because God is the cause of creation, creation will express something of the character of God, however faintly or obliquely.'[130] For Aquinas, this principle is the basis of our ability to speak of God in human terms: 'In some sense, creatures are like God, so when we use creaturely words to refer to God those words are not completely out of place.'[131] The analogical 'bridge' then, is built of this principle of resemblance. When we speak positively of God (as opposed to metaphorically or according to a *via negativa*), we are obliged to use words that are 'creaturely', that is made to name and describe creatures which are subject to categorisation and classification in spite of God's transcending all category and class. Aquinas insists that this kind of speech is possible however, on the basis that though limited our creaturely words can apply, over the bridge of resemblance, analogically to God. Words are able to be applied across genera *to the degree they apply* to the thing in question. In Aquinas'

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[127] Philip West, 'Divine Creation and Human Creativity' in *New Blackfriars,* 67/799 (1986), 478.

[128] Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 66-67.

[129] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.4.3, I.13.2, I.45.7: https://www.newadvent.org/summa/ (accessed 26 February 2021).

[130] Oliver, 64.

[131] Oliver, 65.

famous example, a person, his urine, and his food can all be described as 'healthy' by virtue of the first possessing health, the second indicating health to a doctor, and the third conferring health upon the person who eats it. The sense of 'healthy' is analogically applied to each according to its other qualities and properties. God is not, however, a member of any genus or class. Language can nonetheless be applied to God in one sense in terms of 'perfections', that is words which denote the transcendent qualities of God, such as goodness, wisdom, and beauty. While they are creaturely words, they are used to describe what God is in God's essence, and only describe creatures in proportion or with respect to their natures:

> What Aquinas wishes to say is that we speak of God and creatures analogously because the perfections of creatures - for example goodness or life - pre-exist in God in a more excellent and universal way. So when we say that 'Ben is good', 'the dog is good', 'the cherry tree is good' and 'God is good', we are using the word 'good' analogously because of a likeness of the creatures (Ben, the dog and the tree) to God. [...] Creatures are like God in being good *in their own particular way*, for example as a person, a dog, or a tree, through participation in a certain likeness of God. [...] God is not good in a particular way as this or that kind of thing [because God is not a member of any 'kind'] but is *the Good*.[132]

Because Aquinas distinguishes what a word signifies (*res significata*) from how it signifies (*modus significandi*), he is able to put forward the assertion that though our creaturely words apply (*modus*) first to creatures and then to God by analogy, in the case of perfections, they 'flow from God to creatures by his creative power',[133] and so we are able to appropriate them for ourselves by analogy from God.[134] And this is what Aquinas calls participation. Inasmuch as a dog is good, it is so by participating God's Goodness.[135]

Aquinas also affirms that being itself is had analogically by creatures from God: God *is* being, and creatures *have* being. Creatures have being in the manner appropriate to their

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[132] Oliver, 68-69, emphasis in original.

[133] Oliver, 70.

[134] Speech can also be said to apply to God metaphorically, as in the case Oliver provides of calling God a 'rock', evoking God's steadfastness and as the foundation of one's being. In this kind of speech, the analgoy indeed moves from creature to God, but evades the quandary at hand by being *literally false*. The associated perfections such as constancy and eternity come secondarily through metaphorical speech instead of directly as in the example of goodness.

[135] Oliver, 71.

nature, not exhausting all 'possibilities of being', but rather expressing being in their own way.[136] The being in which creatures participate is given freely as gift. And this, strictly speaking, is what is meant classically by *creation*: the donation of being to creatures by God. As we explore the relation of creation to human making, it is worth reflecting not only on the *what* of creation, but also the *why*, inasmuch as that question can be answered in the context of a God who transcends all categories and concepts. Ian McFarland observes that as Trinity, God's sharing of being in this way is entirely in keeping with the eternal production within the Trinity which 'establishes ontological unity.'[137] That is, as the Trinity is understood as the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father and procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son,[138] we discover productivity is constitutive of God's unity, and so is an aspect of God's revealed nature. McFarland goes on to consider how this Trinitarian productivity is reflected in God's creation of the world *ex nihilo*. The love which is expressed in the perichoresis of the Trinity is given expression in the giving of being to that which is *not God*:

> God is love [...], and the inherent productivity of this love makes it natural that it should expand beyond the bounds of God's own being. The creation of the world is just such an expansion, through which God proves to be love not simply in and for God's self, but also to and for that which is not God.[139]

McFarland's choice of the word 'natural' is important, suggesting as it does a contrast with the necessary 'creativity' of the God of process theology. It is not required of God that God create, but it is natural, that is, it is in keeping with God's nature, that God should. This distinction is important, as it underlines the *gratuity* of the creation: the world need not be. There is thus a gratuity that seems inherent to what is meant by creation, and the arbitrary gratuity of creation is its own reason: God decided to be God to that which is not God. Against cries of divine tyranny in light of such arbitrary creation, McFarland reminds us that the God as revealed in Jesus Christ is anything but an arbitrary tyrant. Rather he gives decisive expression

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136 Oliver, 73.

137 McFarland, 45.

138 We will leave the question of the *filoque* to one side.

139 McFarland, 57.

to the eternal and interpenetrating love of the Trinity within history. The God so revealed is no tyrant, but, in spite of the protestations of process theologians, rather one given to acts of mercy and generous giving. And so McFarland notes that 'Christians cannot talk about creation apart from Christology.'[140] Process creation theology is thus found also to be insufficiently Christological. Not only is Christ the paradigm of what it is to be human, the God so revealed puts checks on what we can imagine about the God who creates *ex nihilo*. God does not create as an expression of power over or of dominance. God creates because, as loving productivity, it is natural that God should decide to share being with that which is not God.[141]

It is under the conditions of this gratuitously shared being that we go about our making, mythic and otherwise. Hart's *creatio per collaborationi* goes some distance in linking how, as sharers in Gods' being we are also sharers in God's creativity. However as Hart focuses on the positive valence of creativity, that which brings creation to its intended completion, he leaves unanswered the question of sin. Oliver Davies proposes an understanding the relationship of God to the world on the model of the relationship of an author to a text. Beginning from a broad definition of 'text',[142] Davies incorporates the verbal character of both the Hebrew Bible's creation narratives ('Let there be...') and the prologue of John's Gospel ('In the beginning was the Word...') to develop a sense that 'the world in all its diversity and variety, in its material and abstract dimensionality [as] most essentially a divine text: a "text" which is the

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[140] McFarland, 23.

[141] For the kind of process theology exemplified by Keller's *Face of the Deep*, creativity is a more fundamental principle than God: God creates because God can do no other. It is unthinkable for God not to be creating, and so it is impossible to think God without the world. Apart from misconstruing temporal and logical causation (even if God has always been creating, it is God creating the world and not vice versa), the process view precludes the gratuity of creation, both in the sense of its contingency and its nature as a gracious gift of God, and it ultimately robs human making, as well as divine creation, of any dignity beyond the perpetuation of blind creative forces. Without trespassing so far into speculation about the nature of the Godhead as to propose to comprehend the mind of God, in order to sustain what has been meant by 'God' in scripture and in the worship and teaching of the Church, we must affirm that God's activity is (at least on some analogy with human will) willed and not the function of principles by which God is bound.

[142] Though not as broad as some. Davies rejects the Derridean universality of the text, insisting rather that 'a text is a group of entities, used as signs, which are selected, arranged and intended by an author in a certain context to convey some specific meaning to an audience.' Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101. This definition excludes the poststructuralist move towards the evaluation of any arrangement of signs as a text, anxious as Davies is to include the element of intentional communication in his understanding of text.

deposit of the divine speaking and which bodies forth the essence of the communication between the divine Persons in a cosmic objectification willed by the Persons that is itself the foundation of the world.'[143] Like Hart and McFarland, Davies identifies the intra-Trinitarian communication between Divine Persons as the source of God's creative activity. He goes further in identifying the world created by God *ex nihilo* as the 'text' of that Trinitarian communication, that which makes manifest the 'speech act' of creating. In the way that an ordinary text such as the one you are reading is 'the displacement and in part alienation of the oral communication by its transposition into another, visual medium, which—as a form of embodiment—both communicates and conceals the vocality and vital content of the original discourse',[144] so too does the world 'body forth' the Divine speech in a 'displaced and in part alienated' way. This displacement and alienation is, in Davies' model, a way of speaking of the otherness of the world from God: if it were not so displaced it would be God. As text, the world is subject to interpretation by we its 'readers'. Indeed, Davies takes up the interpretive intuitions of reader-response criticism in reflecting that the meaning of the text is not completed until received by a reader. The interpretation brought by the reader 'completes the circuit' of the text's communication.[145] And, as part of God's creation, part of the speech itself, human beings' interpretation can be understood *within* God's creative action. Our interpretive response is itself a part of the creative process, a gracious freedom exercised in reply to God's self-communication. In line with Hart's assessment of human making, Davies includes art among the responses we make to God's creative text: making is a kind of speech.[146] One consequence of the displacement inherent in a text, however, is that the text is not identical with the speech it embodies, and so can be 'misread' or interpreted in novel and even counter-to-the-grain ways.[147] The freedom of our interpretive response is given by God in the mystery of God's own creative action, but is also curtailed and compromised by sin. In this sense, the

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[143] Davies, 105.

[144] Davies, 105.

[145] *Pace* Heidegger, Davies use of 'interpretation' appears to subsume both interpretation and understanding.

[146] Davies, 151.

[147] Davies, 104.

'quality' of our response, the degree to which it embodies or enacts God's vision and desire,[148] does not undermine the gracious *fact* of our response-participation in God's creative action. Like Melkor, in Tolkien's *Ainulindalë*, whose song disrupts the harmony of God's intention, only to be brought finally into a yet greater theme,[149] or the geode, the 'egge of stone' which brought forth life unbidden in *The Things that Tak Wrote*, that which was unintended still participates nonetheless in the gift of being and God's creative work.

Davies' model of reading creation as a text and God as its author has the manifest merits of respecting the *ex nihilo*, admirably incorporating the Scriptures, honouring the Trinitarian nature of Creation, and leaving room a narrative of sin and redemption. However, Davies raises the question of whether adherence to Aristotle's principle of the likeness of effect to cause is justifiable in the modern, post-Enlightenment world. He writes, 'The principle of efficient reason, which is one of the critical elements in the emergence of the modern world-view, postulates no such symmetry: causality for us is a generally random collision of forces rather than the interaction of substances within a divinely ordained natural world.'[150] For Davies, this suggests that pre-modern models of understanding human participation in God's creation obsolete and incredible. He goes on to insist that there is no going back: 'The harnessing of a modern linguistic relativism for the purposes of a return to the medieval world-view will produce a hybrid model which is neither authentically medieval nor authentically modern',[151] and so is presumably to be avoided. Seeking to find a form of discourse consonant with 'the modern world-view', however, which claims for itself a 'secularity' at odds with the 'religious world-view' is both unnecessary and finally impossible. Davies' claim that the metaphysical demands of Aristotelian participation are untenable for modern believers leads him to insist that the author-text model is a conceptual one rather than

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[148] Chapter Five discusses at length the qualities of this vision and desire in the person of Jesus Christ, the determining myth and hermeneutic for Christian discipleship.

[149] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 4-5.

[150] Davies, 98.

[151] Davies, 98n4.

metaphysical.[152] One is left wondering whether Davies project is, then, just a thought experiment? He seems, however, to be trying to have it both ways. In the one place he attempts to dispense with the principle of likeness explicitly, he appears to misunderstand its meaning. He writes, 'It does not make sense for us today to ask in what way the effects of gravity themselves reflect the nature of gravity, since gravity does not of itself have a nature.'[153] If Aquinas' account of Aristotelian causation is recalled, the likeness in question is not one of efficient cause to effect, but rather that of final cause. Because the 'modern world-view' to which Davies is trying to address his work has dispensed with final causes in nature, the Aristotelian position indeed makes no sense. However, in a Christian account of the universe, is the abandonment of final cause finally justified? Christian speech about the world must entail God's will for the universe at some level: we cannot escape final causes, and we cannot escape the analogy of being which follows from it. Indeed, the very analogical reasoning on which Davies' model is based assumes an *analogia entis* which he seems concerned to exclude from his account. If the likeness of effect to cause is proscribed, Davies never offers an alternative means by which we can arrive at any kind of analogical speech between creation and God. In spite of himself, Davies has produced a new(ish) analogical model of understanding the relationship of God to creation and the relationship of divine creation to human making. If it is allied to traditional metaphysics, Davies' analogy of the author to the text becomes a fruitful way of thinking the process of human making in the light of God's primary and ongoing work of creation.

Conclusion

The imagination, as well as the heart, is restless. Whitehead and Keller are not wrong when they identify the constant emergence of the new as a defining feature of the world, and most especially of the human experience of the world. As discussed in Chapter One, our seeing the world is always a seeing *as*, an imaginative construction which enables us to see the

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[152] Davies, 154.s

[153] Davies, 98.

world in meaningful ways.[154] This imaginative productivity is a function of our encounter with God's creation and our participation in that creativity. And it is always 'on': we make things up as we go along. Our encounter with the world in all of its bewildering plenitude evokes a making, a making up, as we seek to find our way to meaning. Mythopoiesis is an ongoing interpretive work. When Ricoeur claims that time only becomes meaningful by way of narrative, he is, *inter alia*, gesturing to this work. When Augustine writes that the heart is restless until it rests in God, we may imagine that one of the means of return to God is by way of God's creative action in which we participate. The myths through which we apprehend the world as through the words of an interpreter are simultaneously given and made. As explored in Chapter One and discussed further in the next chapter, myths are first experienced as received, as givens of the meaningful approach to the world. The 'mythic resonances' of 'a tree, a lion, a bird, a river, the ocean, the sky' are, perhaps, written into our genes: they evoke a presence greater than material, full of signification – agelessness, power, freedom, fecundity…[155] But myths are also *made*. The process of mythopoiesis is not reserved to the Homers and the Evangelists. As we tell and re-tell stories which evoke the mythic sensibility, the stories change as we seek to find in them the meaning needed to *make* sense of the present age. Like Keller and Davies, we may take the narratives which we have inherited and re-frame them in terms more congenial to our own intellectual or quotidian sensibilities. The intention here is not necessarily to domesticate or tame the powerful otherness of the mythic presence. Rather it can be to refresh its ability to speak. In this sense, all theologies of creation are a kind of mythopoiesis.

If Eliade points us towards truth when he avers that myths recount how 'a reality came into existence,'[156] then we may think the mythic alongside creation. All mythopoiesis is a theology of creation *in nuce*, and all theologies of creation are, in the end, mythic, offering to bring reality into a meaningful relationship to human beings. What we say about a theology of

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[154] For an excellent book-length treatment of the role of imagination in our knowing, see Graham Ward, *Unimaginable: What We Imagine and What We Can't* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018).
[155] Ward, *Unimaginable*, 167.
[156] Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 5.

creation, then, has implications for what we say about all myth-making. To say that creation is a gracious and unnecessary gift from God, on whose Being it depends and in whose Being it participates has implications for how we are to understand the making which we do in participation with God's creative action. It raises both the dignity and the stakes of our making: what we make, we make by the grace of God, but as it shares in God's bringing forth the new, it is incumbent upon us to bring forth the Good, inasmuch as our limited capacities allow. At the conclusion of *Making Good*, Hart links the creative faculties of God in human beings with the eucharistic mysteries of Christ Incarnate in the sacraments.[157] The sacraments take ordinary things (bread, wine, water, bodies, promises, the touch of hands) and reveal them to be the presence of God: they were already God's gifts and creatures, and by God's grace they become God's presence. So, too, the ordinary myth-making, by which we understand the world, is itself a part of God's creation, given to us through the tradition of language, culture, genes, and gesture. Myth-making becomes sacramental, becomes theological, as it makes God present to us, as it allows us to see the world *as* God's good creation and to point our imaginations toward God.

To deliberately bend Whitehead's antitheses, it is as correct to say that God is creating as it is to say that God has created. As David Bentley Hart puts it, God is 'a constant wellspring of being, at work even now.'[158] As such, it is tempting to agree with the process theologians who affirm God as eternal creativity. However, the consequent necessity of the world as co-eternal with God deprives being of its gratuitous character. Instead, by affirming that the world is entirely contingent on God, we are able to appreciate it as gift and so respond with gratitude and care. But we need not. The possibility of sin, of misusing the gifts we have been given, is the condition under which we experience God's creativity as saving: God brings for the new creation that is redemption in Christ. In this light, we can understand, alongside Davies and in a variation on Trevor Hart's *creatio per collaborationi*, human making as a response both *in* and *to* God's creative activity. We make in order to understand, in order to interpret the creation

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[157] Hart, *Making Good*, 338-339.

[158] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God*, 104.

we have received and encounter.[159] That making is a participation in God's creativity, though not identical to it. Tolkien called it 'sub-creation'[160] as we make new forms from given materials. That novelty is from God, whether we make of it something wonderful or terrible. As with all things human, we always live under the threat of sin, as shadowed by pride as Ged is by the nameless other self in *A Wizard of Earthsea*.[161] We may thus speak of human making as analogous with divine creation; not identical and not co-equal. Though we bring new forms into being, they do not come from nothing: they come from the sea of being which has its origin in God but is not God, entrusted to us. These new things we make, these stories that we tell to interpret the world that we encounter through them, are both the means and the ends of our seeing. But having been made and having begun to interpret the world to us, our creations do not stay still. We tell and re-tell them, and they are received by new generations. They bespeak the world as meaningful, but as the products of us fallen creatures, they do not always serve the ends of freedom, of discipleship, of the overflowing love that is the Triune God. How are we to read these mythic presences anew when they become dangerous or meaningless? This is the subject of the next chapter.

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[159] Nicholas of Cusa makes a similar point in his *Idiota de Mente* as he articulates a theory both of knowledge and of mind rooted in our participation in the absolute 'divine art' in which conception is creation. In the human instance, our coming to understanding is a matter of the making of *notiones*, notions the making of which mirrors the divine creation to such an extent that it can be said to constitute the *imago dei*. Nicholas of Cusa, *Idiota de Mente* in *Nicolai de Cusa: Opera Omnia*, vol. 5, ed. Renata Steiger (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), especially Chapter VII. See Also, Robert Miner, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), especially Chapter 2.

[160] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 25.

[161] Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Atheneum: New York, 1991).

III

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Making Toward God

'I have faith.'
REALLY? IN WHAT PARTICULAR DEITY?
'Oh, none of them.'
THEN FAITH IN WHAT?
'Just faith, you know. In general.'[162]
— Terry Pratchett, *Maskerade*

If all things exist in Christ, then the cultural is not something entirely separate from him; the cultural is that through which God's redemptive grace operates. Christ, we could say, is the origin and consummation of culture, in the same way as he is both the prototype and the fulfilment of all that is properly human.[163]
— Graham Ward, Christ and Culture

A Christian theological account of mythopoiesis must say that, ultimately, all myth-making is theological. It is theological both in the sense that it is speech about God, but also theological in the sense that it is speech in the presence of God. Mythopoiesis both expresses a theo-logic (a way of speaking about God) and participates in the logic of the divine as it reveals to the mythic subject the truth of the world and the truth of the subject herself. This remains the case even when the mythopoiesis in question does not purport to treat of the spiritual or the divine. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how despite being within what

[162] Terry Pratchett, *Maskerade* (New York: Harper, 2008), 87.
[163] Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 22.

Charles Taylor has called the 'immanent frame' of secular materialism, as a function of its participation in divine creativity, the theological saturation of our language and imaginations, and the Christic operation of culture itself, mythopoiesis represents a response to God's salvific drawing of all things to Godself. If what we say about creation is true, that all things depend upon God for their very being, then it is impossible to say that anything that is is not in some way bound to God: everything is dependent upon, and therefore in relationship with and relationship to God and God's desire. Mythopoiesis is enmeshed in this complex of 'nature' and 'super-nature', though the distance between the two will be put into question below.

This chapter will begin with an appraisal of the landscape within which mythopoiesis is conducted. To say that myth-making today is the same as myth-making in the first century is the same as myth-making in bronze-age Greece is to miss out the conditions of belief that shape the social imaginary. It is one thing to speak of mythopoiesis in the context of an enchanted universe, where a strong distinction is not made between *mythos* and *logos*, between magic and nature, and it is quite another to speak of mythopoiesis in the context of a disenchanted universe, where the general assumptions guiding people's decisions and judgments hold that what is 'true' is synonymous with what is subject to the senses. Is it even meaningful to assert that the two forms of expression are synonymous? I suggest that they are, but that our understanding of what is going on in the process has changed based on the changes that have been undergone by the social imaginary. If a Christian account of mythopoiesis owns that not only do all things depend upon God for their being, but that 'all things exist in Christ', then following Ward, we can assert that mythopoiesis, as a cultural artefact, is shot through with God's presence: it is a means by which God is revealing God's self to us. To the degree a myth speaks truly of God it can be understood as participating in God's self-disclosure to creation; to the degree it is enmeshed in and occluded by sin, myth speaks less truly. Following Henri de Lubac, I argue that the nature-grace distinction can be over-stated and that a paradoxical affirmation of the operation of grace *within* nature without violating the proper autonomy of creation is necessary in order to meaningfully express how

human action (mythopoiesis) apart from Christian formation can be said to speak of God (theology). The interplay of the cultural mediation of God's grace and God's already-thereness in nature offers a way of speaking about mythopoiesis' theological possibilities without necessarily resorting to a doctrine of 'anonymous Christianity'.

I. The Landscape of Mythopoiesis

There is a sense in which mythopoiesis seems much more at home in the ancient world than it does in the secular, materialistic twenty-first century. Surely, one imagines, there was a time when people actually *believed* stories of gods and heroes: what we traditionally understand by *mythology*. We have already observed, in Chapter One, how we have not ceased in the making of stories which bear a 'mythic sensibility', interpreting the world as meaningful to a 'mythic subject' who experiences this hermeneutic process as a kind of miracle, however secularly construed. There is a continuity, however, not only in form but also in content. The content in question is fundamentally that of theology: myth-making as I have discussed it always takes place in a theological horizon. Understanding the relationship between mythopoiesis and theology, however, requires a brief journey along the path from the enchanted cosmos of the ancient world to the disenchanted universe of the present age. This genealogical approach will help reveal through lines which continue to characterise both mythopoiesis and theology today as well as to disclose the intellectual and social 'moves' that were made in order to shift the 'social imaginary' from one way of interpreting the world to another. The first stage of this history finds myth-making and speaking about God explicitly intertwined. The gradual disentangling (or attempt at disentangling) of the two would prove to be a feature of the emergence of the modern secular social imaginary. However, I would argue that this attempt at disentanglement only effaced a through-current of theological operation within the process of mythopoiesis. I will begin by discussing the various senses of theology, both the general or philosophical and the specifically Christian and by exploring the origins of Christian theology in and through mythopoiesis, which itself can be understood in the ancient world as proto-theology, combining praise, practice, and reflection in one

movement. This unity of movement was made possible by the enchantment of the world in the pre-modern outlook. Having discerned the initial distinguishing of theology from mythopoiesis, I will observe how the naturalisation of the secular worldview in modernity has sought to finally efface any connection between theology and other varieties of discourse, such that even mythopoiesis is conducted in a disenchanted, material world. I close this section of the chapter by observing the traces of God that remain even in thoroughly secular mythologies, reflecting their origin in speaking of the divine.

Like myth, theology is seemingly always defined heuristically, in ways specific to the project at hand. Until very recently, the term was considered the property of Christian discourse on God, but unsurprisingly it has its origins in pagan discourse about the gods. Thus in tracing the meaning of theology from its pagan roots, we must distinguish theology, as it is variously construed today, from *theología*, ancient, pre-Christian speech about the gods. Before *theologia* represented a discrete form of discourse (such that it might be the subject of doctoral theses), before even it was coined by Plato in the *Republic*, there was the *theologos*, the one who was able to *theologein*. Before Christian appropriation of the term, the title *theologos* designated someone who spoke of the gods. Because it was impossible to imagine speaking of the gods in any meaningful sense apart from poetry, the term was used almost exclusively of those who sang songs about or in praise of the gods or those who composed such songs and poetry.[164] To the latter group belong especially Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod: *ho theologoi*, *the* theologians. The *Orphic Hymns*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Hesiod's *Theogony* and didactic poems as well as representing the heart of pre-Christian Greek literature and discourse on the gods, also represent the heart and ground of Greek mythopoiesis.[165] The one

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[164] 'The ancient singer (bard) and community worshipped the deity through the song. The poet's rendition of these stories was synonymous with worship; their telling invoked the gods even as it recalled events that changed the world.' Diane. J. Raynor, ed., trans., *The Homeric Hymns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 15.

[165] 'From Homer onwards, these divinities, which remain hardly more than names in the Mycenaean texts, become visible as individual characters by their names, epithets, cults, statues, myths, which create a divine unity whereas cult tends to diversity, and iconographies.' Jan N. Bremmer, 'Introduction: The Greek Gods in the Twentieth Century' in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations Identities and Transformations*, eds. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh: 2010), 5-6. The composition of the Homeric epics, followed by the Homeric Hymns and later works of mythopoiesis, constituted both an artistic and cultural unification, lending a shared language and way of seeing that brought together a diversity of practices.

who speaks the word (*logos*) about god (*ho theos*) is also the one who makes (*poeiein*) the stories (*mythoi*)—inasmuch as the terms represent the early stages of the development of theology and mythopoiesis, at the beginning, theology and mythopoiesis are one. While this unity is later ruptured, as speech about the gods becomes the province of philosophy rather than poetry, the ancient insight recognises an affinity between theology and poetic speech which is being recovered by contemporary theologians.[166] It was not until Plato began to reflect on the effect of such theological-mythopoieic speech on the *polis* that *theología* as an identifiable form of speech began to be reflected upon directly. From the beginning *theology* has been concerned with *correct* theology.

The word *theología* first appears in the second book of the *Republic*, in the discussion of the role of the arts in education:

> [Socrates said,] 'Now it is proper that founders of states should be cognizant of the norms governing the general content of poetic compositions and the limits beyond which the poets must not go. But it is not the business of founders to compose the fables themselves.'
>
> 'Yes, but that's the whole point,' [Adeimantus said.] 'What are the norms that should govern the telling of tales about the gods [*theología*]?'
>
> 'Well, they should be something like this,' [Socrates said.] 'Whether portrayed in epic, lyric or tragic form, deity should always be depicted as it truly is.'[167]

The connection between speech about the gods and the arts is assumed. The didactic and persuasive power of the arts is assumed to be a part of social pedagogy. Mythopoiesis (*correct* mythopoiesis) is understood to be a vital part of the social constitution. Plato (ventriloquising Socrates) demands what mythopoiesis/theology says of God must be according to how 'he really is'. The conversation then turns to the subject of what God is really like, proceeding not according to the conventions and discursive tools of poetry, but rather in the terms of

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[166] Of course, poetic speech has always been a close ally of theological discourse. However, the capitulation to a 'scientific' mode of reasoning deemed necessary to bolster theology's credentials in response to the stunning successes of science and technological progress following the Enlightenment. Beginning with the Romantics, a recovery of poetry in theology has been long-arriving as the polysemy of poetic language has remained suspect in systematic and philosophical theology's attempts to banish ambiguity from theological discourse. For a brief survey of the development of the idea of 'theopoetics', see Scott Holland, 'Theopoetics' in *CrossCurrents* 60 (2010), 4-5, and the articles of that issue.

[167] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: Norton, 1985), II.379a, 75.

philosophy. Even at the coining of the term 'theology', then, we begin to be able to discern the pedagogical quality of mythic speech and the disclosive or positive nature of philosophical speech. As he defines theology in terms of mythology, Plato proceeds to engage in (what would later be recognised as) theology in terms of ratiocination. The production of mythic speech ought to be informed by reasoned reflection on the content of that speech, and philosophical reflection on the nature of things is assumed to be formed and informed by the kind of mythic insights provided by the poets. Plato's hostility to poets is well known, but at this point in his argument at least, his distrust of the arts is to do with the capacity of the artist to *lie*, rather than with poetry *qua* poetry. The 'true myth' is one that Plato would approve for his ideal republic, indeed which is seen as necessary for its proper formation and function.[168] If the gods are to be spoken of (and they must be) in the mythic/poetic mode which is considered fitting to such discourse (which is assumed) what is said must be true for the proper formation of the Guardians and for the polis' welfare. What is said (mythopoiesis) and a concomitant assessment of its veracity (theology) are already intertwined at the coining of *theología*.

Plato's views on the relationship of *theología* to mythopoiesis and to what would later become Christian theology are important insofar as they reveal something of what would have gone into the first Christians' use of the term in the second and third centuries. When Clement of Alexandria and Origen speak of *theología* specifically in reference to the doctrine of the trinity[169], and when John the Evangelist is called *ho theològos*, there are echoes of the mythopoieic flavour the word carried in the Greek world. Just as the first Christian communities eschewed Greek philosophy (c.f., Colossians 2.8) they also resisted *theología* on the basis that it was the practice of speaking about the *pagan* gods and singing their praises.[170] However, under the pressures of both combating heresy (that is, speaking of God wrongly)

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[168] The idea of 'true myth' would be taken up nearly 2500 years later by C. S. Lewis in his process of coming to Christianity through a fascination with pagan myth.
[169] Christoph Markschies, *Christian Theology and its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2015), 14.
[170] Markschies, 18.

and of mission (giving an account of the Gospel to those not already within its mythic hermeneutics), a reasoned and understandable way of speaking about God came to be seen as necessary.[171] The retention of mythic resonances within theology can be observed as late as the seventh century,[172] but more importantly, it can be seen in Clement's *Stromata*, in which he distinguishes between the *mythològia* (myths; also stories generally) which belongs to the Greeks and Christian *theología*, which is of course true speech about God. Interestingly, Clement still frames *theología* in continuity with Homer and Hesiod.[173] Christian *theología* is understood to be both contrary to the myths of the Greeks and at the same time in genre-continuity with them: Moses and Homer were going about the same work. Myth and theology occupy a shared cognitive space.[174] Though the character of theological discourse has changed in the wake of such watershed thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, and much later Kant and Heidegger, changing the terms of the theological debate, Clement's attitudes towards these two modes of discourse represent an important insight into the character both of theology and mythopoiesis. We are, of course, very far in time and thought from Clement, and the making of mythic speech in the fifth century BC is different in subject matter and in character than is mythic speech in the twenty-first century AD. The forging of a strong distinction between 'true theology' and 'false mythology', with the help of Plato, would eventually serve to efface both the mythopoieic character of theology and the theological character of mythology *qua* mythopoiesis.

Our world is not the enchanted world of the ancient poets. Whether it is entirely dis-enchanted is a matter of some debate, as will be discussed in detail below, but neither can we pretend that the Enlightenment did not happen, that Kant did not write, and that the public imaginary has not been transformed since the middle of the second millennium. When

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171 Markshcies, 19-20.

172 Markschies, 14.

173 Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, eds. O. Stählin, and U. Treu (Berlin, 1972): (θεοί), ὧν καὶ θεογονίαν Ἡσίοδος ᾄδει τὴν αὑτοῦ, καὶ ὅσα θεολογεῖ Ὅμηρος. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, eds. L. Fruchtel, O. Stählin, and U. Treu (Berlin, 1985): Ὀρφεὺς . . . ὁ θεολόγος.

174 Clement advocates the rather eccentric view (by today's standards) that the Greeks actually cribbed much of their insights *from* the Hebrews.

Pratchett writes of gods living atop the sacred mountain Cori Celesti, he is operating at a double-remove from the mythopoiesis of Homer or Hesiod. First, the world he describes is not our world, either in geography or in imaginative landscape. Though the land masses were roughly the same in the iron age as they are today, the world as Homer *imagined* it, that is as he understood it to be enchanted with *daimones* and to have been home to the heroes of legend, was very different than the world as we imagine it on our summer holidays to Samos and the Turkish coast and the real Mount Olympus, denuded in material and imagined senses of the gods who once lived there. Second, Pratchett would not affirm the reality of Offler, the crocodile god, and Om, the reformed god of Omnia, and Annoia, goddess of things that get stuck in drawers in any sense than the literary. The ironic distancing of the author and the reader from the material is one of the characteristics of fantasy literature and is the condition of Coleridge's poetic faith: not only do we not believe these things to have happened (they are fiction) but we know that they could never have happened *as described* (they are fantasy). However, the literary 'magic' of fantasy and its relationship to mythopoiesis is such that the reader who is moved by the text believes that it is nonetheless *true* in some way other than the factual. The mythic sensibility kicks in and Losev's 'miraculous revelation' of the world as it is according to the myth, or Tolkien's recovery of the world as it *ought* to be informs the reader with a kind of truthfulness. This kind of distance between belief and what is believed *in* was once not possible.

The enchanted world of the poets was, in at least one sense, a more *immediate* world. We are used, today, to imagining ourselves to be atomised: discrete individuals in distinction from all other individuals and from the society of which we are a part. Further to this, Charles Taylor traces the move from the enchanted to the disenchanted world of secular modernity. In terms of our experience of the world, central to Taylor's account is the development of the 'buffered self' of modernity in opposition to the 'porous self' of the enchanted world. The porous self of pre-modernity is immediately influenced by the world, spiritually as well as physically. The acquisition of physical, mental, and spiritual conditions for the porous self are

not a matter of the development of certain hormonal and neurochemical states as a result of certain experiences, inputs, or pre-dispositions. Rather such conditions are the result of action by outside forces or 'charged objects' which themselves *are* the condition in question, bearing physical, mental, and spiritual valence and meaning.[175] For instance, in his discussion of the difference in the quality of experience for a person living, say, in ancient Athens as opposed to one living in Athens in 2019, Taylor remarks on the difference in our understanding of symptoms and disease:

> A modern is feeling depressed, melancholy. He is told: it's just your body chemistry, you're hungry [...] or whatever. Straightaway, he feels relieved. He can take a distance from this feeling [...] Things don't really have this meaning; it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things [...] But a pre-modern may not be helped by learning that his mood comes from black bile [*melancholia*]. Because this doesn't permit a distancing. Black bile *is* melancholy. Now he just knows he's in the grip of the real thing.[176]

The experience of melancholy for the pre-modern is synonymous with the spiritual force of black bile upon his complexion. The spiritual force *is* the feeling of melancholy *is* the black bile. Likewise, good fortune *is* the favour of Fortuna, and curses performed properly are the spiritual and causal agents of misfortune in their object. By contrast, the modern buffered self lives in a world full of exterior causes which, by way of physical processes, can be said to create certain states of being, mind, or spiritual awareness. However, it is not the exterior forces themselves which constitute the conditions: a virus may cause a disease, but the disease itself is a 'meaningless' concatenation of physical processes which do not themselves make up or constitute the self of the person suffering them. Thus, as Taylor puts it, one can 'stand back' from the symptoms, behind the buffer of critical distance to regard the disease or affliction impartially. The immediacy of the porous self, this identification of conditions of the self with the meaningful forces external to it (rather than identifying the external forces as *causes* of said conditions) renders the account given of them more immediate as well.

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[175] Taylor, 35.

[176] Taylor, 37.

For the porous self, the spiritual content of mythopoiesis is likewise immediate and present. The distance between *mythos* and *logos* can be considered much closer in the pre-modern era: the meaning inherent in pragmatic action was taken more as a given. Success in battle was considered not strictly the result of fierce warriors or clever tactics, but as the result of the favour or presence of God or gods. Victory was understood and *experienced* as a moral good because it constituted the pleasure of the divine coinciding with the actions of human beings. Once again we return to Losev's miraculous revelation: military victory or poetic excellence are experienced as the presence of God which is itself synonymous with human success. By contrast, the buffered self requires, at best, a theory of secondary causation to account for the role of the divine, should any account be called for. The sanctity of the individual will, un-enmeshed with divine or other supernatural influence, is a given. The buffered self is able to stand back from its achievements and assess the causes, irrespective of their moral content or meaning.[177] *Mythos* and *logos* have been (putatively) sundered: no longer impinged upon by supernatural or transcendent forces, the buffered self can choose for or against the spiritual content of its actions and ways of being in the world in a way in which the porous self cannot. Thus, when speaking mythically, the porous self finds itself already implicated in the spiritual content of its actions: the *mythos* of the gods is already enmeshed in the *logos* of mythopoiesis itself along with all other actions. To use Taylor's terminology, the social imaginary of pre-modern or porous society contains the furniture of the gods specifically and the mythic more generally such that myth-making and mythic discourse has a recognisable function, even if it comes under philosophical critique. The modern and post-modern myth-maker, however, faces a social imaginary in which the activity of the supernatural is no longer assumed, and so mythic speech is consequently hobbled in this sense at least: any transcendent character to myth-making, any appeal to a higher or more real reality must always be grounded in the assumption that the self is buffered from the world and able to act on its own volition. This is why, as Bultmann was chief to point out, the mythic

[177] Though this stance itself, of course, constitutes a moral position.

language of previous ages can appear incredible, even ridiculous, taken on the terms of the modern social imaginary.

The example of Bultmann reveals the distance travelled from the third-century dialogue between *theología* and *mythològia* to the in the twentieth century in how he understands myth and in how he understands its role in the world. The best-known proponent and progenitor of *de*mythologisation, the rallying cry of twentieth-century liberal theology, Bultmann adhered to a typically liberal modern understanding of myth. He writes: 'Mythology is a way of representing the otherworldly in terms of this world and of the gods in terms derived from human life.'[178] Baked in to Bultmann's understanding of the mythic (and here we may pause to reflect once again upon the heuristic, ad hoc nature of the word across authors) is a distinction between this world and the otherworldly, between the transcendent and the immanent, in absolute terms: they do not intersect or overlap. As a Lutheran, Bultmann is anxious to insist that the divine does not impinge upon the material in any objective way, and so the mythic must be strictly analogous, metaphorical, allegorical: it is always a matter of 'as if', even a coded reference, to that which is fundamentally beyond human reckoning and which must be taken *solā fide*.[179] The myth, then, lacks a fundamental integrity. It is merely a vessel of another message which can be abstracted or interpreted from it. Mythological thinking, for Bultmann, has primarily to do with explaining the universe from the perspective of *logos*, a Tylorian myth-as-primitive-science model of understanding.[180] Telling stories (such as those comprising the New Testament, which were of particular interest to Bultmann) is primarily a means of *explanation* rather than *interpretation*. The myths are what stand in need of interpretation, rather than the world. For many liberal Christians today, Bultmann's hermeneutics continue to be normative: exegesis is a function of discovering what the Bible 'really means' behind the veil

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[178] Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans- Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK 1972), 10.

[179] Walter Schmithals, *An Introduction to the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: SCM Press 1968), 272.

[180] 'But just as mechanical astronomy gradually superseded the animistic astronomy of the lower races, so biological pathology gradually supersedes animistic pathology, the immediate operation of personal spiritual beings in both cases giving place to the operation of natural processes.' Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture, Volume 2* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 229.

of the mythological language.[181] However, following the discussion of mythic sensibility in Chapter One, it is reasonable to suggest that once one has 'decoded' the language of a myth, one has simply 'recoded' it into the language of another myth. However, after the sundering of *mythos* and *logos* that heralded the advent of modernity, we have rendered ourselves unable to discern the mythic sensibility operative in the 'demythologised' sphere of practical reason.

The demythologisation project championed by Bultmann did not eradicate mythic consciousness in the West (nor, perhaps, was it intended to), but it represents the successful displacement of explicitly mythic sensibility from what is considered valid knowledge. As Charles Taylor describes, the advent of an exclusive secular materialism purports to liberate human subjects from the distortions of mythic thinking that have kept humanity in chains for so long. This is true in many respects: the advent of human rights discourse and the uncoupling of secular social policy from theological/mythic accounts of the human person has, in part, been responsible for the liberation of LGBTQ people across much of what was once called Christendom. The 'mythic distortions' of certain theological accounts of human sexuality prevented policy makers from seeing sexual minorities as anything but aberrant instances of cis-gendered straight people. Secular modernity, with its 'freedom' from mythic thinking and its reliance on contemporary science and the modern privilege accorded to personal experience, was able to provide the liberation that traditional 'mythical' thinking had foreclosed. The 'traditional' theological account, rooted in the myths contained in the Bible, is no longer considered valid knowledge: in this context it now represents a lie from which to be liberated, a myth to be jettisoned along with all of the others. Consciously living *through* a myth or on the terms of a narrative is no longer an option. This is not to say that people no longer live through myth. It is indeed the thesis of this thesis that we still do. However, appeal to the narrative is no longer a tenable option for most people. 'As it is written...' is not a viable mode of argumentation in the moral or social frame, unless one refers to the law books or to the instruction manual, though even then, the pragmatics of its success in the 'real world'

[181] Or, in the case of fundamentalist readings, the mythic element is collapsed into a literal/historical sense.

remains the ultimate criterion. Within what Taylor terms the 'immanent frame' of secular modernity, the laws governing the chain of proximal causes is the only authority to which one can appeal, unless perhaps it is to one's 'gut'. The atomism of modern individuality has its counter-point to the *logos*-centric pragmatism which dominates the modern imaginary: the feelings of the individual can constitute valid knowledge so long as the speaker is trusted by the audience in question. Gut feelings indeed are valued in certain political contexts as trumping publicly-available information when it comes to matters of judgment. These kinds of knowledge, however, are considered finally distinct from 'mythic' knowledge, which by its nature is suspect within the immanent frame: appeals to transcendence are unacceptable when made as such. However, as will be discussed further below, all of the reasons of exclusive secular humanism are themselves mediated by myths no less mythic than the traditional theological *mythoi* that characterise a Christian approach to questions of knowledge and meaning. The process of secularisation and demythologisation has rendered invisible the operation of *mythos*, as it has become subsumed by *logos*.

The theological content of myth-making is obscured in the contemporary scene by the effacing of *mythos* by *logos*. The myths which interpret the world to their mythic subjects today do so, at least on their terms, within Taylor's immanent frame. The myth of the American Dream once again provides a useful example. The promise that, if one works hard and plays by the rules, one will be rewarded with wealth and happiness is pervasive in films, novels, and plays. Even when it is not the explicit theme of the narrative, as it is in, say, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, is remains the baseline for judging the existential wellbeing of the protagonist in the vast majority of Hollywood films. Amidst the universe-shattering action of the recent and overwhelmingly popular Marvel *Avengers* films, Clint Barton's stable home-life, with large house, beautiful property, and beautiful wife and children stand as the obviously-sought-after norm of human happiness: this is what everyone is fighting on behalf of; this is what everyone *really* wants. Material security and happiness is the horizon of metaphysical ambition. The actions of the villains, or morally-ambiguous characters of the series, such as

Loki, the inveterate trickster and sometime betrayer or saviour of the 'heroes', denies them this kind of happiness; it is an aspect of their villainy that they reject it. The myth's judgment relies solely on the possession of wealth and material security. The American Dream's dark side declares the poor deserving of their fate: if they had worked harder, they would be rewarded with wealth and security. Their lack of material goods is equated with a negative *moral* judgment. Just as the good are wealthy because of their virtue, their virtue is also a function of their wealth. And vice versa. This entirely *material* mythic frame is indicative of the conditions of modern myth-making. The American Dream is a story that many believe: it is the controlling narrative of American discourse around immigration (Will they work hard? Will they work too hard and steal what is ours?), crime (If only he had *gotten a job* he would never have ended up in prison...), and religion (How does God allow poverty? Jesus' hands were filled with blood that yours may be filled with gold...). However, it is a story that remains solidly fixed to those operations and materials which are subject to the senses: tangible things such as money and property, as well as power over others and physical security. There is no room in this myth for the gods or for spirituality, except as spirituality is rendered a good to be bought and sold in shops carrying incense, books on prayer and meditation, and mass-produced religious art. But even here, the myth retains its hold: spirituality is only available to those who can afford costly goods to liberate them from the shackles of materiality. Any transcendent good, be it *ataraxia*, salvation, *nirvana*, *caritas*, mystical participation in the Godhead, or enlightenment, is ruled out on the basis of being a rejection of the immanent materiality that constituted the world in the modern imaginary. In this context, the Christian God is not just something in which many do not believe, but rather such faith represents a way of being that is simply unavailable to many. *Mythos* is only available in this context inasmuch as it deals on the terms of *logos*.

The landscape is very different, and the myths that we make are likewise changed. That is, the context in which we tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful has been determined, even before we begin to speak, by a myth that seeks to cancel all other myths. It

has established itself as normal, as obvious, as simply the way things are, by way of an account of having stripped away, as Bultmann describes, the chaff of myth to get at the truth that lies beneath. This is only one, and a flawed, way of understanding how we have gotten where we are today. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is much to be said on behalf of another account of the world in which we find ourselves, which takes as given the givenness of being itself and which reveals the world to be pregnant with meaning transcending Taylor's immanent frame. 'All that is prays to you,' writes Gregory of Nazianzus.[182] This account of the world proves more credible, more fruitful, than one locked in to that revealed to us by the senses.

II. The Contemporary *Mythos*

> *[Teppic] envied his fellow students who believed in gods that were intangible and lived a long way away on top of some mountain. A fellow could really believe in gods like that. But it was extremely hard to believe in a god when you saw him at breakfast every day.*[183]
>
> — Terry Pratchett, *Pyramids*

Along with many contemporary theologians dissatisfied both with twentieth-century liberalism's contentment with a metaphorical faith and with the violent supernaturalism of the various fundamentalisms which have visibly emerged in the past fifty years, I am interested to give an account of the world as re-enchanted, though not in the same phenomenological sense as in the pre-modern world. A Christian account of mythopoiesis, rooted in the graciousness of creation and God's ongoing relationship of love to that creation, thinkable only analogically, allows that mythic speech is speech about God (at least in part) and so is theological. Having followed the development of the word theology from its roots in poetry and in praise of the gods through Plato's seeking after a way of speaking of God philosophically, into the Christian philosophy of the first centuries of the church, in which *theología* retained the traces of mythological speech which even then was being criticised and

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[182] 'Πάντα σε καὶ λαλέοντα'. *Carm.* I.1.29 in *Patrologia Graeca*, Volume 37, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris, 1857-1866), 18: http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/pgm/PG_Migne/Gregory%20of%20Nazianzus_PG%2035-38/Carmina%20dogmatica.pdf (accessed online, 18 February 2021).

[183] Terry Pratchett, *Pyramids* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1989), 37.

re-appropriated, I wish now to turn to the relation between the *meaning* carried by mythic speech and the horizon of human meaning, which is God.

In the last chapter, I argued that an analogical, participatory account of creation is necessary both to account for the fact that there is something rather than nothing as well as to account for the generativity which inheres in human mythopoiesis and other making. By participating in God's creativity, our mythopoiesis can be said to be creative as well, bringing forth something new and (in the interpretive presence which speaks to the mythic subject) even giving rise to something greater than simply what was made.

The stakes of this debate are playfully explored in Pratchett's novel *Pyramids*. Centred on the suspiciously Egyptian river nation of Djelibeybi,[184] *Pyramids* follows the career of Teppic, the son of Pharaoh Teppicymon XXVII of Djelibeybi who is himself a living god much like his real-worldly counterparts living along the Nile. As the god of the river Djel and the valley through which it flows, the Pharaoh is responsible (as many gods have been so held in history) for causing the river to flood and the sun to rise. However, according to the rules of the fantasy genre as they are played out in the *Discworld* novels, Teppicymon's deity is very this-worldly: the Pharaoh (and Teppic in due course) truly is responsible for these 'natural' phenomena. When Teppic inherits his father's divinity (in the form of a bird who perches on his shoulder and bestows the godhead upon him), he finds this all a bit much, studying, as he was, for his exams at school in the big city. This fusion and overlapping of such mythic terms as godhead and divinity with the quotidian chores of school work and the torments of secondary boarding school is typical of the *Discworld* novels and, in an ironic sense, of myth more generally: the transcendent revealed in terms of the everyday and the revelation of the everyday as truly transcendent. In terms of the debates of medieval scholasticism and theological ontology, the Pharaoh (along with the other gods who live in decent distance from

[184] Pratchett makes a few of these foreign-names-sound-like-candy-brands jokes in the early books, when the sensibility of the novels was sillier and more picaresque. For instance, the Africa-analogue is rather cringily called Hersheba. Having locked in the names, however, Pratchett was stuck with them in the name of 'canon'. To his credit, nothing is ever made of these early linguistic plays. Having landed the joke in the early days, they simply blend into the background of the strange world he created.

their followers on the peak of Cori Celesti) shares the same *esse* as the human beings (and dwarves and gnomes and...) who populate the Disc, only they have more of it. In this sense, Pratchett's mythopoiesis shares with much contemporary myth-making the flattened ontology of univocal being. In *Reaper Man*, a meditation on death, Pratchett writes of the relationship of wizards (standing in for the intelligentsia):

> Wizards don't believe in gods in the same way that most people don't find it necessary to believe in, say, tables. They know they're there, they know they're there for a purpose, they'd probably agree that they have a place in a well-organised universe, but they wouldn't see the point of believing, of going around saying 'O great table, without whom we are as naught.' Anyway, either the gods are there whether you believe in them or not, or exist only as a function of the belief, so either way you might as well ignore the whole business and, as it were, eat off your knees.[185]

Belief in this instance is synonymous with intellectual assent and the experience of being rationally convinced.[186] Or, to return to the language of ontology, it is a fusing of existence and being. Both the wizards and the gods share being: you can tell by the fact that they both exist. Pratchett's fusing of the horizons of the mythic and the quotidian differs from, say, Tolkien's. Pratchett's winking, ironic sensibility hides a thorough commitment to the material. Where the lore of Middle-earth trails back through history into a mythic past as evinced by Sam's rumination on the history of the Rings and the Silmarils on the slopes of Mordor and is encompassed by a beneficent otherness, Gandalf's 'something else at work' than the forces of darkness,[187] the Discworld is full of magic and wonder but finds its origin in an anonymous Creator, and it is ultimately bounded by the future judgment of Azrael, the Death of Deaths. The gods are creatures like the rest of us, playing games with fate, but ultimately facing the same end as human beings: the heat death of the universe.[188] Fantasy literature can be characterised by a subsuming of *mythos* into *logos*: the magical, the transcendent is rendered part of everyday life. The supernatural, transcendent God has been subsumed by the ordinary

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185 Pratchett, *Reaper Man*, 23-24.

186 Intellectual assent not, of course, being the same as faith.

187 Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 56.

188 One is hesitant to bring in the personal life of the author in assessing his work, but Pratchett's outspoken advocacy for assisted suicide invites theological speculation on the ultimate meaning of life, the universe, and everything in his philosophy.

kind of being experienced by finite mortals. When God is just a 'big creature' it becomes difficult to have faith in such a God. How much more so when the god in question is one's own, biological father. Teppicymon XVII's absent-mindedness, tendency to think he is a seagull, and obvious mortality do not inspire the awe which might be encountered in the worship of even a far-off god living on a holy mountain, let alone the wholly transcendent and wholly immanent God of Jesus Christ. In this ontological flatness, we can begin to discern both the limitations of contemporary mythopoiesis and the potential for myth-making in the context of a participatory ontology of the Triune God.

Flattened Ontology: Milbank's Scotus

The flattening of the ontological world into a univocal application of being to both God and creatures results in an appreciation of mythopoiesis that is locked into an immanent, personal sense of meaning, an imposition rather than a revelation. If mythopoiesis is something that takes place only in the natural world, the work of the atomised *auctor* rather than a participation in something beyond individual being, then it can be safely written off as the interior activities of a writer or a reader and not to represent any possible connection between the finite and the infinite. This can change, however, when the ontological frame of our mythopoiesis is considered within the context of the contingency of being. What can the 'natural' mean in a universe that is held in ontological suspension over nothingness, at every moment, by the ongoing love that is God? In what sense can we speak of a secular myth-making in such a world as the one in which we find ourselves, the result of God's ongoing *creatio ex nihilo*, in which all that has being is bound in an unbreakable relationship of ontological dependence to the Father, through the Son, and by the overflowing grace of the Holy Spirit? To what extent can the hermeneutic action of mythopoiesis be severed from its conditioning by the horizon of meaning that is the Triune God?

What is at stake theologically is the distinction between nature and grace. As we seek to encounter the world as meaningful, human beings tell stories which then take on a more-than-made character, interpreting the world to the mythic subject with a quasi-personal and

miraculous character. The question theologically, then, is to determine to what extent this *poiesis* is a function strictly of our character as members of the created order (nature) and to what extent we can understand it as a participation in God's ongoing creativity. In the last chapter, it was suggested that all human making, irrespective of its moral or artistic quality, can in some sense be understood as a participation in God's creation. There is no other way to account for the 'surplus' of mythic interpretive presence. However, this question is related to but analytically distinct from the question of how this status of participation relates to the traditional Christian doctrine of baptism into the graced order of Christ's body in the world. Is it not presumptuous, one might inquire, to assert that all human making is participation in the Christian God, whatever the faith commitments or lack of faith on the part of the maker? Is this not another instance of Christian colonialism, surreptitiously baptising the pagan and unbelieving other and denying the other its very otherness, erasing difference in the name of an imperial Christian unity? It could well be argued that contemporary workers in myth such as Pratchett or Le Guin would bristle at the thought of their 'creativity' being implicated in the operations of a God in whom they do not believe and indeed go out of their way to critique and to write away from. Surely the secular world in which we now live dictates that individual conscience must take priority over the colonising assertions of an imperial religious dogma.

This assessment fails on at least two fronts. First, it assumes, along with the cult of the artistic genius described in the previous chapter, that the artist is the best interpreter of her own work. Artists are entitled to their own appraisal of the work of their own hands, and like any craftsman, artists will inevitably reflect on their own creative process in conversation with their own most closely-held beliefs. The experience of the non-Christian artist may speak nothing of God, grace, divine creativity, or participation in something greater than their own genius. However, the Christian witness claims to say something not just about a way of life or a personal conviction. Rather the narratives which interpret the world to the Christian have revealed it not only as personally meaningful, but universally so, as will be discussed at length

in Chapter Five: the myth of Christ in its triune articulation is the condition by which we are able to speak of mythopoiesis as well as the mythic sensibility of the life, death and resurrection of Christ being the normative myth for human being. Mythopoiesis is thus both the condition and product of our *theologein*. As Aquinas noted, theology as a form of discourse has no proper subject matter of its own, but rather presumes to discern the theological dimension of *all of reality*.[189] Thus we can discern the second failure of the secular account of creative genius, namely that it denies the possibility (or even necessity) of the Trinitarian account of being. When, in Christian theology, we attempt to speak of the nature of being, we hold this to be the case for all creatures, not only for the Christian believer. Thus the theological account *is* transgressive of the convictions of the secular individual, but not in the sense that one might speak of an 'anonymous Christianity', erasing the difference of the other in order to declare the universality of the Christian Way. Rather a Christian theological account of the world will assert that, *from the Christian standpoint*, the world appears to be thus, and for the reasons given and to follow, this standpoint provides the clearest and most truth-giving view of things available to a human viewer. The operations of grace are pervasive, though perhaps only with the eyes of faith can they be perceived. Even in a state of disconnection from God, whether by ignorance or by choice, the Triune operations of grace continue in and amidst all people, such that a 'natural' state, roped off from these operations, can be seen to be a phantasm of secular modernity and not a truth that can only be found by stripping away the distortions of religious mythology.

In theological terms, this can be understood as part of the question of what we mean when we say that God's grace is operative in and through God's creation, both in the substantive sense (the world) and the verbal sense (God's action). Does God's ongoing creative action allow for 'spaces' within the created order from which God is absent? If God is present in and to creation at all points, in what sense can we speak of a secular zone unrelated to that presence? Grace must be operative in and amongst all beings or there is no sense to what we

[189] ST 1.3-6.

mean when we speak of God's creation *ex nihilo*. To speak of an un-graced sector of creation would be to deny the full sense of the *ex nihilo*, that all of creation is sustained in being by God at every moment. But what, then, of sin? Central to the Christian doctrine of God and to any orthodox theological anthropology is the notion that God is perfect and that the creation is not and that in human beings, this imperfection is manifest in the tendency towards evil or sin. Surely, then, human fallenness carves out a space apart from God where human freedom is allowed to operate to its own ultimate demise, irrespective of its created purpose and God's desire for its ends, namely the beatific vision and bliss in the presence of God for eternity. A high sense of human fallenness would dictate that the world, in its fallen state, is such a place, at least as far as humanity goes. Without the grace of God received in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, the human soul remains in the world divorced from the presence of God in this life and the next. This understanding of the operation of sin and the operation of grace relies on a conception of human fallenness that is radical and entire: the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. The fall resulted in humanity entirely cut off from the knowledge of God. Without Christ, some might say, all is wickedness and terror.[190] From the perspective of mythopoiesis, the doctrine of total depravity would require that any mythic speech is able to speak truly of God only within the Church or only by chance or accident.[191] Locked in the secular sphere, the Godless hinterlands of true being, we are unable to say anything about God that is the least bit true, even in a mythic key, without the very specific grace received in and through the Church. In this sense, paradoxically, the modern account of default secularity and the high Reformed account of total depravity are complementary. Both claim that entire Godlessness is the rule in the world and that for the vast majority of people, the processes and decisions of day-to-day life are conducted in a realm entirely distinct from God's relationship

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[190] 'We stand under the sign of a decision constantly taken between the secularity and the sanctification of our existence, between sin and grace, between a being as man which forgets God, which is absolutely neutral in relation to Him and therefore absolutely hostile, and one which in His revelation is awakened by faith to being in the Church, to the appropriation of His promise.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I: The Doctrine of God, Volume 1*, 47-48.

[191] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Volume 1*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 389-390.

to the world. This may, of course, be a caricature of mature Reformed theology, but it is the logical consequence of a theology of an absolute rupture of fallen humanity from the grace with which it was endowed at creation. By gating the possibility of participating in or benefiting from God's loving grace at the baptismal font, we deny the historicity and ongoingness of God's relationship to the world.

In this sense, the question remains open whether in our myth-making we can be said to be speaking of God (*theologein*) meaningfully outside the bounds of specifically 'graced' discourse, that is, the discourse of the Church. If Barth is right that speech about God can only take place in and to the church[192], then it is meaningless to speak of the theological content of mythopoieic speech *qua* myth. Such speech can only be theological in an idolatrous or accidental way. This hard Barthian distinction between that which is within the ambit of God's action and discourse and that which is not reduces all speech, all action, all being to a binary either-or of for God or against God, fallen or redeemed. By restricting to the proclamation of the Church the designation of 'human language in and through which God Himself speaks, like a king through the mouth of his herald', Barth forecloses the possibility that God might speak elsewhere and otherwise.[193] Truly, the history of Israel and the life of the Church in time bears witness to the possibility that God is always already in dialogue with creation, always already speaking in and through the world and even through human culture, as is discussed further below. If, however, even the secular space carved out by post-Enlightenment modernity is recognised to be (against its own strong protestations) an already thoroughly theological space, then it becomes thinkable that even within the bounds and bonds of secular modernity we might still speak of God, though our hearts be ever so turned away.

As discussed above, the environment into which mythopoiesis occurs has been rendered dispositionally opposed to supernatural ways of understanding. This has not always been the case, of course, and it need not be the case, even in the wake of the Enlightenment's

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[192] Barth, I/1, 17.

[193] Barth, I/1, 57.

disenchantment of the world. That our mythic speech and intuitions might participate in God's self-revelation to the creation is, as Milbank argues in his *Theology and Social Theory* and elsewhere, not only possible, but necessary. In fact, Milbank argues that the very secular space which an exclusive secular humanism insists to be the ground state of human cognition and reflection on the world (if only it were unburdened by the distortions of religious and mythical ideology) is itself nothing more or less than a Christian heresy. It is already theological even as it explicitly rejects the the theological, rooted as it is in an understanding of the relationship between God's being and the being of creation.[194] Milbank identifies the roots of modernity in the flattening of ontology in the univocal application of attributes to God and to creatures.[195] The flattening of the cosmos by way of this univocity resulted in a cosmos no longer of creaturely dependence upon a God who is being itself and whose being was the cause of creatures' being, and so united them in their difference in God, but rather a cosmos of individuated difference, no longer united by anything other than competition for material and ideal resources. In order to preserve the alterity of the divine and God's transcendence, an infinite difference within this flattened cosmos is posited, bracketing God apart in a transcendence in which the created order does not participate but into which God may if God chooses insert God's self. Milbank writes:

> Received sociology [the secular account of human being…] is doomed to repeat the self-understanding of Christianity arrived at in late-medieval nominalism, the Protestant reformation and seventeenth-century Augustinianism, which completely privatized, spiritualized and transcendentalized the sacred, and concurrently reimagined nature,

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[194] 'I hope to make it apparent that "scientific" social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise.' Milbank, 3.

[195] Milbank, 55. According to Milbank, the blame falls on the shoulders of John Duns Scotus. Milbank's assessment of Scotus' role in the origin of the flat ontology which would come to underpin much of Western metaphysics, including the deathblow supposedly dealt to such metaphysics by Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, has come under heavy critique not only from writers hostile to Milbank's project but also from allies who share his assessment of secular modernity and the possibilities of a theological approach in the post-modern situation. For an example of the former, see Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley, eds., *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth* (Aldershot, 2005), especially Richard Cross, 'Scotus and Suárez at the Origins of Modernity' and John Marenbon, 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', 49-64. For an example of the latter, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, 2003), 41n6. For the purposes of this essay, however, I am more concerned with the observation of the flattened ontology than with attributing blame. The genealogy of the idea is less important than its result, which seems unimpeachable.

> human action and society as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power.[196]

Once God is an object among objects, albeit one in whom one can, indeed must, put one's whole trust in order to be saved, according to the formulae of the Reformation, then one is no longer speaking of a participatory cosmos in which God as true being is the condition within which all beings are, but rather a natural world over against a supernatural God, infinitely distant however infinitely loving and self-offering in Christ.[197] The world in this sense becomes a separate sphere. As Milbank notes, the *saeculum* ceases to be the time between creation and eschaton but becomes a realm of being apart from God into which God must not, at the risk of compromising the proper autonomy of the created, meddle. The miraculous becomes repugnant to such a view of the world. In this separate sphere, human making can proceed unfettered by divine interference, and this making becomes the icon of human dominion, that gift bestowed upon humanity by God in creation. The world becomes humanity's plaything and the play of power-over is established as the rule by which we are best to understand the operations of human beings relationship to the world. Dominion shifts from being a right to use to a right to dispose of: dominion becomes sheer power rather than responsibility for the creation and responsibility to God.

When the logic of the secular realm is turned to the question of politics, the implications for mythopoiesis and its vital role in the human approach to the world become more visible. The establishment of the secular realm as the realm of human making apart from God led the first political theorists of the new dispensation to posit governance itself in terms of human making.[198] The sacral authority of the sovereign as rooted in God (however problematic a notion this may be) was replaced by the Hobbesian social contract: a made thing which takes on the *numen* of divine right. Because political authority has been thrust into the secular, that is historical, realm, unmoored from divine sanction, Hobbes must re-establish its beginnings.

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196 Milbank, 9.

197 'No longer is the world participatorially enfolded within the divine expressive *Logos*, but instead a bare divine unity starkly confronts the other distinct unities which he has ordained.' Milbank, 15.

198 Milbank, 26.

In order for it to be authoritative, thinkable, there must be a founding myth. Because society was no longer conceived in terms of a whole of which each member was a part, but rather that each individual, possessed of a portion of Adam's founding *dominium*, consents to be governed by means of a great contract. His treatise on the subject, *Leviathan*, is a founding work of modern mythopoiesis, constructing a mythic account of the origins and thus the meaning of governance and civil society. However, as Milbank observes, this is not simply the re-location of sovereignty from God to human beings. Rather, Hobbes' account of Leviathan relies on a theological underpinning of absolute dominion, which as theology is necessarily implicated in mythology. Rooted in a theological question of authority, Hobbes' new modern science of politics is still 'within bounds' as it remains subject to theological judgment and critique: it remains in some sense Christian. 'It is when theology finally *drops out of* modern theories of sovereignty that the real moment of mystification occurs, because here the "mythical" character of sovereignty is forgotten.'[199] That is, as long as thinking about society, sovereignty, and governance remains in concert or in conversation with the mythical accounts upon which it relies, its theological character remains *visible*. The mythopoiesis involved in establishing the secular remains mythic, and so remains within its appropriate field. It is when the mythic character has been forgotten, that it is *naturalised* and rendered 'scientific' as well as being divorced from the questions of ethics and formation that had occupied classical political discourse, that the secular modern discourse of politics can position itself as the 'baseline' account of human interaction, rather than constructed and contingent.

When positioning itself as *logos* rather than *mythos*, the secular political account of the world seeks to naturalise itself and render itself immune to ontological critique. Having 'drilled down' to an understanding of what 'really' is at work in human society, theological accounts can be discarded as so much unnecessary vapour. However, this attitude towards the social sciences in general, whatever the potency of their insights might be, obscures their birth in theological discourse and the latent theological character they still carry. They remain the

[199] Milbank, 27.

fruit of mythical intuitions and articulations, and as such bear assumptions about who God is and what counts as meaningful. Though originally conducted *etsi Deus non daretur*, the *etsi* was soon also discarded, and the social sciences were able to construct a picture of the world as brute fact, sheer power. This is no less a theological position than the theory of the divine right of kings.[200] It is also no less mythical.

The conclusion of this argument is that as myth, the secular account of the world cannot be addressed except by another myth. As discussed in Chapter One, mythic sensibilities are not propositional knowledge. As such, they are not subject to dialectic. As narrative, the myth of secularity which has become the normative model of understanding the world, power, and the human person as existing in a secular space apart from God, can only be countered or undone by another, more attractive myth. Milbank writes: 'my case is rather that it is only a *mythos*, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of literary taste – that Christianity offers a much better story.'[201] I will argue in Chapter Four that Milbank's insistence on 'out-narration' replicates the very structures of violence he seeks to abjure in *Theology and Social Theory*. For now, however, it is enough to note that once secularity is understood to operate within the logics of the mythic, we can begin to perceive a way of speaking of mythopoiesis as a theological, even revelatory exercise of human making in participation with God's creativity.

Numerous critiques have been lodged against Milbank's account. Most damning is the argument made by experts on Scotus' thought that his writing on univocity was never intended as an ontological claim. As Catherine Pickstock has observed, however, whatever Scotus' intentions, to frame being as a shared attribute between God and creation is implicitly to render being a genus under which both God and creation can be classed.[202] It is not necessary to adopt the general hostility toward Duns Scotus held by Milbank and Pickstock, however, to agree with Milbank's assessment of both the importance of ontology to the

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[200] Though this, too, is a result of the over-mighty dominion theology that leads to Hobbes' social contract.
[201] Milbank, 331.
[202] Catherine Pickstock, 'Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54/3 (2001), 414.

question of the secular and of the role of theology in making sense of being and our participation in it. One need only consider the commonly held understanding of God as 'a big bearded man in the sky' to appreciate how a flattened ontology continues to shape ontological and theological imagination in modernity. The infinite being possessed by Scotus' God is not so distant from the God who is, in the words of Monty Python, 'Ooo so very big, so absolutely huge'[203]. It is not enough to write off the objective silliness of Monty Python as merely nonsense. That the idea of a school chaplain leading his pupils in prayer telling God how very big he is and that 'we are all very impressed down here' can function as a meaningful joke is testament to the idea that God can be (and indeed *is*) understood to be just another being among beings, albeit the 'biggest'. This is the ontological frame of 'Western metaphysics' as it plays out in the public sphere. Mythopoiesis considered in such a light seems not to need recourse to the transcendental Being who is God, but can be understood on its own, as a 'natural' phenomenon of human culture. But what is human culture other than the means by which God is and has always been speaking? If this is so, then how are we to speak of the 'natural' apart from the 'supernatural', the traditional stock-in-trade of both myth and fantasy?

III. Trinitarian Ontology

Among the most defining characteristics of both fantasy literature and mythology as commonly understood is the presence, indeed the central importance of the supernatural. It is impossible to imagine Pratchett's Discworld without the ubiquity of magic, Le Guin's Earthsea without the wizards of Roke, Tolkien's Middle-earth without the terrible power of the Ring and the mysterious forces working both for and against it. The formulae of both myth and fantasy discussed in Chapter One almost all reference the importance of the supernatural, and this supernatural is a primary characteristic distinguishing myth and fantasy from the world in which you and I reside. This, at least, is the assumption behind these formulae. The consensus assessment of reality prevailing after the scientific revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has taken the flat ontology attributed to Scotus by

[203] *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life,* 1983.

Pickstock and Milbank and rendered it radical. Being is not only equally predicated of God and creatures in the same way: all being is subject to the same means of measurement and evaluation. Anything which cannot be repeatedly measured according to the criteria of sense data and mathematics is judged unreal. Even the recent advancements in brain science, which have revealed consciousness and cognition to be much more emergent, elusive, and perhaps even transcendent than previously imagined,[204] are rooted in a material and sense-based ontology which cannot think that which cannot be measured.[205] Myth-making in this context must follow the same rules. To the extent that mythopoiesis goes on unreflectively, naturalising the view of the myth behind the awareness of most members of the society subject to it, it must be in accord with the ontology practiced by those subjects. A contemporary myth which speaks in terms of a transcendence which the ontology of the subject cannot allow will seem to be nonsense. This goes some way in describing the incredulity with which the Gospel is received by many in post-Christendom. It is not that the ethics or even the aesthetic quality of the world revealed by the Gospel is problematic: to speak of Ascension, Heaven, a God beyond human understanding is simply un-thinkable for a radically flat ontology. There is no place for God to 'go'. It is important to note that this ontological disjunction goes beyond Bultmann's famous claim concerning the preposterousness of the 'three-storey universe' in the modern age.[206] The problem is more serious than needing to find a way to speak of transcendence in a world in which we have been to the moon and beyond, finding no heaven than the black void of night. For Bultmann, the scientific discoveries of the past two hundred years had obliterated what had been assumed to be the ancient and natural understanding of the universe, namely that above the sky, beyond the lunar sphere, one would find heaven if

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[204] For instance, see Maura Casadio, et al., 'Consciousness as the Emergent Property of the Interaction Between Brain, Body, and Environment: Implications for Robot-Enhanced Neuromotor Rehabilitation' in *Journal of Psychophysiology*, 24/2 (2010), 125-130.

[205] The most reflective such scientists will acknowledge the epistemological limits of their methods, but these voices are the exceptions, it would seem.

[206] 'Can Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible'. Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology: The problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation' in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984), 2.

only one could fly high enough. This would have been the meaning of the Ascension in Bultmann's view. The recovery of the kerygma from the now-discredited 'myths' of the Bible was the only way to salvage the faith of the church. But this understanding of the place of heaven was not precisely the ancient one. As the product of the flattening of the ontological field, the reduction to Taylor's 'immanent frame', the spatiality of the mythic language was taken to be literal. The symbolic character of the language had already been lost as the understanding of being had been collapsed into existence: if heaven were to exist it must exist in the same way as the earth, only distantly, just as for God to exist, God must exist in the same way as human beings, only infinitely. Where Bultmann takes for granted the flat ontology of modernity and so seeks to recover the kerygma from the myth, if we do not assume a flat ontology, then we can begin to understand the metaphysical assumptions of the Biblical and other mythic frames. In the contemporary situation, the problem for apologists is finding a way in to an ontology which needs to treat the universe as closed and ontologically uniform. The supernatural can only be conceived as something super-added, a violation of the rules of the natural order and intolerable to its autonomy.

The division of the natural from the supernatural has a long pedigree in Christian theology, even as it is the baseline assumption of post-Christian secular ontology. In order to properly distinguish the operations of the fallen creation from those of the creator and redeeming God, theologians have struggled to articulate the relationship between God and nature such that nature does not save itself, God's saving power does not overwhelm nature's finite capabilities to such a degree that nature has no integrity of its own remaining, God's saving power is 'domesticated' into natural processes that operate independently of God's will to redeem the fallen creation, and God is not understood as being *required* to save a fallen nature.[207] The supernatural must not be subsumed into the natural, nor vice-versa. As long as God's redeeming grace is understood to impinge upon the created world from the outside and only at special moments of salvation, these issues will remain in question. It becomes possible

[207] As unconditioned act, God cannot be understood to be 'required' to do anything.

to begin to resolve these questions when we recall that the first act of grace, the one which is the condition of being for all the others, is God's originary and ongoing act of creation. Henri de Lubac dissects these distinctions carefully in his *Theology in History*, from which I will quote at length:

> There is thus an absolute distinction, a radical heterogeneity between nature and the supernatural, and it is good to stress this first in order to avoid certain deadly and sacrilegious confusions. But that does not prevent there from being an intimate relation between them, an ordination, a finality. Nature was made for the supernatural, and, without having any right over it, nature is not explained without it. As a result, the whole natural order, not only in man but in the destiny of man, is already penetrated by something supernatural that shapes and attracts it. When it is absent, this absence is still a kind of presence. In other words, which we can take here to be nearly equivalent, it is undoubtedly very true that we must distinguish in things in general and in human life a twofold zone: the zone of the 'secular' and the zone of the 'sacred' it is very true that certain things that we know and use, certain activities that we deploy, are, considered in themselves, purely secular. But we must add that this is, in one sense, an abstraction. For in concrete reality, nothing is purely 'in itself'. All, in one measure and for reasons that can vary much but that are never negligible, all is sacred by destination and must therefore begin by being so through participation.[208]

De Lubac rightly notes that the distinction between natural and supernatural is both real *and* heuristic. His 'absolute distinction' is nothing less than the distinction between creator and created, the necessary being of God and the contingent being of the world. Inasmuch as the world is created being, it is held so thoroughly in the supernatural gift of God's loving will that it should *be* that it becomes difficult to understand how we can speak of a 'pure nature' apart from God's grace as was done by many Roman Catholic theologians until the Second Vatican Council.[209] Maintaining the distinction between natural and supernatural is important, as it is the distinction between that which needs salvation and that which saves. However, as de Lubac indicates, the actions of creation and salvation cannot, finally, be separated utterly. Creation and salvation are two themes in the same act of divine Grace. It is thus a category

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[208] Henri de Lubac, *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 231.

[209] John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 54.

mistake to think that given a 'supernatural end' (that is, to be destined ultimately to be with God in the beatific vision) it is somehow *owed* to a sinful creation that God provide and effect the means to that supernatural end. It would be as sensible to say that God *owed* it to us to create us: the saving action of Christ in history is part of the same divine action of grace that began in (and continually begins in) creation and will end in the consummation of all things in the eschaton.

In saying 'nature was made for the supernatural', de Lubac is rooting his theology in the doxological prayer from the opening words of Augustine's *Confessions*: 'you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless (*inquietum*) until they rest (*requiescat*) in you'.[210] Two features of Augustine's words bear upon the question of mythopoiesis and its relationship to our supernatural end. Firstly, this passage of the *Confessions* is often repeated (as in de Lubac) shorn of its immediate context. Augustine begins the story of his life and his conversion (itself a kind of auto-mythopoiesis) by setting out his conviction that humanity has an inborn desire *to praise God*: 'even though humanity bears everywhere its own mortality, and bears everywhere the evidence of its own sin [...] even so humanity, which is but a part of your creation, longs to praise you. *You inspire us to take delight in praising you*, for you have made us for yourself...'[211] The restlessness which de Lubac takes as humanity's inborn desire for God, humanity's supernatural end, is for Augustine tied directly to our delight in praising God. This delight in praise is the sign of the supernatural end to which we are ordered. Thus the restlessness of our hearts is bound up in our *poiesis*, our making of praise to God, which is itself made possible through our participation in God's own creative being. We are thus, in small proportion, 'working out our own salvation in fear and trembling' though our participation in the salvation God is always already working. Secondly, the sense-rhyme of restless and rest is only a partial replication of the Latin wordplay: '*inquietum*' (restless, not-resting) is resolved by '*requiescat*'. While *requiesco* does literally mean 'I rest' or 'I sleep', the English translation

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[210] De Lubac says as much in *Theology in History*, 231.

[211] Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), I.1, 3.

elides the 're-' prefix which forms a contrast with the 'in-' of *inquietum*. The unrest of our hearts is not resolved in something radically new, in-breaking from outside time and history. Rather it is constituted by a *return* to the restful state in which and for which we were made. The rest to which Augustine points is a resting *again* from the restlessness into which we have been thrust by circumstance and the flux of the created world. When de Lubac speaks, then, of the natural being penetrated, shaped, and attracted by the supernatural, he speaks of a continuity and not a departure. Acting *through* the created order, God is working for its salvation, and that created order includes our praise, our making towards God.

Mythopoiesis is a part of this making towards God. If de Lubac is correct that, with Augustine, we may say that the human being is ordered by virtue of our created nature and our participation in the Trinitarian operation of creation-and-salvation, then it is reasonable to speak of our *poiesis* as also ordered toward the same supernatural end. Just as our making is always already a participation in God's creativity, so, too is it always already a participation in the saving action of God's self-revelation. If our delight is in praising God, then there is a sense in seeking the experience of that delight, we are always seeking to praise God, however disordered and enmeshed in sin that attempt may be. Even the Church, the privileged site of Christian mythopoiesis, the body of Christ in the world, is enmeshed in sin at the same time as it strives by the grace of God to be oriented towards the triune procession of love. It is this situation of which Ward speaks when he writes 'If all things exist in Christ, then the cultural is not something entirely separate from him; the cultural is that through which God's redemptive grace operates. Christ, we could say, is the origin and consummation of culture, in the same way as he is both the prototype and the fulfilment of all that is properly human.'[212] As a product of human culture (as linguistic, symbolic, shared how could it be else?) mythopoiesis is a part of this medium 'through which God's redemptive grace operates.' Elsewhere, Ward demonstrates how literature, in the surpluses of meaning in language and 'the imaginary's recourse to teleologies (and eschatologies), is necessarily always a bit overlapping

[212] Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 22.

with the theological.'[213] This is all the more true in the case of mythopoiesis. Because the mythic is explicitly and by nature not just incidentally an opening 'to the mythological and metaphysical'[214] but this dynamic constitutes the core of its way of being, as an exercise in story-making, mythopoiesis is a heightened location for the dynamics Ward here describes. The mythic sensibility suggests not only an interpretive presence, but also a hermeneutic which offers a kind of 'miraculous revelation' by which the experience of the mythic subject is found to be metaphysically affirmed by the world as revealed by the myth. This opening of the self to the world through the mythic bears a resemblance to the making toward God suggested by Augustine. Mythopoiesis, speaking the mythic, is oriented towards the miraculous revelation of the mythic sensibility. All such revelation exits in analogous relation to the fundamental revelation that is God's self-offering to the creation. There is something about mythopoiesis, in its striving after the miraculous revelation of the mythic sensibility, which mirrors or participates in the human delight in praising God, whether or not delight, praise, or God are evident in the myth-making. We might, however, say that myth-making is *most* true, *most* revelatory when it is ordered toward the revelation of truth itself which is God.

Thus in approaching the question of mythopoiesis not strictly through the formulation of Holy Scripture, or through the contemporary fantasy myth-making of Christian authors such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien or Madeleine L'Engle, or even an anti-theological writer such as Philip Pullman, we are able to observe the theological operations at the heart of mythopoiesis and the 'pull' exerted upon it by our shared orientation toward the vision of God. Because the mythic sensibility is phenomenologically the means by which we see *as*, it is at its core associated with vision, literal or metaphorical. Inasmuch as the beatific *vision* is the end for which all human beings were created and are being redeemed, our attempts to see are always, however distorted by sin, ultimately attempts to see God. The restlessness of our searching, our making in order to see, is a restlessness coterminous with the desire in our nature to rest in the knowledge and love of God. We tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful: we

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[213] Ward, 'Why literature can never be entirely secular' in *Religion & Literature*, 41/2 (2009), 27.
[214] Ward, 'Why literature', 27.

tell stories in order to recognise ourselves, being recognised by the world. The humanity in the fiction of a Pratchett or a Le Guin is recognised by thoughtful readers and can be experienced as a recognition of the self by the text: perhaps we have all had the experience of reading a novel and feeling seen or known, and a rest settles upon us, a relief from alienation. This is a foreshadow, an analogy to the rest we are seeking out and can only find in God. As I will discuss further in Chapter Five, this is part of what makes the myth of Christ *the* myth for humankind, the entry point into the rest of the vision of God. The beatific vision, of course, most properly refers to the consummation of the questing restlessness that is human being, only to be found after all earthly cares have been laid aside in death. However, when Christ speaks of the nearness of the Kingdom (Matthew 3.2) and teaches his disciples to see his face in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, sick, and imprisoned (Matthew 25.31-46) he is speaking of the fore-vision, the preparation-in-life for the consummate vision to come. This suggests that our seeing in life, embedded in the desire for God which Augustine and de Lubac declare is constitutive of our humanity, is able (as through a glass darkly) to be a partial seeing of God in life. We make stories in order to praise that which we believe to be God, and we make stories in order to see what we hope God to be. Inasmuch as we tell stories in search of meaning, in this life that meaning is always partial, deferred, and obscured, as much by the dynamics of language as by sin.[215] But as long as we speak toward meaning, we are striving to speak toward God, who is meaning itself. And these attempts at meaning through story, which

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[215] According to Milbank, the paradoxical consequence of this univocity of being is that while speaking being in the same way about all things (among them God), the ultimacy of difference grows, until each genus is isolated: 'The divergences of genera, therefore, like the divergences of infinite and finite, become sheer, absolute differences. As Deleuze argues, the reverse side of the univocity of Being is the philosophy of pure heterogeneity.' (Milbank, 306). He then argues that Scotus' ontology finds its culmination first in Heidegger and then in the poststructuralism of Deleuze and Derrida in whom 'There are are no stable genera, but only complex mixtures, overlappings and transformations. Hence the absolute diversity of genera becomes the absolute diversity of every *ens* as such [...]' (306). The consequence for this dissolution of an analogical understanding of the relationship between individual beings and the divine Being undergirding them is, according to Milbank, the dissolution of all correspondence and therefore all meaning into the nihilism of secular materialism. Every being is atomised and separated. Derrida's infinite regress of signification is a reflection of this dissolution into difference and différence. Once analogy is abandoned, Milbank contends, nihilism is the unavoidable consequence. Speech, in this swirl of nihilism, is rendered always just beyond signification, meaning never quite appears. This is not a necessary conclusion. Others have found Derrida's approach a fruitful supplement to Christian theology. See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and John Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

may become hermeneutic frames through which we encounter the real, are formed, conducted, attempted by means of language which we have inherited, in cultures which we did not make, and at the near end of a history which extends backward even as it conditions the possibilities of the present.

The language we speak is shot through with history, with the myths that have brought our culture to the present day, with the presence of God as God has been speaking to us historical creatures through time. In his essay on the transformation of the body Jesus Christ from the particularity of the first-century Judean man through a series of displacements into the Church which is his body in the world after the Ascension, Ward argues that the world is not properly thought to contain Christ's body, but that the situation is precisely reversed:

> The body of Jesus Christ, the body of God, is permeable, transcorporeal, transpositional. Within it all other bodies are situated and given their significance. We are all permeable, transcorporeal and transpositional. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ (*eis este en Christoi*)" [Phil. 2.12]. This theo-logic makes possible [...] an understanding of the omnipresence or ubiquity of God.'[216]

From the Incarnation, through the transfiguration, the institution of the Eucharist, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and finally in the Ascension, Christ's body is progressively displaced into a broad and wider location. However, Ward's emphasis is on the displacement of Christ's body at the Ascension into the *Church*. The theo-logic of Philippians is predicated upon participation in Christ through baptism. In becoming a member of the Church, the differences of the world are effaced. In becoming a member of the body of Christ in this way, we escape the dichotomies of the secular world. And this is true. However, there has been a further displacement, or diffusion perhaps, of the body of Christ in the age after the dissolution of Christendom. While full membership in Christ is still effected and signified by baptism and the Eucharist, the cultures of what was once known as the Christian world have been materially transformed by their long sojourn with the Church.[217] Whether one professes

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[216] Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113.

[217] And here I do not mean 'the West' as a euphemism for White Euro-America. Armenia and Ethiopia have been Christian for much longer than we in the wreckage of European Christendom.

Christian faith or not, our languages are thick with Christian mythemes and imagery. For all of their manifest failings and grave disappointments, the laws and ideals of countries shaped by the Church are different than those rooted in other mythical frames. This is not the place to discuss or defend these ideals and cultural dreams in terms of better and worse than those of cultures shaped by other faiths. It is only to say that in some sense, the Church as the body of Christ in the world has left its imprint on the cultures it once informed from a privileged, nearly ultimate, position. Thus writing from within such a culture must retain in some traces, some obvious, some more deeply hidden, of that now almost holographic body. Le Guin may have worked to write in the opposite direction of Christianity, and Pratchett may explicitly have disavowed his childhood faith, but both wrote in English from American and English situations. That is to say, while not *being* Christian, they could not help but to *write* in Christian. The resonances and echoes of theological ways of being and thinking and writing remain in the language, the genre, the themes, and the openness to something transcendent. To reiterate: this does not make them secretly Christian. Far from it. But it opens their mythopoiesis into the conversation of Christian theology in a way that is baked into their way of writing. As mythopoieic, as fantasy, as writing out of the wreckage of Christendom, even the fiction of these non-Christian writers remains bothered by the Christian God.[218]

Conclusion

A great deal of theology has dwelt on the otherness, the unknowability, the utter strangeness of God. This is much of what is being safeguarded in speech about God when insistence is made that it be analogical rather than univocal in attributing anything to God. In scripture, one need only think of the 'sound of sheer silence' in which Elijah encounters the Lord and the Isaiah's reminder that God's ways are not our ways.[219] God's strangeness is on display in the mercy and forbearance which are God's from the protection of Cain to the forgiveness of those responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' parables are meant to shock

[218] My thanks to Rev'd Joseph Simmons, SJ for this happy phrase.

[219] 1 Kings 19.12 and Isaiah 55.8.

us, to jolt us out of our complacency by their strangeness and the foreignness of God's ways of being to ours.[220] The apophatic tradition from Pseudo-Dionysius onward has sought to put limits on what we can say of God in order that we do not become seduced by the idea that God can be known by human reason beyond what God has shown of God's self in revelation. More recently, theological thinkers such as Richard Kearney have insisted upon God's strangeness in the unknowability of the Levinasian Other.[221] This is all to the good. The domestication of God and the framing of a God made in our own image is responsible for the theological justification of many of history's worst atrocities: a God who we *know* to share our prejudices and to wield the power we wish we possessed becomes the dangerous guarantor of our own worst actions. To insist upon the otherness, the surprising strangeness of God is, at least in part, an effective prophylactic against such violent appropriation. God must not become too familiar or God will cease to be God and become just another being among beings, another bully among bullies.

However. The witness of scripture and the witness of the Church is also to a God who is intimately familiar. God is, in Augustine's words, deeper within us than that which is most intimate,[222] other ontologically, but familiar parentally. The encounter with God resulting in conversion is intimately bound up in familiarity and intimacy even as it results in the short term in disorientation only to open into glimpses of re-orientation and a new vision of the real. One need only consider those on the road to Emmaus whose confusion opens into an encounter with their friend in the intimacy of bread and wine at table. A more contemporary example can be found in the life of Sara Miles, whose memoir of conversion hinges upon the taste of bread and wine encountered as the strange-and-familiar God of whom she had heard some, knew little, and met as a friend.[223] The God witnessed to in the Eucharist is intimate as the food which becomes and changes the communicant, as familiar as the smell of the bread and wine which are received as body and blood. As we consider the ways in which God relates

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[220] This will become a major theme in Chapter Five.

[221] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 62.

[222] *Confessions*, 3.6.11

[223] Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine, 2007), 60.

to the world, grace relates to nature, our myth-making to the God upon whom all depend for being itself, it is well to remember that this God, ontologically distant, is existentially close. When we recognise in myth an evident truth, a familiarity that is both distant and very near at hand, this encounter is something of an encounter with God. If we take seriously Augustine's claim that we only rest when we rest in God, then there is surely something of God in every rest, something of God in the peace that comes in recognition, in being known.

This being known is what is communicated in the mythic sensibility: a sense of knowing and of being known. In some ways, English is hampered in this regard by our having only one word 'to know'. The distinction in Latin between 'scire' and 'cognoscere' or French 'savoir' and 'connaître' is helpful in teasing out the meaning of the knowledge imparted in the mythic encounter with the world. The former refers to knowledge gained by reason and deduction, and the other the knowledge of familiarity and intimacy. The latter is knowledge, but the knowledge as one gains as one falls in love, coming to know the beloved. To say that I know my beloved is not strictly to say that I have been persuaded of certain facts. Rather, it is to say that the relation between us has brought forth a conviction of certain propositions and a trust that they are the case. In a sense, this distinction mirrors that of *logos* and *mythos*. Inasmuch as mythopoiesis is about encountering the world as meaningful, and the world is pregnant with meaning as it participates in God's being, mythopoiesis and mythic sensibility is about knowing God in and through the world God has created and through which God reveals God's self. Nicholas of Cusa's insights about the relationship between making and knowing once again spring to mind: it is by the making of the mythic narratives that the meaning they reveal begins to 'shine forth' (*resplendere*)[224] Mythopoiesis is part of the God-given capacity of human beings to know God not as an object among objects with the knowledge of deduction, but as the fount of being itself, as the original beloved. The strangeness of God preserved in apophasis, in the reticence of theology to speak in too positive a way about God's attributes is

[224] '*in qua formis coclearitatis convenienter resplendeat*', Cusa, II.8, p.97. In the layman's making of a spoon, the form of the spoon is able 'fittingly to shine forth'. We might also say that in our myth-making, the meaningfulness of the self and the world shine forth, sometimes in new and surprising ways.

not disturbed by the knowledge of God which comes through our narrative approach to the natural world held in supernatural relation to its creator. It is a knowledge which cannot be spoken directly, but which must be encountered in the poetics of the allusiveness of speech brought into the foreground by poetry and narrative. And so we return to the poetics of the first *theológoi* who could speak of the gods only in song. Myth-making as a theological act testifies to the ways in which our speech is necessarily bound up with the operations of God in and through our culture, our language, our ways of being in the world.

The world in which we live and tell stories in order to encounter the world as meaningful is always already embroiled in theological discourse. This is what I have sought to argue in this chapter, and it situates myth-making within a theological milieu such that we can understand mythopoiesis itself as a theological enterprise, even when the content of the myth does not speak of God or gods. Myth-making is a searching for the rest that is God alone, and to the extent that an experience of meaning emerges from the mythic sensibility, we can say that this is a shadow or an intimation of the rest that comes only fully in the source of meaning that is God. This argument has left in abeyance the question of the consequences, the quality, the ethics of the myths in question. As we must always in this life encounter the world 'as through a glass darkly', our mythopoiesis is always obscure, always distorted (but not necessarily entirely darkened) by sin. How are we to trust which mythic expressions are most fruitful, most revelatory of the truth? This is the subject of the next chapter.

IV
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Myth and Desire

'If you don't turn your life into a story, you just become a part of someone else's story.' [225]
— Terry Pratchett, *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents*

I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.
— Isaiah 45:7

Thus far, I have examined mythopoiesis from a variety of more or less detached standpoints. In Chapter One, I observed the game-like dynamics of mythic sensibility and how participation in the 'game' of a myth structures the perception of the participant. I argued that this ludic character of the mythic also offers a way of understanding the power that a *mythos* can have over the mythic subject and the radiant intensity of the 'revelation' that the mythic discloses to the myth's participants. In Chapter Two, we approached mythopoiesis in relationship to a theology of creation. I argued that by understanding creation in participatory terms, we are able to approach myth-making as a participation in God's ongoing creative act, which is itself also always an act of divine self-disclosure. In Chapter Three, pursuing the participatory metaphysics introduced in the previous chapter further, I demonstrated how the making of mythopoiesis is always in some sense a making towards God, who is both the source and end of human desire. In what follows, I return to the personal dimension of mythopoiesis,

[225] Terry Pratchett, *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 179.

now considering the personal amidst the social, those dimensions of mythic encounter characterising the relationship between myths as they are made and re-made in conversation with one another. Against a nihilistic relativism which understands mythic sensibilities to be engaged *a priori* in a violent contestation, I argue that a Christian theology of mythopoiesis must begin from the ontological mutuality that is the Trinitarian source of being itself.[226] The relationship of myth to myth and narrative to narrative cannot, finally, in light of the Gospel, be an agonistics, but rather a final reconciliation and transformation, a redemption and resurrection from the death of nihilistic violence. Thus, in this chapter, I argue for a realist, plural approach to the polyphony of the mythic, grounded in a participatory Christian metaphysic. In doing so, I aim to correct a relativistic tendency in approaches to the mythic, which sees them as either equally false or as irretrievably (and fundamentally) in conflict. Instead, I suggest that the participatory theology so far outlined opens a space for the possibility of myth as inherently theological form of discourse, subject to aesthetic rather than dialectic judgment, and so oriented to the real by desire. The commitment entailed in the mythic sensibility is both predicated upon a suspension of such commitment in the name of humility and forgetful of it. In this way, one can endorse the revelatory moment of mythic subjectivity as well as demand a reticence in the face of a violent erasure of difference.[227]

Rather, the ontology of peace announced by the Gospel cannot finally be one of *submission* to the authority of Christ except inasmuch as the lover submits to his beloved, making himself vulnerable and orienting his desire to her desire, his vision to her vision. While the 'marketplace of ideas' announced by the culmination of a capitalist *mythos* exists (it would be foolhardy to pretend otherwise), a Christian assessment of the underlying logic (*logos*) of created being cannot be content with this state of affairs or with this as a final judgment on

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[226] In this analysis, I rely on the genealogical work of John Milbank's (*Theology and Social Theory*) and David Bentley Hart's (*Beauty of the Infinite*) studies of the origins of postmodern nihilism. Milbank speaks of Postmodernism's 'ontology of violence' and Hart of 'a war of persuasions.'

[227] This is in no sense to say that a Christian worldview forbids fighting on behalf of what is right, on behalf of the truth that is revealed by its encounter with the real. The world is fallen, and sin is real. Agonistics is the present condition of human being and a political quietism is not a viable option. For a discussion of the importance of this kind of reticence, especially on the part of Christians whose sureness has wrought such damage in history, see Richard Kearney's *Anatheism*.

how truth will be negotiated in a plural society. Thus this chapter does not aim to end merely with a description of the state of affairs, but rather with the Gospel's announcement of victory in submission and the willingness to be pierced in the side by that which opposes it, only to reveal a yet more fundamental attestation to the real in that very defeat. As will be discussed below, the mythic dimension of the cultural operations of human being represent a vital location for understanding not only the processes of mythopoiesis, but also the theological dynamics of cultural change. The questions of how mythic sensibilities encounter one another and how mythic sensibilities change as a result of such encounters sheds light on what we mean by culture, human ways of being, as a participation in the life and activity of God.

I begin with a discussion of what is meant, specifically, by the encounter of mythic sensibilities, as distinct from the other dynamics of the flux of culture. Namely, I consider the phenomenology of the mythic discussed in Chapter One, the seeing *as* that characterises the mythic sensibility, and how rival accounts of the real confront one another. I continue by problematising the idea of inter-mythic relations as fundamentally a matter of conflict by closely examining the agonistics of *mythos* pursued by Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory*. I go on to suggest that Milbank's appeal to taste, considered in light of Jean-Louis Chrétien's phenomenology of prayer, can be better thought as a participation in the *perichoresis* of the Trinity and of the creature's return to its creator. By privileging the dynamics of desire and erotics over that of agonistics, I attempt to orient mythopoiesis toward the desire for God. Finally, I consider the way that *mythoi* can challenge or critique one another *from within one another*, allowing a new understanding, a new encounter with meaning, to emerge from the making of a new narrative and a new practice. In this I seek to point toward how it is possible to discern the movement of the Spirit in and through human cultural production (including mythopoiesis) working to bring all things, including our sinful and broken making, into God's desire.

I. How to Think Difference

In 1919, the British Museum accepted the deposit of a 'coarse marble figure of a Kriophoros: boy, short-haired, in girded chiton, holding a ram on his shoulders behind his head by the fore and hind legs',[228] taken from the ruins of the present day city of Az Zubayr, south of Basra, Iraq's largest port. Near the mouths of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Az Zubayr would have been a cosmopolitan crossroads in the third and fourth centuries AD, during Iran's last great empire under the Sassanid dynasty. One can thus imagine the different ways that a traveller from Athens, confronted with the Kriophoros statue would have seen it. When I see a disc of metal imprinted with the image of Queen Elizabeth II, I can only see a coin, and when confronted by a ceramic vessel with a handle and a swanlike neck issuing in a hole, I cannot but see a teapot where our Athenian traveler might see a rather oddly bulbous oil lamp. Having spent my days drinking tea, I see one thing, and having spent his by the dim light of an oil-soaked wick he sees another. Likewise, this visitor to Zubayr (or whatever its Persian name might have been), would have seen the Kriophoros in one of at least two ways, depending upon the life he had led up until that point. On the one hand, if he were a conventional Greek citizen of the Roman empire, he would probably see the figure as Hermes Kriophoros, the god Hermes Ram-Bearer, and would, perhaps, take comfort, knowing that the god of medicine, who is said to have circled the city of Tanagra bearing a ram on his shoulders and so averted plague,[229] is honoured in the city, and perhaps he could breathe a sigh of even unconscious relief that perhaps the miasma of the city would not strike him down in his sleep. Were our Greek traveller a Christian, however, he would instead see an image of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for his church as a shepherd cares for his sheep.[230] Perhaps he would be likewise be comforted, but in this case by knowing that Zubayr was home to fellow Christians, and that he might find refuge with them and give thanks with them to the Good

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[228] British Museum, 'Good Shepherd', British Museum collection: https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=804833&partId=1 (accessed 1 March 2021).
[229] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Volume 1, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 265.
[230] John 10:11-18.

Shepherd of the sheep who had brought him safely to this stage in his journey. Participating in distinct mythic sensibilities, we might speak of distinct 'mythic subjectivities', constituted in and by that sensibility. Each mythic subjectivity, each formation in seeing shapes the traveller's understanding of the statue, and so the city and the world. Both 'meanings' of the statue exist together, in a participatory relationship between the traveller's mythic sensibility and the statue's form. They are, in a sense, superimposed upon one another, like a double-exposure negative, revealing haunting shapes over or behind conventional subjects.

There is little reason to imagine, in the third century, why two such travellers, each seeing a different divinity represented in the statue of the Kriophoros, would necessarily have come into conflict over their differing perception of the worked stone. Christianity at this point was a tolerated minority religion in the Zoroastrian Sassanid dominions, and the Hellenistic pagan would have had little knowledge of or concern over the Christian's idiosyncratic faith. The same cannot, of course, be said for the Buddhas of Bamiyan which stood in what is now central Afghanistan for seven centuries before being destroyed by the Taliban in what was widely perceived to be a shocking desecration of world heritage.[231] The Taliban's actions, however, demonstrate a vastly different mythic sensibility, a different kind of seeing. Where Central Asian Buddhists through the centuries might have seen in the statues the peaceful gaze of the founder of their practice and faith, and the secular world saw monumental achievement and beauty, the Taliban saw blasphemy and affront to God. It is not that the theocratic impulses of the Taliban led to a judgment that such statuary was idolatrous. Rather the mythic sensibility interpreting the form of the stone to their eyes enabled those ordering their destruction to see only something terrible and worthy of destruction. At least, this is to give the most generous reading to their actions, and not to apologise for a vision surely compromised by domestic and foreign political calculus, the blindness of sin, and the mere limitations of creaturely finitude, all of which compose the complex of our seeing *as*. The means of co-relation of these incompatible mythic sensibilities is anything but

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[231] The statues designated 'World Heritage in Danger' by UNESCO in 2003: https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/208/ (accessed 1 March 2021).

straightforward, enmeshed as they are in systems of governance and political power, global capitalism, and the adoption or imposition of certain Western attitudes towards art, culture, history, and the landscape. It lies well beyond the scope of this chapter or this thesis to propose even a theological theory of the interplay of such vast cultural complexes, let alone to provide a prescription for the amelioration of such cultural conflict as that between radical Islam and an ever-encroaching Western secularism. What is at stake in this chapter, however, is an essay at a Christian theological response to the meeting of different ways of seeing *as*: a Christian way of understanding the ground of such difference and a possible means of imagining the co-existence, or even co-inherence of such difference without compromising or sacrificing the particularity and priority of a Christian theological vision. So what is under consideration here is not something called a 'culture', however it might be defined. Rather, it is something closer to a phenomenology of culture, how it is to see from within a cultural frame, subject to the mythic resonances one participates in and in which one's culture participates.[232]

It cannot be sensibly argued that all mythic sensibilities are created equal, nor that all myths are beneficial to their subjects in every (or indeed any) sense. The seeing *as* with which they equip their mythic subjects may prove harmful (spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially, etc.) to others or to the subjects themselves. To return to a familiar example from previous chapters, the myth of the American Dream tells a story of self-starting ambition, hard work, material prosperity, and nuclear family life. Innumerable Hollywood films, stage plays, novels, folktales, and anecdotes repeat and re-inscribe the myth into citizens of the United States until it has become invisible and the mythic resonances of such words and phrases as 'work', 'success', 'prosperity', and 'money' reveal a world of competition and reward, of possibility and flourishing, all suspended over an abyss of penury and deprivation. For those fortunate enough to enjoy material prosperity (however it was achieved), the Myth of the

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[232] Graham Ward addresses this dynamic from an epistemological perspective in his *Cultural Change and Religious Practice*. By considering the way that various epistemic standpoints ('a standpoint is a shared knowledge; an understanding of the world that, in being articulated, is recognised and held to be a better account of the world than others available') interact with lived faith in the production and alteration of culture. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 72-74.

American Dream reassures us that the success upon which we live is both ours (and so no debt is owed to others on its account) and virtuous because it was achieved by hard work, one of the Myth's chief moral virtues, bequeathed to the American people by the long shadow of our Puritan (cultural if not necessarily biological) forebears.[233] Subjectivity to the myth interprets the facts of the world underneath our conscious rational judgment, such that wealth and security are seen *as* virtuous and praiseworthy: it is deserved because it is the good in itself and it is to be enjoyed. The shadow side of the Myth, however, reveals in equally automatic and uncritical a fashion, the *deservingness* of the poor. If one is poor, it is because one has not worked hard enough. The poor are seen *as* lazy by definition, because the meaning of wealth and success is pre-determined to be the reward for virtuous labour. Lacking wealth, one must equally be lacking in virtuous labour. Thus the stock and seemingly automatic response by successful Americans confronted by poverty: 'Why don't they just get a job?' That this judgment of lack of the virtue of diligence is internalised by many of the American poor, leading to a compounding cycle of low achievement, depression, and sense of desperation has been extensively studied.[234] What is affirming and even motivating for some Americans is oppressive and destructive for many others. Another (Biblical) example will illustrate the point further.

Our mythic sensibilities are shaped by our upbringing and cultural environment. New Testament scholar Mark Allen Powell conducted an experiment in how Christians from different parts of the world hear scripture. He invited a hundred American theology students at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Ohio (who presumably have a higher Biblical literacy rate than the average American) first to read the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15.11-32) and then to retell it from memory to a partner. Of the hundred students, only six included the

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[233] Historical and cultural observers have noted the persistence of Purtian ideals in American culture since at least Alexis de Toqueville: 'It seems to me, that I can see the entire destiny of America contained in the first Puritan who came ashore'. For an interesting recent study of phenomenon, see Eric Luis Uhlmann and Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, 'The Implicit Legacy of American Protestantism' in *The Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 45/6 (2014), 992-1006.

[234] For an informative compilation of recent research on these lines, see Adamkovic, M. and Martoncik, M., 'A Review of Consequences of Poverty on Economic Decision-Making: A Hypothesized Model of a Cognitive Mechanism' in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 (11 Oct 2017), 1784.

famine in verse fourteen. When asked why the boy was starving, the students answered that it was because he had squandered his fortune. In their estimation, the boy's decision to spend his money on living luxuriously constituted the narrative hook of the story, and his sin was wastefulness. When the same exercise was undertaken with fifty Russian students in St. Petersberg, forty-two mentioned the famine and only seventeen mentioned his wastefulness. The boy's hunger and shameful return to his father were a result of the famine, and his sin was not wastefulness, but rather leaving his father's house. As Powell puts it, 'In a phrase, his sin was *wanting to be self-sufficient*.'[235] No narrative is complete: inevitably there are details which the reader fills with their imagination, out of their experience of the world.[236] The relative affluence and food security of the average American and thoroughgoing capitalist ethos would lead most American readers to hear more 'loudly' the squandering of wealth than the shared suffering of famine. Likewise, the Russian readers, whose city still remembers the 900-day siege and famine during the Second World War, are more apt to hear boy's experience of famine and to understand his sin as the pride of self-sufficiency, rejecting the safety and graciousness of community. The mythic dimension, however, and the more conventionally theological dimension of this question was brought into even clearer relief when the study was conducted among students in Tanzania. Unable to conduct precisely the same exercise, Powell instead read the story aloud to the students and asked them to answer the following question in writing: 'Why does the young man end up starving in the pigpen?'[237] Expecting some distribution of 'Because he squandered his money' and 'because there was a famine', Powell was surprised to find that 'around 80 percent wrote something completely different: "Because

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[235] Mark Allen Powell, *What do they Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 18.

[236] 'The literary text may be conceived of as a dynamic system of gaps...A reader who wishes to actualize the field of reality that is represented in a work, to construct (or rather reconstruct) the fictive world and action it projects, is necessarily compelled to pose and answer, throughout the reading-process, such questions as, What is happening or has happened, and why? What is the connection between this event and the previous one?' Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 50.

[237] Powell, 26.

no one gave him anything to eat".[238] When he pressed the Tanzanian students on why anyone ought to give him anything to eat, the replied that

> [T]his was a very callous perspective. The boy was in a far country. Immigrants often lose their money. They don't know how things work—they might spend all their money when they shouldn't because they don't know about the famines that come. People think they are fools just because they don't know how to live in that country. But the Bible commands us to care for the stranger and alien in our midst. It is a lack of hospitality not to do so. This story, the Tanzanians told [him], is less about personal repentance than it is about society. Specifically, it is about the kingdom of God.[239]

The mythic sensibilities of Biblical hospitality, alloyed with whatever pre-Christian hospitality customs have been baptised by Christian missionary activity, led the Tanzanians to see the story in a yet different way. Thus, even within one mythic tradition (Christianity) there is, of course, great diversity.

What Powell's study reveals, among other things, is that mythic subjectivity is largely a factor of path dependence. The reason the United States remains a predominantly Christian country (at least in terms of the most closely-adjacent religious imaginary) has less to do with the quality of the Christian vision of the world than it does with the fact that children are born into families for which the Christian *mythos* is a major part of the complex of narratives which form the mythic milieu of the growing child. Each of us learns to see the world differently, not as a function of the 'rightness' of the mythic sensibility to which we belong, but because it is given to us. We receive our mythic identity from the relationships which constitute us a human beings, which returns us to the participatory nature of mythic subjectivity and mythopoiesis itself. The mythic sensibility by which we encounter the world is a participation in the shared mythic sensibilities of the family, subculture, and wider culture into which we are born. This participation is analogous to the participation in God's being, which is the condition of all our making, a *receiving from* the family and cultural myths: we live embraced by them, encountering meaning by them. How, then, are we to think

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[238] Powell, 26.

[239] Powell, 27.

participatorily about mythic difference, about divergent 'games' of mythic sensibility and the possibility of changing games?

Is Competition the Only Way?

When thinking about the difference between rival mythic sensibilities, especially regarding actively harmful ones such as the violent religious fundamentalisms that have so shaped recent history, it is tempting to conceive of this difference in agonistic terms: rival myths battling for loyal adherents. Milbank is among the most influential recent theological voices to advocate such 'mythic warfare'. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank states his claim that secular reason 'is only a *mythos*, and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated, if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of 'literary taste" – that Christianity offers a much better story.'[240] The basis of his project is framed in mythic terms, and specifically in terms of the relationship of one myth to another, the critique *of* myth *by* myth. As discussed in the previous chapter, Milbank's diagnosis of secularity as a kind of 'Christian heresy' has much to recommend it. Both genealogically and in the way that it thinks so resolutely in terms of opposition to Christianity, secular reason can fruitfully be understood as existing within the same noumenal space as Christian theology. Milbank accurately introduces the concept of the mythic into the cultural discord he describes. Is 'out-narration', however, the only Christian response to the apparent nihilism of the secular age? Milbank aims to champion an 'ontology of peace',[241] but does he in fact merely replicate the violence he aims to 'out-narrate', negating 'violence at the metanarrative level, only to reinstate it at a "higher" level—the level at which he narrates a story of how his metanarrative "combats" the nihilist metanarrative, namely, by winning a rhetorical "victory" over it'?[242] Must a Christian confrontation with that which opposes it ultimately be construed as a contest? In answer to this question, I would contend that a participatory theology of mythopoiesis must answer 'no'. If all of our making is rooted in

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[240] Milbank, 331.

[241] Milbank, 279.

[242] Gavin Hyman, 'John Milbank and Nihilism: A metaphysical (mis)reading?' in *Literature and Theology* 14/4 (2000), 440. See also, Graham Ward, 'John Milbank's Divina Commedia' in *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992): 'Finally, is not this present essay also an act of violence?', 318.

our participation in the Triune life of God, then the fundamental reality cannot be agonistic, however divided and divisive the politics of belief and mythic sensibility are in history. A Christian account of mythopoiesis must give priority to this ontological peace in the negotiation of difference no less than in its account of fundamental ontology. Because of the considerable influence Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* continues to have in Anglophone metaphysics and theology of culture, it is worth examining his approach in detail to understand how his version of post-liberalism can contribute to a participatory theology of mythopoiesis and how it may fall short. We can begin by parsing Milbank's claim so as better to understand both what he is attempting to establish and how it does or does not live up to the goal he has set for himself and to the standards of the Christian *mythos* he champions.

Notably, at no point in *Theology and Social Theory* does Milbank specifically lay out what he means by *mythos*.[243] A close examination of how he uses the word, and how it is distinct from his use of the word 'myth' will reveal what he intends by *mythos* and the potential inadequacy of his model for understanding change in mythic sensibility. In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank uses the word *mythos* in seven distinct ways: the Biblical/Christian *mythos*, the Antique/Pagan *mythos*, the Nietzschean/Nihilist *mythos*, a *mythos* of sovereignty/law, a religion as *mythos*, Hegel's historicism as *mythos*, and a few unspecified references to *mythos* in general, which seem to be employed in contrast to *logos*.

The generalised references to '*mythos*' refer to something that exists at the cultural level, conditioning and shaping the way that members of that culture think and can think. Distinguishing *mythos* from *logos* appears in Milbank's discussion of the various theological responses to the postmodern critique of ontology, which is in a sense a response to the identification of Greek (that is, non-Biblical) tools for thinking about God that are entwined in traditional modes of theological discourse. He writes, 'To refuse these questions [of God and Being] altogether suggests – for us to whom the Greek questioning of Being has happened irrevocably – either an impossible schizophrenia of *logos* and *mythos*, or else a faith-

[243] Though he does discuss *mythos* further elsewhere, as in *Being Reconciled* (London: Routledge, 2003), 168f., it is not thematised in a way beyond the 'non-identical repetition of the same yet always different story.', 170.

content reduced to a set of fideistic assertions beyond all logical discussion or development [...]'[244] *Mythos* in this sense is that which is not *logos*, that which is not the substance of classical philosophical reflection. This leaves both the affective, narrative, symbolic content of experience and personal reflection, as well as the cultural conditions in which such thinking and reflection take place. In some sense, this *mythos* is the story that a culture tells about the way things are. Such a *mythos* must, in Milbank's estimation, remain in contact with *logos* in order to remain intelligible and reliable as an account of things. Later, Milbank discusses *mythos* as a general category in terms of this cultural primacy. That is, in reasoned reflection on the world, 'one begins by embracing a *mythos*, not a proposition.' This must be the case if *mythos* accounts in part for the conditions under which such reflection is conducted. We are born into a cultural world of language, image, and story that shapes our seeing from birth, long before we consciously exercise philosophical rationality. In these cases, *mythos* appears to categorise a particular dynamic in cultural knowledge. *Mythos* also seems to refer to a specific instantiation or particular mode of such knowing. It is not at all clear at this stage, however, that such instantiations are necessarily at odds or mutually exclusive. Introducing a specifically religious flavour to *mythos*, Milbank begins to demonstrate how this is the case.

Given the historical relation of 'myth' to what today in the West we call 'religion', it is not surprising that at several points, *mythos* and 'religion' are identified with one another. It is telling, therefore, to note that in the three instances Milbank refers to *mythos* in terms of religion, it is always in discussing a rejected or criticised mode of thought. The first comes in relation to the Enlightenment critique of European Christianity's claim to truth, as post-Enlightenment theorists such as Joseph de Maistre observe that 'any old *mythos* of power will do' and that 'in practice what holds societies together is not a formal ordering of the arbitrary, but rather the *content* of the arbitrary, or devotion to a particular *mythos*.'[245] He goes on to note that on the post-Enlightenment account of 'naked power theory [...] *mythos* or religion is

[244] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 296-7.
[245] Milbank, 55.

indispensable, because it is the all-essential *content* of the arbitrary.'[246] In this cynical appropriation and manipulation of the content of religious devotion, Milbank identifies one of the germination points of the secular nihilism that emerges much later in history. By first allowing for *mythos* and religion to be identified, one introduces the possibility of 'escaping' *mythos*. Milbank's over-arching assertion, that secular nihilistic ontology represents a *mythos*, is in part a corrective to this innovation: if secular modernity is also a *mythos*, then there is no escaping *mythos* as such. Identification of religion and *mythos* occurs again in Milbank's discussion of Durkheimian sociology.[247] The concern in this context is to reject the social-scientific impulse to assign *mythos* to another feature of human social dynamics. Such a suspicion of religion (and so also of the validity of the category of *mythos* on social-scientific terms) has the form of '"isn't religion really x?" An x which is more basic, though concealed. Isn't it really a function of social control, really a means of discipline for production, really an aspect of the psyche's suppression of the unacceptable?'[248] What is implied by these critical readings of those who identify religion and *mythos* is, of course, that *mythos* entails more than whatever is now meant by 'religion', though it is intimately bound up with it. One of the troubles the identification of 'religion' and *mythos* faces is the irreducible particularity of the individual *mythos* itself. This particularity and the ways that particular *mythoi* 'cover the same ground' as it were, suggests how they can be construed as both mutually incompatible and necessarily at odds.

In one of his few references to the Bible in *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank introduces the idea of *mythos* by contrasting the Biblical *mythos* to the Nietzschean/nihilist *mythos*, whatever a *mythos* shall turn out to be.[249] At this point in the text, the Biblical *mythos* is linked with 'the Augustinian metanarrative and an Augustinian ontology of peace' which are alone fully rational, such that 'Apologetically one can suggest that in some profound sense to elect

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[246] Milbank, 56.
[247] Milbank, 71 and 261.
[248] Milbank, 260.
[249] Milbank, xvii.

unreason [Nietzschean nihilism] is irrational [...]'.[250] Rhetorically, then, *mythos* is first and foremost to be express univocally what is represented by the Biblical tradition and what is represented by the secular reason which Milbank takes to task. This risks a circularity that would be both definitionally unhelpful and in keeping with the ungroundedness of *mythoi* to which Milbank repeatedly appeals in the text. The identification of the life of Christ with *mythos* comes in Milbank's excursus on the secular roots of sociology. Against a reading of Augustine's two cities (that of God and that of the World), which reduces them according to the assumptions of sociology simply to 'the initiated and the uninitiated', he claims that

> in the life of Christ a new *mythos* is established which replaced and resituated the *mythos* of antiquity [...] Christ is the founder of a new city, which, uniquely, does not refer to a story of primal murder, primal sacrifice and expulsion (like the story of Romulus and Remus), but traces its descent from a sacrificial victim who had no material issue.[251]

Already, we can begin to discern how Milbank's use of *mythos* links theology and politics into one conceptual sphere. Indeed, throughout the remainder of the text, the Christian *mythos*, by which is meant both the life of Christ and the tradition which emerges from that life, is always invoked in counterpoint either to the 'antique *mythos*' which shaped the outlook of Plato and Aristotle or to the Nietzschean/nihilist *mythos* which is held to lurk behind the 'non-ontology' of difference and infinite suspension of secular reason. Indeed, in this dual opposition, we can discern more of what is meant by both of these non-Christian *mythoi*.[252]

Of the seven ways of using the word *mythos* here identified in *Theology and Social Theory*, the most frequently encountered is in reference to the 'pagan' or 'antique *mythos*' which conditioned the ways of knowing and understanding put into operation both by luminary thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as by the more general antique public. The 'antique *mythos*' discussed by Milbank is heroic, in the sense that it raises up the possessor of pagan virtue, or as it comes into Christian Europe, Machiavellian *virtù*, or social potency, the aim of which 'is to "use" and surmount, for a time,' *fortuna*, 'an antique and impersonal compound of

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[250] Milbank, xvii.

[251] Milbank, 72.

[252] C.f., Milbank, 331-3, 380, 383, 391.

chaos and fatality.'[253] *Mythos* in this sense describes the aim of human being, the conditions under which human action is understood to take place, and which things are to be valued and how. In Milbank's estimation, under the 'antique *mythos*', virtue becomes synonymous with the exercise of power, and it is finally unable 'to imagine a civic or an ontological peace that was more than suspended warfare.'[254] Milbank's genealogy of secular reason's nihilistic substructure begins in a sense with Machiavelli's 'restoration' of this antique *mythos* to Christian Europe, and it culminates with Nietzsche's full-throated advocacy of the antique vision against the *mythos* of Christian charity.[255] Thus the links between the pagan *mythos* of antiquity (which includes not only the myths of the Olympian gods, but also the religio-civic institutions of sacrifice and patronage) and the echoes of a warrior aristocracy begin to grow clearer. Closely allied to Milbank's use of the 'antique *mythos*' is the idea of a civic constitution or the imagined force of sovereignty, constituting a 'civil *mythos*' or a '*mythos* of sovereign power'.[256] This narrative construction of how power is held and by whom was as part of the antique *mythos* as the stories of Gods and heroes, even as it is today.[257] All aspects of this complex come under critique in antiquity by Christianity as it re-narrates the world in a new *mythos* of reconciliation and ontological peace under God. In modernity, Nietzsche appeals aesthetically and narratively to the virtues of the antique *mythos* in order to critique (aesthetically and narratively) what he takes to be the weaknesses and internal contradictions of the Christian *mythos*. This process of aesthetic/narrative critique is not itself finally rejected by Milbank, but rather embraced as the only means of combatting the *mythos* of secular reason.

With the Christian tradition constructed in Milbank's argument as a *mythos* in contradistinction to the *mythos* of secular modernity, we can turn to that use of the word in *Theology and Social Theory*, which as noted above, is constructed circularly as a *mythos* largely

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[253] Milbank, 24.

[254] Milbank, 332.

[255] Milbank, 262.

[256] Milbank, 27.

[257] We need only think of how the Founding Fathers continue to be invoked in American politics.

in contradistinction to the Christian tradition. Having passed through the genealogy from Machiavelli through Nietzsche and into 'the major Nietzscheans'[258] a number of words have accreted to the *mythos* Milbank seeks to unseat by the more persuasive narration of Christianity. Among them are: secular, modern, nihilist, violent, and differential. That last refers to the assumption of the irreconcilability of difference in a fundamental and eternal play of conflict, 'the conclusion that the ultimate, over-arching game is a play of force, fate and chance.'[259] Milbank conceives of the *mythos* of secular reason in terms of a narrative that speaks of difference as the basic condition for ethics, for what is meant by a human subject, and for what is to be valued (namely, the freedom to exercise power).[260] This is not unlike the mythic sensibility with which this thesis is concerned. The unfoundedness of Milbank's *mythos*, however, compromises the attractiveness of both his scheme and his attempt to out-narrate the nihilist *mythos* he opposes.

In Chapter 10, which, with Chapter 11, forms the heart of Milbank's argument, having been prepared by an omnivorous genealogy of secular reason, Milbank lays out the dynamics of the nihilist *mythos* he is both articulating and attempting to out-narrate. It is interesting to note that in the first two instances of the word in Chapter 10, the nihilist/differential ontology of secular reason is first called 'but one more *mythos*' and then 'no more than a *mythos*.'[261] To this point, Milbank has not given in to the temptation to use *mythos* in the pejorative sense he often gives to 'myth', as will be discussed below. It is not surprising, then, that this move is quickly followed by a further reduction in the epistemological esteem with which he holds the nihilistic 'ontology of violence', as he refers to it as 'only a mythology'.[262] That he does so now is surely a rhetorical move to position the secular ontology in a less favourable light, but it also weakens his overall approach: if secular reason is 'no more than a *mythos*', then the Christian tradition is also 'no more than a *mythos*', and indeed 'only a

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[258] 'Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida', Milbank, 278.
[259] Milbank, 279.
[260] Milbank, 279.
[261] Milbank, 278-9.
[262] Milbank, 279.

mythology'. This relativity is ultimately upheld by Milbank as a fact of contemporary reasoning,[263] and the only grounds that he allows can serve to justify holding to one *mythos* and not to another is the aforementioned 'literary taste' or aesthetic judgment. However, Milbank's pejorative uses of '*mythos*' and 'mythology' ultimately weaken the purchase of his argument that not only is the Christian *mythos* the only story able to out-narrate nihilism, but also that the Christian *mythos* should command the faith of many. This is because Milbank does a minimal job of expounding what he means by 'literary taste' beyond the implication that a narrative offering a vision of ontological peace is naturally to be preferred to one promising violence and eternal difference, what he calls 'an entirely malign mythology'.[264] In a way, the pejorative sense he gives to '*mythos*' in these final chapters lays bare something of the tragic flaw of the whole project. In spite of insisting that only a *mythos* can cast out another *mythos* and that one cannot effectively argue against a *mythos*, the closest Milbank comes to an articulation of the aesthetic terms by which one *mythos* can out-narrate another is on the basis of internal coherence.

This is not to say that Milbank demonstrates a wholesale coherence theory of truth. That would be to abandon 'the postmodern realization that discourses of truth are so many incommensurable language games'.[265] However, in discussing the Christian out-narration of the 'antique *mythos*', Milbank writes:

> I will argue that one can retrospectively narrate Plato's and Aristotle's writings as a groping towards the linking of universal with particular, as also the individual with the whole, the family with the city, contemplation with practice – all achieved more satisfactorily by Christianity. This 'more satisfactorily' is objective in the sense that I identify a series of antinomies in Plato and Aristotle's accounts of virtue, the city and the individual soul, which they can never satisfactorily resolve within the terms of their inherited *mythos*, but which *are* resolved within the terms of the Christian *mythos*.[266]

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[263] In multiple locations, Milbank refers to 'the postmodern insight' that all narratives are equally unfounded and thus ontologically and epistemologically equivalent.

[264] Milbank, 279.

[265] Milbank, 278-9.

[266] Milbank, 331.

Milbank goes on to say that the greater internal consistency of the Christian *mythos* 'does not imply [...] that simply by antiquity's own criteria it should abandon its own *mythos* and embrace Christianity [...] it is, for me*, never* sufficiently clear that the inherited criteria or rationality within a particular tradition will dictate the embracing of a new tradition'.[267] However, such internal consistency seems to be the primary criterion, along with the promised better outcomes should the Christian *mythos* be adopted, by which it can be said 'that Christianity offers a much better story.'[268] It is true that coherence is a good *guide* to truth, just as it has traditionally been held to be an aspect of beauty.[269] However, coherence and the promise of ontological peace do not constitute an aesthetic theory of the kind that Milbank argues is the only means by which one *mythos* is to be preferred over another. And in this, we can at last discern the chief shortcoming of his theory of mythic interaction. Milbank argues that when evaluating truth and encountering meaning, 'one begins by embracing a *mythos*, not a proposition.'[270] That is, one is not first convinced of the rightness of a *mythos* and then one embraces it; rather it is only in the embrace that the truth of a mythos is encountered. This is certainly true as far as it goes. However, this human voluntarism and the relationship between *mythoi,* defined in terms of 'out-narration' and equating the Christian *mythos* at the epistemological level with the nihilist *mythos* Milbank wishes to displace, effaces an aspect of the mythic which has been integral to the participatory mythic account given in this thesis and which is fundamental to Christianity's own account of the relationship of its *mythos* to the believer: namely the way in which the *mythos* embraces *you*.

By beginning with a presumption that a mythic sensibility is first of all chosen or embraced, Milbank sets the stage for a sense of *agon* lying at the heart of inter-mythic relations. Out-narration becomes the only mode of challenging a dangerous *mythos* because the work (in this case) of the theologian is finally one of persuasion. In doing so, he concedes too much to the very ontology of violence he seeks to out-narrate. The desire for mastery, even

[267] Milbank, 331.
[268] Milbank, 331.
[269] ST I.39.8.
[270] Milbank, 340.

if it is by a discourse of non-mastery,[271] remains a rhetoric of conquest and even violence. Even if the criteria of persuasion are not ultimately discursive, but rather aesthetic, it lies in the remit of the theologian to convince the other that their story is wrong and so to come over to the 'right' side. This is certainly the case, but only in part. Apologetics is a vital labour for the Church. However, a failure to give priority to the work of the Holy Spirit renders this mythic-cultural agonistics less than fully Christian. If all human cultural production (theology included) is constituted by a greater or lesser degree of participation in the creative operations of the Trinity, then priority must be given to that action, logically and temporally preceding the derived, analogous action of human beings.

In the phenomenology of mythic sensibility discussed above, we observed how for the mythic subject, the myth is experienced as *given*. The effect is not so much one of selecting a myth to which to dedicate oneself, but rather of being grasped by a story which reveals the world as meaningful. This is as true of 'fictional' mythopoiesis as it is of secular and religious mythologies. We speak of being 'captivated' by a story, 'drawn in' and 'enchanted'. This is not so very far away from the opening of the disciples' eyes on the road to Emmaus or Paul's experience of conversion on the road to Damascus. These cases, too, are instructive for their demonstration of the way that Christian conversion happens *in mediās res*, transforming the meaning of the actions one is already taking: geographical travel becomes also spiritual growth, hostility is transformed into dependence, hospitality is revealed as theophany. In the context of a theology of participation, in which our actions, our being, our making are all participation in the Act, Being, and Creation that are God and are God's, then even our worst inclinations can be drawn back into God's as redemption rather than as conquest. If all our making is a making towards God, oriented by our created nature to praise God and drawn by the beauty that *is* God, then Milbank is right that the negotiation of mythic difference is a matter of *taste*, but this is less a matter of overcoming the foe than it is of formation in

[271] Milbank, 6.

discerning the beautiful, such that the ongoing 'seduction' of creation by God can be discerned: God's drawing all things to God's self in and through their particularity.

II. Taste and See

> *...the beauty Christ discloses remains invisible to anyone who finds beauty in a violent stilling of violence...*[272]
>
> — David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*

How we think about taste has a great deal to say about how we think about difference. Discerning the beautiful here and not there constitutes a position on the value, or at the very least the attraction, of one object over another. If difference in taste is a problem to be argued discursively, then there can be only one 'correct' taste: the taste of the victor. If different judgments of the beautiful are understood as diverse enactments of the natural desire for God, then they can be thought constructively and there remains room for the action of God in seducing our perceptions. In what follows, I argue that while Milbank is correct in his assertion that the judgment between *mythoi* is a matter of taste, that taste must be understood in the context of God's judgment of the beautiful and of God's call to us out of nothingness.

The Psalmist writes 'O taste and see that the LORD is good',[273] and this wonderful piece of synaesthesia captures a vital aspect of the mythic sensibility. Rooted in the physicality of the world and the sensuality of the body, the Psalmist invites the hearer to experience God in the world and to experience the world as revelatory of God. While it is well known that taste and smell are closely bound together, here it is brought into close conjunction with sight, collapsing the space between the distant object which is caught by the eyes and the tongue in a most intimate kind of touch. Of the classical five senses, only hearing is missing here from the encounter with God's goodness to which we as listeners are invited. As will be discussed further below, however, there is a sense in which all of our responses are responses to a call that is heard. In this way, hearing is the prerequisite of our ability to speak of not only our sensory encounter, but of anything at all. What is important at this stage, however, is the way in which

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[272] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 147-148.
[273] Psalm 34.8.

the sense of taste becomes for the Psalmist the locus of the encounter with God, with all of the intimacy, invitation, and transformation which this implies.

The process by which the sense of taste (as opposed to the sense of smell, touch, sight, etc.) became metonymic for the more general discernment of beauty is not clear. However, further associative and metaphorical usages in English suggest the degree to which taste becomes the sense *par excellence* in terms of judgement. As noted above, the union of senses that occurs in taste might be one reason: all of our senses meet in the invitation to 'taste and see'. Perhaps also it is a matter of the fact that unlike the other senses, in order for the sense of taste to operate, that which is sensed must *enter* the body. With the exception of the tentative lick of an unknown food or an ice cream, the most 'normal' experience of taste involves bringing the object of taste into the body to be experienced. Further, the response of the sensorium to the object tasted is often instantaneous and further involves the whole body. When the taste is bad, the body reacts in revulsion to eject the object from the body, and the gut and mind are wracked with discomfort and even disgust.[274] When the flavour is pleasant, the mouth waters and the mind reels in enjoyment, perhaps causing the eyes to widen or the shoulders and arms express appreciative gestures toward the cook or one's companions. Complex flavours are pondered, leading the eyes to wander as we search for the best words to describe the experience and to the nose wrinkling to get a better olfactory 'grip' on the taste, so as to appreciate its details. Perhaps because food (that which is most often the subject of the sense of taste) in fact *becomes* the body, taste is suitably metonymic to stand for the whole-person work of discerning the beautiful that is known as taste. Because the mythic sensibility involves not only the way that we see the world, but how we act in it (think of the Bamiyan Buddhas), this embodied, whole-person approach to taste is important in how it informs the relationship between different or perhaps rival *mythoi*. Our taste in *mythoi* is also a discernment of beauty.

'The beautiful', however, is most commonly thought as a *visual* category: Aquinas' famous definition of beauty, 'that is called beautiful which pleases when seen' assumes a visual

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[274] Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

perception of the object.[275] It is remarkable that notions of taste as they begin to appear in eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics are likewise primarily concerned with sight: *taste* becomes the signal metaphor for the judgment of beauty in what is *seen*. The development of the idea of taste as a matter of contemplation centres on the metaphor of sight: the gaze, internal or external, becomes the means by which aesthetic beauty is judged. However, Milbank's use of 'taste' to describe the discernment of *mythos* from *mythos* with regard to their qualities strains the formulations of many of the eighteenth-century writers, whose philosophies of taste and aesthetics continue influence our understanding of the term, concerned as they are to emphasise the considered nature of taste and more especially, the development of *good* taste. To a great extent, the idea of taste remains intimately bound up with issues of class and of who is allowed to speak and to discern 'good' taste from 'bad'. This dynamic is tellingly laid bare in the twentieth century by Pierre Bourdieu, who argues that taste is *all* a matter of class, one's social standing determined by and determining one's *habitus*.[276] Milbank's concern to emphasise the ungrounded nature of the determination operating in the judgment of *mythoi* is at once aesthetic and not concerned with the same kind of beauty which concerned the philosophers of the 'century of taste'.[277] The questions at hand for Hutcheson, Kant, Hume, and the rest are 'Is this beautiful' and 'How do we know?' Answering these questions requires them to inquire into the nature of beauty, the causes of different evaluations between individuals, and ultimately that status of the 'art object' as a cultural production. It is easy, then, to discern the link from questions of taste to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century preoccupations with 'Is it art?' and the development of philosophical aesthetics as adjunct or identical to 'philosophy of art'.

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[275] '*pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent*', ST I.5.4.ad1.

[276] 'The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile— in a word, natural— enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satis fi ed with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences.' Pierre Bordieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010). See also Pierre Bordieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

[277] George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

The question of taste which Milbank brings to our consideration is less one of rightly discerning 'the beautiful' as a contemplative, aesthetic experience, but it is rather to determine how we are to speak of the power exerted by the beautiful upon us. The decision, as Milbank presents it, is one of a judgment between secular nihilist violence and Christian eschatological peace, on the basis of their aesthetic qualities: which do we deem more lovely, more worthy of devotion and investment? This insistence on an aesthetic voluntarism, however, reduces an appreciation of the way that the mythos itself *acts* upon the one meant to be judging, calling out, shaping us pre-critically, as the liquor of the flower love-in-idleness pre-conditions Titania to perceive the ass-headed Bottom as both wise and beautiful.[278] Simply declaiming the virtues of one *mythos* in the face of another does not perform the aesthetic 'apologetic' Milbank is after; the matter of 'taste' he perceives is one rooted not in a Kantian disinterested judgment of the relative aesthetic merits of one *mythos* over another such that an 'out-narration' is possible. Insistence in the face of the besottedness of the lover is not simply futile: it can result in retrenchment and incredulity. The Kantian turn to the subject signalled the rise of 'aesthetic experience' as the category through which we are to think beauty.[279] Characteristically, Kant's insistence on the subject's construction of an aesthetic judgment precludes a consideration of the 'graspedness' of the experience of beauty and the way that aesthetic judgment is folded into all kinds of experience. The development of the strictly 'rational' approach to aesthetic judgment prevents us from appreciating the way that the 'exercise of taste' is a process always already underway and which conditions our moral and practical judgment of objects, situations, and people. And far from being a function of cognitive assessment, the exercise of taste and the experience of beauty is a matter of the whole body. As Frank Brown puts it, 'What we normally regard as purely visual or auditory "feel" is registered integrally, by body

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[278] Midsummer Night's Dream 3.1

[279] Though Kant's definition of the beautiful mirrors that of Aquinas ('The *beautiful* is that which pleases universally without a concept'), his analysis dwells not on the characteristics of the object which elicit such pleasure, but rather on the judgment of the subject, introducing the idea of 'disinterested' consideration. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of The Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §9/219, 104.

and mind together. A jagged, "nervous" line looks nervous to me and not just to my eyes.'[280] Thus the complex network of senses and bodily judgments that allow us to balance physically and emotionally are brought into play by the experience of beauty or by its absence. The Psalmist points to this unity of experience in his appeal to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. The power of a beloved flavour to evoke hunger and to elicit the taster to seek more need not be rehearsed. It is only in our bodies that we experience aesthesis, and with our bodies we respond, and it is this economy of call and response to which consideration of the judgment of taste between *mythoi* must tend. In the context of the Augustinian desire for God which roots and drives our making, this call and response is inextricably bound up in the originary call and response of God's love, which in loving calls forth its beloved, even from non-existence. This eternal relatedness finds a rich and canonical expression in the Song of Songs, which offers an aperture for glimpsing something of the relationship between God, creation, and beauty.

Call and Response

The Song of Songs is the *locus classicus* for theological consideration of love and desire. At once alluring for its lack of mention of God, and at risk of appearing scandalous and out of place or even un-canonical, the Song represents a kind of playful intrusion into the canon, a provocation and a invitation to reconsider what 'counts' as theological. The Woman begins the Song of Songs with her plea, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant.'[281] Again, senses blend as the poet seeks to give voice to the experience of love, the specific experience of God's call. Touch and taste and smell bleed together in the desire of the lover for the beloved. As Roland Murphy observes, 'The opening line certainly plunges *in medias res*.'[282] The lover has already been grasped by the beloved, and the yearning she expresses now is a yearning for a return to her lover, for the coming together of skin and lips and ultimately for the fusing of horizons effected by sexual

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[280] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 93.

[281] Song of Songs 1.2 (NRSV).

[282] Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 127.

love at its very best. Desire in this way is not simply union but *re*union, the return of and return to the beloved. The lovers exist in an economy of love that in a sense pre-dates them. How many lovers have said, upon meeting their beloved for the first time, 'You are the one I have been waiting for. I've missed you, even as I've only just met you!'? This sense of return is part and parcel of the dynamics of love and desire, even as it is an integral part of the mythic sensibility. The mythic subject experiences the mythic, miraculous revelation of truth that as given, as pre-existing her encounter. The mythic encounter with truth in the miraculous revelation shares in the call-response structure of the lovers' encounter, of the nature of the beautiful, and of the phenomenology of prayer.

From ancient times, there has been an association between the beautiful and a sense of being called. As Jean-Louis Chrétien traces in *The Call and the Response*, for the Greeks, 'The origin of the word "beautiful," *kalon*, does not constitute an etymology among others, but is the very origin of language. The word *kalon* is the name of naming: it names that which, in speech, calls. [...] Beautiful, *kalon*, is what comes from a call, *kalein*, which continues to call through it and in it.'[283] Chrétien points out that French shares with Greek (and to this we may add English) a synonymy between 'call' in the sense of a vocalised bid for attention ('hey you!') and 'call' in the sense of how a thing is known ('what is this called?').[284] It is thus, accepting the Greek etymology of *kalon* ('beautiful') from *kalein* ('to call'), that he can say that '*kalon* is the name of naming'.[285] Quoting Heidegger, Chrétien notes '"Naming is not to distribute quantifiers, to use words, but to call into the world" [...] To name things is thus to call them—to tell them to come forth. "When they are named, the things that are named are called to their being as things."'[286] Beauty is that which calls us. In mythic terms, the mythic sensibility which interprets the world to the mythic subject is also a means by which the subject

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[283] Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 7.

[284] Chrétien, 7.

[285] Later, Chrétien notes, '...the exact or inexact character of this etymology in the eyes of philology loses all importance. The verbal derivation only sends us back to an eidetic correlation, a foundational relationship that finds expression in the derivation without actually depending on it.' (8). There is a wisdom in the Greeks' etymology even if it is not historically-founded.

[286] Chrétien, 8.

understands himself. It exerts a call on the subject, calling him who he is and how he is. Allowing oneself to be caught up in such a call and to respond in terms of how one acts in the world and how one tells the story of one's life (re-counting the myth) is an aesthetic movement, accepting the call, moving towards that which calls, that which is beautiful. The beautiful is that which names us, which calls us what and who we are.

This sense of call is what what evades Milbank's account of mythic discourse in *Theology and Social Theory*, intent as it is on a polemical attack on the nihilist other. In the rhetoric of violence to which Milbank succumbs, the only way of conceiving interaction between *mythoi* or conversion from one *mythos* to another is through rhetorical insistence and the dismantling of the logics and rhetoric of the opposing *mythoi*. When making an appeal to 'taste', Milbank is arguing that there is no other basis upon which to make a judgement between *mythoi* than on the basis of assessing the coherence of the *mythos*' account and judging their relative beauty. Far from being anti-foundationalist, then, the rhetoric of *Theology and Social Theory* advocates a sense of aesthetic taste firmly grounded in the notion of coherence, something which can be dispassionately judged by reasoned argument. Chrétien's phenomenological approach, however, demonstrates how the aesthetic encounter is one that shapes the response that can be made to it, even before critical judgment is engaged. Our speech, our synthesis and judgment on sense data and experience, always participates in a pre-existent dynamic of call and response. According to Chrétien, to speak of that which is beautiful, or to speak through it in the sense of the mythic sensibility which shapes our seeing and expression, is to respond to that which has called us, which is identical with the beautiful as we understand it:

> To think beauty from the starting point of the call implies that the address sent to us by beauty is not a contingent feature, added over and above its essence, but actually defines it as such. The in-itself of beauty is to be for-the-other, aimed at gathering the other back to itself. What is beautiful calls out by manifesting itself and manifests itself by calling out. To draw us to itself as such, to put in motion towards it, to move us, to come and find us where we are so that we will seek it—such is beauty's call and such is our vocation.[287]

[287] Chrétien, 9.

Taste is a matter, at least in part, of what one perceives as beautiful, of what to which one is drawn. The beautiful in this sense is nothing more or less than that which calls us. In such a *mythos* as that represented by secular nihilism as Milbank describes it, then, or by the iconoclastic violence of the Taliban's destruction of the statues at Bamiyan, there is a kind of aesthetic call to which the proponents and even poets of the *mythos* respond. To call it 'beauty' in any conventional sense would of course be outrageous. But the perception of the beautiful is what is at stake in the discernment between *mythoi*. We are drawn to a *mythos* because we perceive it as beautiful or because we perceive the world to be beautiful as it is revealed as meaningful *through* its mythic sensibility. The beauty of clean lines and knowable geography and geometry proffered by the *mythos* of modern secularising governance has shaped the world as we know it.[288] The revelatory, miraculous interruption of the *true* encountered in the mythic sensibility is perceived in terms of beauty: it calls and it attracts. Moving towards that beauty, by way of the adoption of the *mythos* as one's own, is simultaneously the putting on of something new and the return to something experienced as already familiar. The *mythos* acts upon us, and together we weave ourselves into its sensibility.

This sense of return and of response to a call is revisited toward the end of the Song of Songs in its most famous passage, reprised in the Revelation to John:

> Under the apple tree I aroused you—
> there, where your mother labored with you,
> there where, laboring, she bore you.
>
> Set me as a seal over your heart,
> as a seal upon your arm,
>
> for love is as strong as death,
> passionate love unrelenting as the grave.
>
> Its darts are darts of fire—divine flame!
>
> Rushing waters cannot quench love;
> rivers can't wash it away.[289]

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[288] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[289] Song of Songs 8.5b-7a (CEV).

The Woman addresses her beloved in terms of arousal and commitment, of sexual union and fertility, of a love strong enough to defeat death and rushing waters (NRSV 'many waters') simply by virtue of its *being*. By evoking the place of her beloved's birth, the Woman ties their love into the fabric of the beloved's very existence: this love that we share is constitutive of your birth, your life, your generativity. In mythological terms, she weaves a myth of origin around the beloved and weaves herself into it: their stories merge and grow into something mighty and powerful enough not to be washed away even by the tides and rushing rivers. Aren Wilson-Wright argues convincingly that verses 6b-7a contain echoes of, or are a peculiarly Hebrew response to, the combat myths shared by the semitic cultures of the Levant and Babylon. He writes, 'Scholars have often noted YHWH's apparent absence from the Song of Songs. At best, he appears under the name Yah in the difficult and morphologically frozen term שלהבתיה ['the flame of Yah', translated above 'divine flame'] in Song 8:6. In this article, I go beyond שלהבתיה to suggest that love plays the role of YHWH in the Song.'[290] The milieux within which the Hebrews thought and wrote and sang about God was awash with the mythological imagery of surrounding nations and cultures (as discussed above in Chapter Two). In this case, the writer of the Song responds in echoes to a combat myth, versions of which appear in the Hebrew Bible, in the Caananite *Baal Cycle* and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. In the Caananite version, Baal rebukes the sea (Yamm) and is not defeated by it and proves himself stronger than Môt (death).[291] These phrases and epithets ('rebuke sea' and 'strong like Death') are common across the cultures with whom the Hebrews would have had cultural intercourse. Their appearance in the Song of Songs is remarkable in at least two ways.

First, and most notably, is that in the Song's mythopoiesis, the name of the god is replaced by 'love'. It would be hermeneutically impertinent to make too close an association in this instance between the role of the god or of God here being 'played' by love as suggested by

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290 Aren Wilson-Wright, 'Love Conquers All: Song of Songs 8:6b-7a as a Reflex of the Northwest Semitic Combat Myth' in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134/2 (2015), 333.
291 Wilson-Wright, 335.

Wilson-Wright and the later Johannine equation of God *with* love.[292] If, however, his reading is correct, then it opens the door for theological reflection on the Song of Songs in a more participatory vein than is normally suggested. Standard readings of the Song interpret it allegorically in terms of the relationship God to God's people: the Man stands in for God whose love is sought and enjoyed by the people of Israel (in Jewish readings) or the Church (in Christian readings).[293] Wilson-Wright's contention that God is already located in the text in or as love itself allows us to read the love between Woman and Man, or simply between any lover and beloved, as a participation in God's love: the love shared by the lovers is in fact simply an aspect of God's own self. Our desire, then, is always already inscribed in God's desire, not in terms of its object, but in terms of its possibility and its form. It is possible, even guaranteed, for human beings to desire wrongly, whether in terms of what we love (being right, violence, ourselves at the expense and to the detriment of others) or in terms of how that love is expressed (possessiveness, jealousy). However, being drawn to another, the motion of desire, can be understood as a matter of God's love having first been expressed in such a way as to create another to be the object of that love. The creativity of our response in mythopoiesis is thus a double-participation: the movement of desire that prompts the making of mythic narrative is a participation in the movement of desire that caused our being, and the making itself participates in the generativity of God's love from the beginning.

Second, in characteristic fashion, the Hebrew appropriation of shared mythology accomplishes a kind of demythologisation or re-mythologisation by stripping the narrative of its violence. Like the Genesis 1 appropriation of the Babylonian creation narrative, which removed the theomachy and replaced it with the primacy and unity of YHWH, this passage

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[292] Though the poetics and imagery of the Old Testament inform the mythic sensibility of John's Gospel, the Johannine formula 'God is love' is novel. For a discussion of the nuances of this central Christian affirmation, see Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[293] 'Jews during the Greco-Roman period came to regard Song of Songs as an archetypal and idealized portrait —as a divine love song—rather than a work depicting human attraction, longing, and love. The successors of this Second Temple period approach to Song of Songs—rabbinic Judaism and Christianity—continued this trajectory, interpreting the work as a statement of divine love between God and Israel or Jesus and his followers, respectively. For rabbinic Judaism, Israel is God's companion (*ra'yah*), and God is Israel's beloved (*dod*), appellations drawn from Song of Songs...', Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

of the Song of Songs echoes that creation narrative and its related myths of divine combat, but asserts God as ontologically superior to the forces that would assert themselves violently. Môt (death) and Yamm (the sea) were gods before the assertion of monotheism in Israel. Here, as in Genesis, they are reduced to creatures, with all of the infinite ontological difference that entails. As a piece of mythopoiesis (or re-mythopoiesis), this passage of the Song not only reveals the participatory character of the creatures' relationship to divine love, but also the futility of creaturely violence to still, inhibit, or finally overcome that love. The love that is strong as death and which cannot be quenched by rushing waters *need not fight them*. The battle is already won without violence. The strength of this love is such that the violence brought against it simply dissipates itself in the attempt. Or, better, the unrelentingness of the grave and the turbulent power of the waters are assumed by the love itself, and they become an aspect of it: unrelenting and unconcerned with the finality of death, free-flowing and embodying of power as the rushing river. There is a sense in which the love (which here we read as God's own self) has pre-figured the power of the grave and the all-consuming rush of the waters. Their coming is a return, a kind of praise of the source of all things which can welcome them as creator rather than fear them as an enemy. Thus even that which would be violent is here seen to praise (albeit in a way limited by its own violence) and to be drawn to God in the dynamics of love and desire which have their origin in God's original act of creation.

For human beings, love and desire are inextricably intertwined, and the sense of beauty as call, that which draws us to itself, further underlines this complex. When we speak of God, we speak of Unity and Simplicity: God lacks nothing and is Good/Goodness, True/Truth, Beautiful/Beauty. How, then, can we speak of human desire in participation with God, who lacks nothing? If human love is irretrievably bound up with desire, with lack, is this simply a feature of the imperfection with which we participate in God's perfect love? Or is there a way that God can be said to desire without lacking, such that our making-towards God, the movement of our desire for God played out in a *poietic* key, can be said to participate in that

divine 'desire'? Already we have explored how creation represents, not an expression of divine lack but rather a fitting expression of the overflow of God's love into a mode by which God loves that which is not God.[294] Chrétien draws our attention to this in terms of call with reference to Paul's letter to the Romans: 'that God "calls into being what is not" [...] may be understood to refer to the gift of promise, election, and predestination as well as to the gift of creation, according to the double possibilities of the call.'[295] Our very being, then, is always already situated in the context of a call, and any move or speech or myth we make cannot be anything other than a response to that call. God's calling us into being is not a function of a lack in God, but rather an expression of God's will or desire that things be other than they have been. Not to fill any absence in God's being but rather to justify the overflow of love that is already God's nature: 'so is my word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead it does what I want, and accomplishes that which I intend.'[296] God's love is productive, moving toward that which it causes to be. Though the 'yet greater difference' always obtains in analogical language of God, there is a sense in which we can say that God desires, and a sense in which we participate in the love and desire of God. God loves us first, not as though we had already existed and then God's love came later. Rather, God's love is the condition for the possibility of our being at all. The call into being is thus also a means by which we can say of God that God is beautiful and beauty itself: God calls to us and we respond with desire, even if that desire is inevitably compromised by sin. The variety of mythopoiesis is a representation of this always-already response and the possibility of its failure. The movement of desire is there, but what we discern to be beautiful is not necessarily (or even often) that which is truly beautiful, namely God.

Throughout the Song of Songs, the movement of desire and the response of love exist in relation to the beauty of the beloved. The famously erotic poetry of the Song dwells longingly on the physical beauty of the lovers: 'Like a slice of pomegranate is the curve of your face

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[294] See Chapter Two.

[295] Chrétien, 19.

[296] Isaiah 55:11 (CEV)

behind the veil of your hair [...] Your two breasts are like two fawns... You are utterly beautiful, my dearest; there's not a single flaw in you'[297] and 'His arms are gold cylinders studded with jewels. His belly is smooth ivory encrusted with sapphires [...] His mouth is everything sweet, every bit of him desirable.'[298] This emphasis on erotic desire and physical beauty has proven embarrassing for interpreters through the centuries anxious to divorce God from the desires of the flesh. However, the creaturely experience of love is necessarily embodied, and erotic love is not problematic when properly ordered, as all but the most prudish of Christian interpreters would admit. Once again finding recourse to a participatory account of the creature's relationship to God, the desire and even the carnality of embodied love operate on analogy with the love for God's creation which is at one with God's being, goodness, and truth. Even *agape*, the non-possessing love of the Gospel and the highest form of creaturely love, is embodied and can be understood in relation to the movement toward the beautiful. Even as historically rendered, such love makes beautiful the object of its love by that love.[299] As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, with regard to God's perception of our sin (which can be understood as the inverse of beauty), 'But the way God, the lover, sees us is in fact the way we *are* in reality—for God, this is the absolute and irrevocable truth. This is why there can be no talk of "merely forensic" justification; the theory is valid only in the sense that, through God's creative and transformative love, we become what he takes us to be in the light of Christ.'[300] Already possessed of the image of the fullness of our being in Christ, God thus sees in us the beauty that God desires, and our participation in the humanity of Christ through baptism 'meets' God in that desiring, making us that which God sees in us as beauty. Always we return to the beloved, and always the economy of return is drawing us back. This is the meaning of desire and the meaning of aesthetic judgment: to perceive the beautiful and in perceiving

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[297] Song of Songs 4.3b-7.

[298] Song of Songs 5.14-16.

[299] Consider Samuel Crossman's hymn lyric 'love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be' in reference to Ephesians 1.4, 'he chose us in him before the foundation of the cosmos that we should be (*einai hemas*) holy and unblemished before him, marked out ahead of time (*proorisas*) in love...'. 'My song is love unknown' in *Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp, 1982).

[300] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Only Love is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004, 1964), 103-104.

move towards it. The inter-mythic theory of agonistics and out-narration does not take seriously the degree to which the encounter with the beautiful, which is of a type with the encounter with the beloved, is always already a movement *towards*, a drawing back in. To consider aesthetic judgment of the type Milbank describes as a detached act of consideration and will does not take seriously the way that aesthetic experience is already under way and the movement of desire is already in operation. Having first been called into being by God, all that we say in words and in making, and all that we say in action and way of life, constitute a response to that initial call: we are always already responding, always already moving towards that through which we encounter beauty, trying to speak truly of and to the object of our desire. Taste, in this sense, is the particular predisposition to move toward, to encounter beauty in a specific set of encounters. The development of taste in this sense is not a function of rhetorical combat (out-narration) but rather of aesthetic and personal formation. In the Christian idiom, this is called discipleship, the education of the Holy Spirit. In the interpersonal idiom, we might call it willing seduction.

III. Spoilsports

One can justly ask, however, what can be done to put one in the way, as it were, of being seduced by a more worthy beloved. The question arises how the negotiation of difference is to be accomplished when a mythic sensibility is found to be deficient, or even damaging. For the reasons outlined thus far, it seems to me a mistake too quickly to place *mythoi* such as 'secular nihilism' and 'the Gospel' on equivalent epistemological footing, as Milbank ends up doing. His insistence that the Gospel and the secular *mythos* he describes are 'equally foundationless' has the advantage of enabling him rightly to situate Western secularism as a defective kind of Christian theology and not to put any philosophical principle logically prior to the Gospel. An objectively available foundation for the Gospel runs the risk of undermining its gratuity and the simplicity of God. However, the logic of inter-mythic negotiation Milbank assumes (two *mythoi* shouting at one another across the marketplace) finally succumbs to the 'placeless' logic of Modernity. Milbank is correct that Christian theology cannot begin from a 'more

basic' place than its own revelation and witness: we cannot step outside the *mythos* to show what makes the *mythos* make sense. However, by affording the Christian *mythos* and the secular *mythos* equal standing as competing narratives seems to do just this. From the perspective of Christian theology, we can only speak from within its mythic sensibility. The genealogical work of *Theology and Social Theory* is of great use in diagnosing the postmodern condition. But the solution of inter-mythic rhetorical combat does not finally assume the primacy of the Gospel of reconciliation and resurrection which Milbank and I both share as Christians. A Christian theology of the mythic must begin from the premise that the Good News about God and about human being revealed in Christ is the most basic *datum* of reflection, and any persuasion must take place from within that mythic sensibility. As a Christian, I am staking my claim that not only the Christian *mythos*, but also the way of life it describes and circumscribes, and the meaningfulness in the world which it reveals, is fundamentally *more beautiful*, and therefore more and more rightly evocative of the love which we all express in one way or another, to one object or another. If we affirm the participatory metaphysics discussed above, then we can also affirm that the response of Christ to his human desire for the Father produces the most fundamental mythopoiesis, in which all other myth-making participates. It is nothing other than the appearance in history of the calling of being from nothing and the response of that being (in Christ and by the Spirit) back to the God the Father.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a comprehensive solution to the problem of mythic difference. However, noting the shortcomings of Milbank's approach, and given the analysis above, I am willing to point toward a way of thinking mythic difference that is situated within the Christian *mythos*, which does justice to the reality of different mythic sensibilities, and which does not succumb to the kind of violent opposition critiqued in *Theology and Social Theory*. This approach returns to Johann Huizinga's work on the theorisation of play, in the person of the spoil-sport. To the degree that mythic sensibility shares the dynamics of a game, we may pay special attention in this case to the spoil-sport, the

one who kicks the ball over the fence, who, by pointing out the very arbitrary nature of the game, undermines its premises and dissolves it for the other players as well. Huizinga writes:

> The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport'. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter still pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle [that is, the bounds of the mythic sensibility]. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with the others. He robs the play of its *illusion*—a pregnant word which means literally 'in-play' (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community.[301]

In keeping with the playground origin of this analysis, we must first distinguish the spoil-sport from the bully, who interrupts or interjects himself into the game for the joy of seeing the game broken. In a sense, this is the role of out-narration: the game of disruption overtakes the game in question, replacing it in a violent displacement. In contrast to the bully, the spoil-sport begins *within* the game itself. Having taken the rules of the game seriously up to a point, the spoil-sport rejects or ignores them in order to shatter the 'play-world'. In the setting of a 'proper' game such as football or chess, this might be because the spoil-sport is losing or has become bored or otherwise frustrated. The ball is kicked away, the board is toppled. Upon losing or winning, the spoil-sport can rob his erstwhile opponents of their victory or undercut the real pain of defeat by saying with derision, 'It's only a game'. In doing so, the spoil-sport attempts to sever the ties of the players' participation in the logic and sensibility of the game.

In the context of the 'game' of a mythic sensibility, the spoil-sport must have been a participant in the *mythos* to begin with in order to be in a position to 'spoil' the game. Perhaps disillusionment with the interpretation of the world provided by the mythic sensibility has led to a sense of unreality: the revelation of meaning is no longer miraculous, but rather dead or deadening. Perceiving the now seemingly arbitrary character of the 'game' of the myth, the spoil-sport seeks to 'free' his fellows from their captivity to a false or misleading *mythos*. This is the 'grown-up' who tells her younger friends, 'You don't still believe in *unicorns*, do you?' or, to

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[301] Huizinga, 11.

return to the earlier example of the fascination commanded by the Harry Potter novels upon readers of all ages, the sophisticated reader who has 'outgrown' them says in disgust, 'Who *cares* what House you would be in? None of it's *real*!' It is disenchantment even as it is demythologisation: ceasing to be in the game ('*in-ludō*'), the spoil-sport breaks the illusion by pointing out that it *is* illusionary. The imaginative magic that makes the mythic sensibility 'work' is interrupted and revealed to be arbitrary. What Milbank points out is that the result in the case of the *mythos* of Christianity (or that of any other religion, for that matter) upon 'shattering', one is not left with the 'truth' of the secular actual, but rather another *mythos*, equally arbitrary. Indeed, this 'spoiling' of the *mythos* of pre-Enlightenment Christianity by the emergence of secular modernity only makes sense because the secular *mythos* did just that: emerge, from the *mythos* of a faith which no longer revealed the world as meaningful to its subjects. The dead metaphors and untenable contradictions in early modern Christianity, whether introduced by Duns Scotus or finding their origins elsewhere, allowed a new *mythos* to spoil the game of a Christian mythic sensibility which no longer interpreted the world faithfully. While the rhetoric of the Enlightenment was often unabashedly hostile to Christian faith,[302] the articulation of the Enlightenment critique was not wholly without value and even justice.[303] This returns us to the question of *taste*. The world as interpreted by the faith of the time had proven lack-lustre. It no longer revealed the world as beautiful to at least some section of the populace. Thus the seeds of disenchantment grew until the fully-fledged spoil-sport could emerge: Nietzsche's mythopoieic critique of Christianity succeeds not in its dialectics as much as in its poetics: in the vision of the world that it paints. His compelling mythic sensibility declaring the 'death of God' carries its message far more powerfully than a systematic analysis of Christianity's shortcomings. By allowing Christianity to deconstruct

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[302] Consider, for example, Voltaire: 'Your majesty will do the human race an eternal service in extirpating this infamous superstition [Christianity]. I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened and who are apt for every yoke; I say among the well-bred, among those who wish to think.' Quoted in William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Invention of Fanaticism' in *Faith, Rationality, and the Passions*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Malden: Blackwell, 2012), 37.

[303] That is, the church was in many ways predatory and exploitative in ways that rendered it ever more liable to the charges of hypocrisy and enormity to which it was increasingly subject.

itself by presenting a more aesthetically compelling vision, Nietzsche is Christianity's consummate spoil-sport, shattering the play-world of many Western Christians, both in his time and in his intellectual and rhetorical descendants.

One might object that the image of the spoil-sport is just as violent as the model put into practice in *Theology and Social Theory*. A rhetoric of 'shattering' and 'spoiling' is surely no better than one of 'overcoming' and polemic 'out-narration'. This depends mightily upon the means by which the spoil-sport affects his work. Political Scientist James C. Scott has extensively documented the means by which those without 'hard power' are able nonetheless to interrogate and reveal the inadequacies of the social structures in which they are trapped. For instance, he observes how foot-dragging and strict adherence to the letter of the law can act as sufficient catalysts to enact change in systems otherwise opaque to the wills of the oppressed.[304] Such actions show up the inadequacies and intolerability of an oppressive *mythos*, taking up opposition and affecting change from within the *mythos* itself. The same logics apply to the non-violent civil rights movements of the twentieth century. My intention in reference to these methods of political action is not to advocate for or against certain strategies over others. Rather it is to observe how these cases demonstrate the emergence of a new *mythos*, a new way of interpreting the world, emerges from within another at the level of *practice* rather than discourse. It is by making a new *praxis* that a new understanding of the world emerges. Not only does practice make the *mythos* visible, in rendering it visible, it makes its aesthetic qualities more directly manifest. It is in enacting the *mythos* (perhaps even at the level of mirror-neurones) that the *mythos* becomes credible: once again we make in order to understand, to encounter the world as meaning-full. Mythopoiesis is a matter of developing practices that embody the *mythos* as much as it is about re-narration. Simply telling a new story, or the old story in a new way, is an act of resistance from within, a re-framing of the game, making new rules out of the old.

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[304] James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), xx.

The advantage of speaking in terms of the spoil-sport, as opposed to the marketplace of ideas, when considering differing *mythoi* is that it takes seriously the always-already involvement of the mythic sensibility. To challenge the premises or the hermeneutics of another mythic sensibility is to challenge the way that a person encounters the world. The dynamics of taste and desire discussed above place the negotiation of the mythic squarely within the emotional, the affective, and the visceral. That differences in mythic sensibility can evoke such powerful emotive response is a function of it being a matter of challenging one's love and the validity of one's desire. The world-shattering transgression of the spoil-sport can cause one to fall out of love. This is why the spoil-sports of the greatest *mythoi*, the 'apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors' and others pose such a great threat to those with vested interests in the mythic *status quo*.[305] Their words and actions, if compelling enough, if persuasive enough and revelatory of a beauty otherwise unavailable and more desirable than that which is revealed by the dominant *mythos*, can lead to its abandonment by a cascading multitude. But all of the figures that Huizinga lists as spoil-sports emerge from within their game, their tradition, their *mythos*. The most momentous, ambitious, and long-lasting mythic change is the result of a process *from within*. Indeed, it is only from within one *mythos* that another can be descried: there is no view from nowhere. It is only *as* Christian theology, emerging from within the Christian *mythos* that the secular *mythos* Milbank describes, can be critiqued from a Christian vantage. Christianity in this way can be understood not simply as the progenitor of the secular *mythos*, but also as its spoil-sport, revealing its arbitrariness from within. Christ comes in just this way, spoiling the myths of the ancient world and the modern world alike, as a response to God's call, as an expression of the desire for God that is always already inscribed in our nature.

If we may speak in some way of the work or inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the work of the priestly writers of Genesis as they sought to re-mythologise the Babylonian creation narratives by excising the violence, we can speak of the Spirit as a kind of spoil-sport,

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[305] Huizinga, 12.

shattering the mythology of theomachy and the necessity of overcoming the violent by violence. As the Spirit hovers over the deep and God speaks the world into being, a peaceful *mythos* is expanded, and by its being, the myth of violence deconstructs itself for the subjects of the new mythic sensibility. A 'rhetoric of peace' as David Bentley Hart puts it must always resist the temptation to a polemic rejection of the other. To do so would be to give in to the logic of the 'war of persuasions.'[306] Used specifically and advisedly in the sense of the one whose 'spoiling' is a speaking which engenders the self-disintegration of the *mythos* it encounters, what the image of the spoil-sport offers is the degree to which it takes seriously both the goodness of God and the sinfulness of the world. Sin cannot withstand the greater being, beauty, and goodness of God. This is one meaning of the Resurrection. Drawing all things to God's self, spoiling the *mythoi* of violence by submitting God's self to that violence, the goodness and beauty that are God were able to show forth more clearly, more tangibly, with more reality.

Conclusion

In the wake of Judah's crushing defeat and the deportation of the Judean elite to Babylon, it would have been expected that the people of Judah would understand not only that they had lost in battle, but that their divine patron had lost in cosmic battle to the gods of the conquering nation.[307] Instead, under the rhetorical genius and mythopoieic inspiration of 'Second Isaiah', the people of Judah came to a new understanding of the world, themselves, and the God they worshipped. It is not that the gods of Babylon had defeated YHWH, but rather that the Living God had led them into exile and would lead them out again. And what is more, Second Isaiah follows this logic to its ultimate and finally revolutionary conclusion:

> Yahweh becomes more than the god above all other gods: the existence of other gods is denied and two images central to 'Second Isaiah's' presentation of Yahweh, the warrior-king and creator, are melded and scored in the text to counter the perceived reality of other deities and

306 Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 414.

307 Trimm, Charlie. *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

> therefore the putative stupidity of cultic devotion to their images. Interestingly, Yahweh as cosmic creator and warrior in 'Second Isaiah' addresses the issue of loss of land and king. Yahweh is not just the god of Israel (both as land and people), but of all lands and nations. This persuasive section of the Bible is to move Judeans in exile from their current situation to a new outlook. One part of this outlook is a new vision of their god.[308]

The old *mythos* no longer served and a new one emerges, as one spoiling the game of conquest, of defeat, of self-pity and concession, re-illuminating the world as full of meaning and revelatory of God. This absolute claim of God's unique being ('Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no saviour') lays the groundwork for the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[309] This claim, so offensive to the secular liberalism that insists upon religion as private and inconsequential to public life, emerges from a place of oppression, dispossession, and fragility. One need not rehearse the manifold ways that it has since been weaponised by mythic communities ('religions') who succeeded in achieving temporal power to the degree that they could enforce their mythic sensibility upon millions upon millions of the world's people. This power differential cannot be ignored.

What I argue in the next chapter is that the universal claim of the Christian *mythos*, of Christ as *mythos* and myth-maker, is by its nature undermining of the kind of power-plays to which it has been put in history. The actual operations of God in Christ, through the Spirit, drawing all to the Father are subversive of our claims for domination. This is the ontology of peace to which Milbank points in *Theology and Social Theory*, and which is ultimately the claim of the Christian evangel. As David Bentley Hart puts it, 'The Christian evangel still stands apart, a word of contradiction that falls across philosophies of public accord, because the only justice and the only peace it knows is the infinite beauty of the form of Christ, which cannot be contained within the prudent economies of modernity.'[310] Somehow, the words of

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[308] Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 179-180.

[309] Isaiah 43.10b-11.

[310] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 439.

Isaiah hold together in that evangel, in the fundamental being that is God: 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.'[311] Even with its violence, which in the state of sin we cannot help but commit, our myth-making is held in the goodness of God which transcends our ordinary economies. We speak of peace and we work for peace, but ultimately it is the 'peace which passes all understanding.'[312] We do not truly know what an 'ontology of peace' entails, because to do so would be to understand God, who is not an object to be understood. The beauty of Christ, in its historicity and its transcendent and Ascended universality, is knowable as far as it is knowable, describable as far as our stories will go, but ultimately, like the depth of human interiority and radiance, is beyond description. The poetics and resonances of the mythic go some of the way, evoking our desire and drawing us on, but only in the beatific vision beyond life and death can we imagine that desire being consummated. And this is why the difference of *mythoi* is fundamentally both comic and tragic. It is comic in the erotics and revelation of the truth through the mythic sensibility each bears and promises. The joy of knowing is a kind of marriage between the mythic subject and history. It is tragic as every mythic sensibility is ultimately inadequate, a failure to meet the task. The audacious claim of the Christian *mythos* is that the defeated Christ, who did not fight against the *mythoi* of the Empire but allowed himself to be crucified by them, that this counter-*mythos*, emerging from within the *mythoi* of first-century Judea offers the clearest glimpse, the most limpid, lucent revelation of the one after which all *mythoi* strive. Indeed, its claim is to be the *mythos* in which all others participate, the condition of all other mythopoiesis.

311 Isaiah 45.7.

312 Philippians 4.7.

V

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Christ the Myth/maker

Though we entered the mythic by way of the Eucharist, the archetypal act of ongoing Christian mythopoiesis and participation in God, the discussion of myth-making and participation so far has been not been directly responsive to the primary witness of the Christian evangel, namely the Incarnation of God in the human life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In order to approach the mythic and mythopoieic dynamics of the Incarnation, we first had to appreciate the power of narrative to shape our understanding of the world, as discussed in Chapter One. Chapter Two addressed the way that our story-making participates in God as a function of our creatureliness and our participation in God's triune being, a self-offering analogous with the Trinitarian self-donation that is constitutive of God's revealed nature. Chapter Three situated this participation in God's creativity in the context of the secular materialist ideology that dominates the modern, economically prosperous world, observing how this ideology is no less mythic, and so no less involved in the same Trinitarian operations that characterise more explicitly theological myth-making. Chapter Four considered the relationship between *mythoi* such as that of nihilistic secular modernity and the Christian evangel of peace, and it put into question the necessity that this relationship need be conceived in terms of antagonism. Instead, I argue that the *mythos* of Jesus Christ has no competition if considered on its own terms: the antagonism it faces must disintegrate in the face of the crucified one. In this chapter, I finally consider the form and the content of the

Christian *mythos* in the light of a participatory theology of mythopoiesis: Christ as *mythos*, Christ as myth-maker, Christ as the locus of full participation in the redeeming life of God. Only thus can we understand the mythic dimensions of Christian discipleship and the Christological dimensions of mythopoiesis. In the first section of this chapter, I critique Rudolf Bultmann's emphasis on stripping away the 'mythological' apparel of the Gospels in order to access something behind or beneath the New Testament text by suggesting a way of reading that leaves the *mythos* intact and able to 'speak' on its own terms. In the second section, I suggest how Jesus' own myth-making is inseparably bound up in his identity and the emergence of God's presence in history, appealing to the work of Eberhard Jüngel and Hans Urs von Balthasar to re-place the *kerygma* inside the *mythos* itself as a 'quasi-sacramental' presentation of the divine. Finally, in the third section, I point toward how we are able to speak of human beings' participation, by faith, in this fundamental and world-making mythopoiesis through baptism and by growing into the 'full stature of Christ'.

Until this point, I have discussed participation in primarily ontological and analogical terms. We have being by participation in God who is: our being, which is contingent on its giftedness, is analogous with God, whose being is identical with God's nature. This approach does not address the ethical: 'is' does not immediately convert into 'ought'. We may have a sense that being is not enough, however gratuitous and wonderful the participation in God's being may be. The soul wants more. Human beings want to be *well*. Modern and post-modern individualism wants to conceive being *well* in terms of self-actualisation, given voice in the frequent admonition to 'be your best self'. This is not the same as being *well*. Unlike animals, trees, and hammers, being in the human case is subject to qualification, and this qualification is part of what is meant by the doctrine of sin. Even as the occurrence of cruelty and selfishness is so endemic to human behaviour that Western Christianity has dignified it with a name ('original sin') and attributed it to our (fallen) nature, we nonetheless are right in rejecting certain acts as 'inhuman' or 'inhumane'. Somehow, vice is a failure to be fully human, and the ubiquity of this failure is the condition for the necessity of our salvation. In mythic terms, sin

is a result in part of failing to see the world *as* it is and so interpreting it awry and judging it wrongly.[313] Augustine's (and later Aquinas') insistence that human beings always act toward a good, even if it is a lesser good, coupled with this bad mythic sensibility, results in even well-intentioned judgments causing injury and even suffering.[314] The promise of the Christian evangel, and the hope of Christian faith, is that by participation in the *mythos* of God incarnate, we are able to perceive the world aright and to act in accordance with that mythic sensibility. This is an aspect of what has been known in East and West as *theosis* or divinisation, the entering into and participation not only in God's being but in the very life of God through Christ. The question remains, then, what can be meant by a further participation in God's *life* over and above our already graced participation in God's *being*? If our mythopoiesis is already a participation in God's creativity by analogy with God's ongoing act of creation, how can we be said to participate in God further, and what are the consequences for our understanding of human making? The answer lies in what we mean when we speak about the humanity and the divinity of Christ and the entering of the *Logos* of God into the *mythoi* of the human making-toward God that is mythopoiesis.

Implied in this way of approaching the question of *theosis* and right living is the assumption that there is some relation between our participation in God's being, our participation in God's creativity, our participation in Christ's life in God, and our participation in a mythic narrative. Already we have seen how our possession of being is on analogy with God who is by nature and how our making operates on analogy with God's creativity. In both senses, we can be said to 'participate' in God's attributes. It is only from and in the context of God's eternal attributes (in this case, being and creativity) that we enjoy a way of being appropriate to our nature (finite, contingent) and a mode of generativity appropriate

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[313] There is a sense in which the idea of mythic sensibility could run afoul of a docetist sense of divine seeming: I do not want to suggest that Christ was merely God incarnate *as a function of* a certain mythic sensibility. Quite the opposite in fact. Likewise, it is possible to consider 'access' to the 'right' mythic sensibility as a lapse into the kind of privileged knowledge economy that has been called gnostic. Again, just the opposite: Christ's *mythos* is available to all without restriction. This is part of what is meant by the Ascension and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

[314] Augustine, *City of God*, XV.22. *City of God,* Volume IV: Books 12-15, trans. Philip Levine, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 542-547. Aquinas ST I-II.55.1.ad4.

to that way of being (finite, contingent, dependent on the being and beings given by God in Creation). I have sought to emphasise that human making as a participation in divine creativity is always a participation in God, irrespective of the moral content or aesthetic quality of the produce.[315] However, if we speak of God as not only Being, but also Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, we are left with the obvious realisation that it is not enough simply to say that we and our makings participate in God by virtue of existing and by virtue of our bringing forth that which is new (though not *ex nihilo*). The analogical character of our language of participation is always a matter of 'in some way like, but then again in a greater way unlike', Balthasar's 'ever greater'.[316] Because human beings are finite (physically limited, mortal, of limited capacity for knowledge, etc.) our ways of being and making will always be 'less' than those of God. Aquinas writes '*nobilitas cuiuscumque rei est sibi secundum suum esse*', 'the excellence of any given thing is to it according to its [way of] being'.[317] That is to say, any given thing is like God (who is all excellences by nature) in its own way. To be contingently is the human way of being, and it is obviously a way of being that is 'less than' God's absolute way of being.[318] We could be said to 'have' less being than God, for to have being in the same way and 'quantity' as God would be to *be* God. The difference in quantity or intensity of being is something which cannot be overcome, for doing so would be to violate the analogical quality of our participation in God's being. God is not simply a 'bigger' creature with a greater store of being-ness. There is no path from finite human being or making to divine being or creativity. An infinite number of incremental steps would not suffice.[319] This is because human beings and divine being exist in entirely different ways. What, then, are we to make of the different intensities of being to be found *between human beings*?

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315 See Chapter Three.

316 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 548-9.

317 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.28.260: http://aequivocum.net/text/thomas/scg/1_28-43.html (accessed 26 February 2021).

318 This is a profoundly troubling idea to many contemporary turns of mind, which understands inequality as fundamentally unjust, and so unworthy of God. These lines of thought mistake God's friendship with humanity (cf. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*) for equality.

319 What David Bentley Hart calls the 'pleonastic fallacy'. *The Experience of God*, 98.

If one is not careful, the language of intensity of being can have deleterious effect on how we conceive of humanity. In the discussion of the privative account of evil in his *Participation in God*, Andrew Davison uses the example of illness as an example of the 'greyness' that results in creatures as a result of evil in the world:

> This greyness can be considered at the level of what an Aristotelian would call accidents: the business of *how* something is. We might take illness and wickedness as examples: one a matter of evil suffered and the other of evil undertaken. The sick cat, for instance has less intense being on the plane of its accidents: its fur is less sleek; its pounce less agile. Similarly, the wicked person fails to live fully and characterfully *how* a human being, how something of this kind (or substance), should live. Not least, the all-important properties (or virtues) of a moral existence, which are definitive of what it means to be human (such as justice and restraint), are enfeebled and washed out.[320]

Though he is careful to specify that the cat suffers a diminished intensity of being 'on the plane of its accidents', this logic can easily run afoul of the observations made by many theologians of disability who would be quick to point out that what is experienced as a diminishment by some is not experienced that way at all by others.[321] For instance, it is a matter of some controversy in the Deaf community whether deafness ought to be properly considered a disability at all.[322] The flourishing of sign language culture and art suggests an equally valuable manifestation of human generativity and sociality, even as the hearing world experiences deafness as a disability. The resistance among many deaf people to cochlear implants (which restore or generate at least partial hearing) is testament to this position.[323] To speak of their

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320 Davison, 241.

321 For instance, see Thomas E. Reynolds, 'Theology and Disability: Changing the Conversation' in *The Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* (16:1, 2012), 33-48: 'As the conversation shifts, disability might become received as a matter of human difference rather than deviance, and accordingly, received as gift, one that disrupts and preempts easy closures, but in the end opens new transformative possibilities for being vulnerably human together in mutual relation.'

322 For instance, the British Deaf Association advocates on behalf of the Deaf community as a linguistic and cultural minority, disadvantaged only by the structures of society as they stand today and not existentially or ontologically: 'Deafness here is description of a state of being: it defines a group of people who share a perception of the world through an emphasis on visual and kinaesthetic input.' *British Deaf Association*: https://bda.org.uk/what-is-deaf-culture/. (accessed 13 January 2021).

323 The question is also raised of to what degree those with implants qualify as 'Deaf-enough' by other members of the Deaf community, deeply complicating the meaning of deafness. Tom Humphries and Jacqueline Humphries, 'Deaf in the Time of the Cochlea' in *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 16/2 (Spring 2011), 153–163.

human accidents as less intense or as diminished reflects a possibly unjustifiable normalisation of one experience of being human. Advocates for the autistic represent a similar case. The insistence by some that 'some people are autistic' and not that 'some people have autism' represents an expression of the importance of understanding human ways of being in terms of neurodiversity rather than strictly in terms of ability and disability. None of this is to suggest that disability does not exist or that impairment of faculties does not constitute a real loss or diminishment of experience for many who suffer. It is rather to point up the dangers in using the language of intensity of being to describe difference between human beings. This is all the more the case when an account of 'less intense being on the plane of its accidents' is paired rhetorically with human moral being. Less intense being can sound to some as perilously close to lesser being full stop. Davison is careful to note that diminishment of being on the plane of accidents is not the same as a diminishment of substance.[324] That is, though the cat ceases to display healthy cattiness, it remains a cat, and the wicked person remains a human being. It is not obvious, however, that the language of intensity of being applies equally to the attributes sleekness of fur and wickedness of action.

The resurrection body of Christ appears with his wounds intact: 'Put your finger in my side.' This risen fullness of human being is not a matter of the erasure of accidents. Instead, the fullness of human being that is revealed in Jesus Christ is a matter of fully participating in what it is to be human, in all its finitude and in all its limitation. As we become more human, we become more godlike.[325] But in the process, we do not lose that which has made us human, which includes the wounds. They are healed, not erased.[326]

Bearing all this in mind, we are able to consider what is redeemed in Christ, and what is gained by speaking of this redemption in terms of participation in the *mythos* of Christ. Thus far, we have explored the dynamics of mythopoiesis as a constituent part of the human way of

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[324] Davison, 242.

[325] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.34.7: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm (accessed 3 March 2021).

[326] Trauma theologians have developed the importance of somatic memory and the role of the body as the site of trauma in the operations of salvation. For example, Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 12.

being. Only now have we begun to consider how different kinds of mythopoiesis, as participations in divine creativity and the human means of encountering the world as meaningful, actually succeed at revealing the world truly and truly meaningfully. We have already examined how some mythopoiesis reveals the world in ways that are oppressive, terrible, and untrue.[327] The Christian witness is to Christ as the fullness of humanity, of the *mythos* of Christ as the *mythos* revealing the world most truly, of Christ's mythopoiesis as the true account of the world, not only as it seems, but as it is. This is not because Jesus Christ was a particularly wise teacher or led a particularly exemplary life. The Christian witness is that Christ was not only an exceptional human but rather God being in a human way: the full participation of human being in God's being. Christ represents the full participation of the *Logos* of creation in the human network of *mythoi* that is the water in which we swim, encountering the world not simply as atoms in motion but as a meaningful cosmos. The union of *Logos* and *mythos* in the Incarnation is unique in Christ and the ground of the Christian statement of faith that Christ is not just *a mythos* but is *the mythos*. In this way, the Christian can speak of the *mythos* of Christ as that which reveals the world *most truly*.

I should hasten to clarify that this chapter does not represent a turn to apologetics. I do not propose to describe why the *mythos* of Christ is better than the *mythoi* of other religions to faith traditions. As I hope is apparent by this point, my intent is first to clarify what happens within a mythic sensibility and second to give an account of how that sensibility operates from a Christian posture. By situating mythopoiesis relative to a Christian theology of creation and participation, I have sought to show what is revealed about mythopoiesis and the mythic in light both of these theological principles and of the mythic narratives and mythic sensibilities they engender and contain. In what follows, I aim to unfold how this perspective is specifically *Christian*, that is, rooted in the *mythos* of Jesus Christ and a product of Jesus' own mythopoieic generativity. As a work of Christian theology, this thesis is not interested in disproving the mythologies of others. The exception to this rule, of course, is the *mythos* of secular modernity

[327] Though the Nazi *mythos* said so, it is untrue that Jews, homosexuals, Roma, etc. are less human than others. See Chapter Four.

and its attendant *mythoi* of extractive capitalism and white supremacy. The reason for this exception is, as argued above, that secular modernity has a special relationship to the Christian *mythos*, as a degraded and distorted version of itself. It lies with Christianity to unpick the damaging *mythoi* of secular modernity that imagine the mythic landscape as one of necessary conflict, and which Christianity imagines more fundamentally as one of peace in and through the economy of the offering of God to God through the Incarnation and the perichoresis of the Trinity.

I. The Mythos of Christ

> *Despite these claims, the vast wheel of mythmaking rolls on, grinding even the gospels to powder. This powder is then mixed into the wet concrete of ever new mythologies, which explicitly and implicitly recycle and adapt gospel plots and motifs. Hollywood has colonized gospel narratives, in that self-sacrificing heroes continue to die and rise on the silver screen. Artists, poets, filmmakers, and novelists readily adapt stories of angelic visitations and breathtaking resurrections because they still inspire the thrill of hope.*[328]
>
> — M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History*

Until now, we have discussed *mythopoiesis* almost entirely in terms of myth-making, with a particular emphasis on the making of a mythic sensibility, as opposed to the making of particular myths or mythologies. *Mythos* has been unfolded in terms of narratives, however inchoate, which structure our seeing and valuing. Emerging out of our desire for God, the making of these *mythoi* participates in the creativity of God as we participate in the Trinitarian return of God to God. As noted in Chapter One, *mythoi* are not simply fictive constructs, texts to be approached, or even stories to be enjoyed: they are programmes for action. As Karen Armstrong puts it, 'the only way to assess the value and truth of a myth [is] to act upon it,' and that 'if we failed to apply it to our situation, a myth would remain abstract and incredible.'[329] The truth within the mythic, revealed by a mythic sensibility, becomes real, becomes human in the acting out. How we understand ourselves and the world becomes meaningful as it shapes how we are *in* the world. It is not enough, in other words, to recognise

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328 M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History: Jesus and Mediterranean Myths* (New Haven: Yale, 2019), 220.

329 Armstrong, xii.

our roles as myth-makers; the human relationship to the mythic is also one of being a myth-enacter.

Traditionally, the relationship between *making* and *doing* has been conducted in Aristotelian terms distinguishing between *poiesis* and *praxis*, the *locus classicus* being his discussion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'For while production [*poiesis*] has an end distinct form itself, this could not be so with action [*praxis*], since the end here is acting well itself.'[330] This clean distinction between making and doing is not at all so clear in a Christian participatory understanding of action. Rather, an understanding of the Trinitarian and specifically Christological dynamics of what might be called *Christian action* illuminates the possibility that in the case of mythopoiesis more generally, making and doing remain entangled. Ward illuminates this dynamic in a theological analysis of the use of the word *poiesis* in the epistle of James. The peril and tragedy of translation means that the polysemy of *poieō* is inevitably collapsed when rendered into a language that does not neatly hold the two senses in one word. When translating the Epistle of James, translators have traditionally rendered '*poiēsei*' 'doing' and not 'making' in spite the word's polysemic ambiguity. This is not to say that the translation is in error, rather it is to note that the repeated use of *poiētēs* in conjunction with *ergon* [work] nonetheless highlights the close relationship in this context between doing and making. 'Doing' a work cannot be other than its 'making'; enactment *is* a kind of *poiesis*. This is the very sense of Aristotle's attempt to distinguish *praxis* from *poiesis*. However the distinction is an artificial or at best heuristic one, not a philological necessity.[331] This is also Armstrong's point with regard to the mythic; its making *is* its enacting.

Ward reflects on the consequences of *poieō*'s broad semantic field for an understanding of the tension between 'faith' (*pistis*) and 'works' (*erga*) in the epistle of James, and further for an understanding of what it is to act *en Christo*. James' insistence on the Christian being a 'doer of

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[330] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b, translated and edited by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 105.

[331] The philosophical insistence on a radical distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* might be said to rely on philological rather than philosophical grounds.

the Word' and not just a 'believer' reflects not a Lutheran rejection of the Medieval church's attenuated theology of works righteousness, but an exhortation to participation in God's *poietic* work of creation in and through the creation. Ward begins by observing that while the writer of James could have used the less ambiguous '*prasso*' in referring to the action of the 'doer of the Word', instead he chooses '*poieo*'. Not only does the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition reserve *poiesis* to name 'a unique and creative act, a bringing forth or *genesis*' but 'the LXX has around 3,200 references to *poieo* as God's action with respect to the created world.'[332] In other words, James' use of *poieo* delivers us from the economy of comparatively straightforward action or *pragmatics* into the *poietic* economy of divine creativity. God's participation in created pragmatics, however, implicates *poietics* with the pragmatic economy. Ward goes on, '[...] it is the performance of the Word by the Word in human acting that constitutes the *poietes* [the doer or maker], the *poiesis* [the doing or making] and the *poiema* [that which is done or made].'[333] The incarnation fuses the horizons of divine creativity and human action in a way that cannot be easily picked apart or finally separated. The 'implanted word' (James 1:21) has somehow woven the Christian into God's poetics/pragmatics in such a way that the Word enacted by the Christian (the vocation of Faith) is also enacted by the same Word: 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28) and 'as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17.21). In Chapter Two, I discussed our participation in divine creativity through mythopoiesis: in telling stories to encounter the world as meaningful, we participate in God's revelation of God's self through creation to creatures. The incarnation represents the fulfilment and archetype of this economy of return and so we can begin to see how a full account of our participation in God's creative action may best be articulated in Christological terms. Our participation in God's creativity by myth-making is predicated upon Jesus' participation in God through the incarnation. The dynamics of this participation and the role of faith in it, however, remain to be unfolded.

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332 Graham Ward, '*Kenosis*, *Poiesis* and *Genesis*: Or the Theological Aesthetics of Suffering' in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word*, eds. Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 167.

333 Ward, '*Kenosis, Poiesis* and *Genesis*', 168.

Seeing in a Christian Way

> *'Are you a stranger in Jerusalem, that you only did not know what has been happening there these past days?'*
> — Luke 24.18

We observed in the last chapter how a visitor to fourth-century Az Zubayr might encounter the *kriophoros* statue in terms of Christ the Good Shepherd, rather than as Hermes Ram-Bearer, because he is subject to the *mythos* of Christ rather than the *mythos* of Hermes and the Olympian gods. For the Christian, this difference is not reckoned in relative terms: the *mythos* of Christ has absolute priority and relativises the *mythos* of Hermes alone. This is not only because of the Christian insistence on monotheism. While the pagan might recognise the divinity of Christ, the Christian does not acknowledge the claims of the Olympians, because what the Christian means when she says 'God' is not identical with what the pagan means when he says 'god'.[334] What, then, is the content of this *mythos*? Through what story does the Christian encounter the *kirophoros* as meaningful? The answer lies not only in the stories Jesus told, in the preaching he accomplished, but also in the life of the Church that emerged from that teaching. The *mythos* of Jesus that the Christian church has passed on is rooted first and foremost in 'what has happened in Jerusalem in these past days'—in the story of the life of Jesus himself. It is this 'modification' of the message of Jesus, a charge often laid at St Paul's feet, to which many critics of Christianity object, claiming that the Church has made an idol of a simple Galilean preacher and rabble-rouser.[335] However it is

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[334] This is a commonplace of Christian doctrines of God, discussed widely. For a particularly illuminating discussion of the difference, see David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (New Haven, Yale, 2013), 1ff. While entertaining in its own right, Hart's discussion in the Introduction is of particular interest directed as it is especially at the New Atheists, whose conception of God is reducible to a caricature of the pagan 'god' - namely an especially large and powerful being like ourselves. The degree to which this idea of God gained a foothold within Christian theology owes more than a little to the work of making the Bible congenial to modern sensibilities.

[335] The idea that Paul was the originary mytho-poet of Christianity goes back at least to Ferdinand Christian Baur's *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: his life and works, his epistles and teachings* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1873/2003), and found its modern megaphone in Nietzsche's *Antichrist* (New York: Knopf, 1895/1920). More recent iterations of this claim can be found in the likes of Hyam Maccoby's *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986) and A. N. Wilson's *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (London: Pimlico, 1998). The various 'historical Jesus' treatments similarly (necessarily) reduce Jesus to his material historicity, generally with little or no consideration of the Church's witness. Cf., J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Westbourne, 2013), et al.

'Christ and him crucified'[336] and the things which happened in those days in Jerusalem which have formed the basis of the Church's faith and have shaped its world-interpreting *mythos* from its earliest days.[337] How it has told this story has changed over time, however, and become refined and even been revised in important ways.

The need to re-narrate the Christian evangel in every generation is the vocation of the theologian. The content of that re-narration is re-negotiated each time it is told. It is negotiated in pulpits and in Bible studies, in classrooms and at the altar. It is re-narrated by Christians enacting the Gospel in the shape of their lives and it is reflected upon in community.[338] It is the history of Jesus of Nazareth, in the prophetic, ritual, and historical context of his appearance, in the life, death, and resurrection that constitute his earthly ministry, and in the life and shape of the Church as it has sought, by grace, to embody him in history. As we have discovered above, some *mythoi* are very short indeed, however far-reaching their revelatory power may be (e.g., 'A man works hard and is so rewarded with material security'). However, the *mythos* of Christ is sufficiently complex and interwoven with other histories and lives that its unfolding is especially contingent upon the context of its explication. Rudolf Bultmann famously sought to cut through this mythological enfolding by his programme of demythologisation, in quest of the kerygmatic kernel of the Gospel, explicable in other terms than those of its appearing in history.[339]

In order to grasp Bultmann's position, and to reflect upon the tradition of understanding Jesus and the mythic which he inaugurated, it is worth quoting him at length on the subject of

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336 1 Corinthians 2.2.

337 Cf. Jean Danielou, *Christ and Us* (London: Mowbray, 1961), N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*: *Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Cincinnati: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1997), et al.

338 This is one of the founding principles of Latin American liberation theology. Cf., Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1971/2005), 5-12.

339 This project would go on through the twentieth century to spawn a cottage industry of de-mythologized theologies, culminating in the 'Death of God' theologies of John A. T. Robinson and Bishop John Shelby Spong, who sought to carve out a credible narrative from a discardable 'mythological' shell. Other influential essays can be found in *The Myth of God Incarnate,* ed., John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977). This re-narration and salvage operation can also be witnessed in the 'radical theology' of the twenty-first century among the likes of Catherine Keller and John Caputo (*The Weakness of God*). I dwell here upon Bultmann as the modern progenitor of this project and so the most widely (if sometimes inchoately) influential.

'not only his preaching of the Kingdom of God but first of all his person, which was mythologized from the very beginnings of earliest Christianity.':

> ...At any rate, the early Christian community thus regarded him as a mythological figure. It expected him to return as the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven to bring salvation and damnation as judge of the world. His person is viewed in the light of mythology when he is said to have been begotten of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, and this becomes clearer still in Hellenistic Christian communities where he is understood to be the Son of God in a metaphysical sense, a great, pre-existent heavenly being who became man for the sake of our redemption and took on himself suffering, even the suffering of the cross. It is evident that such conceptions are mythological, for they were widespread in the mythologies of Jews and Gentiles and then were transferred to the historical person of Jesus. Particularly the conception of the pre-existent Son of God who descended in human guise into the world to redeem mankind is part of the Gnostic doctrine of redemption, and nobody hesitates to call this doctrine mythological. This raises in an acute form the question: *what is the importance of the preaching of Jesus and of the preaching of the New Testament as a whole for modern man?* / For modern man the mythological conception of the world, the conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with.[340]

According to Bultmann, the content of the *mythos* of Christ includes: his pre-existence, his descent from heaven, his taking on 'human guise', his begetting by the Holy Spirit and birth from a virgin, his historical suffering, the crucifixion, his imminent return 'on the clouds of heaven', and his judgement of and salvation of the world. These are the materials of the Christian evangel about Jesus that are liable to the project of de-mythologization. As noted above, Bultmann's project has as much to do with justifying a Tylorian understanding of mythology as primitive science/psychology as it does with his apologetic mission.[341] For Bultmann, the mythological mode is discredited on its own terms and must be rehabilitated by de-mythologisation to uncover the core of the New Testament's/Jesus' message so that it can be credibly preached in the modern era. Bultmann's emphasis on the preaching of the *kerygma*, however, effaces the importance of the power of the narrative itself: 'We must ask

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[340] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM, 2012), 16-17.

[341] E.g., 'But just as mechanical astronomy gradually superseded the animistic astronomy of the lower races, so biological pathology gradually supersedes animistic pathology, the immediate operation of personal spiritual beings in both cases giving place to the operation of natural processes.' quoted in Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 7.

whether the eschatological preaching and the mythological sayings as a whole [that is, the content of Jesus' preaching] contain a still deeper meaning which is concealed under the cover of mythology.'[342] It is not the story itself which contains power, but rather the interpretation that Bultmann brings to it or excavates from it. He goes on, 'Mythology [...] believes that the world and human life have their ground and their limits in a power which is beyond all that we can calculate or control. Mythology speaks about this power insufficiently because it speaks about it as if it were a worldly power.'[343] Concerned as he is to salvage value from the wreckage of the mythological mindset, Bultmann also appears to be attempting to dissolve the very metaphorical character of language itself.

Responding as he was to the pressures of modernity and the challenges faced by Christian preaching and theology in the twentieth century, Bultmann's project is not without merit. Crossing the divide between the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the *mythos* of secular modernity is a hermeneutical project, as Bultmann rightly identifies.[344] However, the means and method of such interpretation are not as tidily divided as Bultmann would have it. Tim Labron summarises Bultmann's outlook: 'The Christ event happened in a particular time and world-view, but it is not limited to that time or world-view, and demythologizing makes this clear – it is not rejecting the Christian message, it is rejecting the reduction of the Christian message to a particular time and world-view.'[345] If Bultmann's project is indeed to make 'the Christian message' available to any world-view and to free the *kerygma* from one archaic world-view, then he is fundamentally attempting to wrest the events of the Gospels from their mytho-historical context, as though something else, something objectifiable, lies *behind* the mythic clothing of the text. Labron continues, 'On the other hand, to reject demythologizing is either to deny relativistic world-views or to deny meaning to mythological elements in the Bible, whereas to accept it is to say that revelation in the Bible

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[342] Bultmann, 18.

[343] Bultmann, 19.

[344] Bultmann, 18.

[345] Tim Labron, *Bultmann Unlocked* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 36.

is not historically determined by a world-view, but applies to many world-views.'[346] He correctly identifies the crux of the matter when in querying whether 'revelation in the Bible is not historically determined by a world-view.' However, Bultmann is mistaken in the extent to which he privileges a kernel to be found beneath the *mythos* rather than the *mythos* itself. It is determined by a particular world-view, and it must be, as the world-view in question, however scientifically dubious, is enmeshed with the narrative which becomes the Christian *mythos*. Bultmann's insistence on 'the mythological mindset' as equivalent to a mechanistic reading of scripture does not do justice to the ways that scripture has been used in the past or is used in the present by many, or even most, Christians. One need not rehearse the multiple methods of reading advocated by Origen or Aquinas[347] to recall that figurative readings have been considered vital to the life of the Church from its earliest days. Since Ferdinand de Saussure at the latest, we have known that language is a complex of reference and gesture,[348] and no one has highlighted the metaphorical character of even 'literal' language better than Ricoeur.[349] The practice of pointing to 'difficult' referents by way of simpler, easier, or more ready-to-hand objects is not only the province of mythology, let alone poetry, but simply the means by which language functions at all. The attitude towards the Biblical narrative that Bultmann advocates is nothing less than the most elementary kind of literary criticism, discarded at the undergraduate level at the latest, that seeks to find out 'what the author means when they write…'. Sometime US poet laureate Billy Collins illuminates this graphically in his 'Introduction to Poetry':

> I ask them to take a poem
> and hold it up to the light
> like a color slide
>
> or press an ear against its hive.

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[346] Labron, 36.

[347] *On First Principles, Book IV* in Origen, trans. Rowan A. Greer (Mahwah: Paulist, 1979), 171-216. ST I.10.

[348] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1916/2013).

[349] For instance, see *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) and *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge Classics, 2003).

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.[350]

For Collins, as for the mythic subject of the *mythos* of Christ, the meaning emerges not strictly in the dissection, in the de-mythologization, or in the 'beating it with a hose', but rather in the experience of it, of probing our way out of it and enjoying its surfaces and walls. The vital turn in Collins' poem is from his desire to let the poem shape the reader's experience not only of its words, but of the world, to the reader's desire to dissect the poem as an object to extract its vital core. Rather than allow the poem to colour my vision, to act upon my sensorium, to condition the space of my perception as does a darkened room, I instead seek to make the poem conform to my preconceptions of what counts as meaning and signification. It should be clear from this vantage where the experience of mythic sensibility lies.

When we speak of the *mythos* of Christ, then, we are not speaking of a narrative in need of de-mythologization, as though extraction were the means by which the meaning of the story is encountered. In her lively manifesto *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski puts into question the universal validity of the critical approach favoured by Bultmann, however tempered his approach might be by the reticence of a faith seeking an understanding of God's speaking through Scripture. The spatial and even geologic metaphors of critique, like those employed by Bultmann, such as getting *behind* the text, searching for *deeper* meaning, and even *excavating*

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[350] Billy Collins, 'Introduction to Poetry' in *The Apple that Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

the text, obscure the power that the story itself exerts on the reader.[351] Though parties on all sides would surely disavow one another in the strongest terms, Bultmann's approach to the 'mythological' character of Christology shares much in common with the tradition of critique extending from the masters of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a term borrowed by Felski from Ricoeur: Nietzsche, Freud, Marx.[352] In all three cases, these 'masters of suspicion' insist that the 'real meaning' of any cultural expression must be unearthed, be it power, sex, or economics. Felski observes that it is not merely an acknowledgement of the necessity for interpretation that constitutes the hermeneutics of suspicion, but rather 'an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness'.[353] There is a knowingness to critical theory that brings the answers to the text and which remains on guard against the text's complicity in pulling the wool over the reader's eyes in order to facilitate and reproduce systems of power and oppression.[354] As has been exhaustively observed, this is both the power and the peril of theory: the revelation of complicity in oppression (or even simply in the opposite of the apparent intent of the author) is a powerful tool for developing a mature hermeneutics, but the sense that the story has already been told before it is read remains a danger. The text is no longer allowed to speak on its own terms, as those terms are assumed from the outset to be suspect. This is not identical with interpretation *per se*.

Ricoeur demonstrates how the sense-making we do in our lives by way of narrative-formation is always already in operation as we live and recount our experiences.[355] As discussed in Chapter One, narrative *poiesis* is one of the most important means by which human beings encounter meaning, and there is both a pre-critical and post-critical moment to that encounter with meaning. The problem with the Bultmannian approach to the *mythos* of Christ as it is found in scripture is common with other, liberal approaches to scripture which

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351 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 52ff.

352 Felski, 2.

353 Felski, 3.

354 What Felski and others call 'symptomatic reading' in which the text is presumed to be a symptom of a known social disorder (patriarchy, capitalism, racism, et al.), and the critic's role is to point up how this is so, in this particular case. Felski, 60-62.

355 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3ff.

risk trying to reconcile the Biblical witness, the Christian evangel, with the criteria of the secular modernity which Bultmann insists is necessary for a recovery of the Good News for contemporary preaching.[356] Namely, it is the subjection of the Christian *mythos* not to the supposedly neutral arbitration of a third party ('the modern world-view'), but simply to *another* mythos, the *mythos* of secular modernity. Thus Bultmann's 'de-mythologization' turns out to be another and unspoken re-mythologization. Felski moves in the final chapters of *The Limits of Critique* towards a hermeneutic approach to literature inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory that enables a way of understanding the work of art as a non-human actor upon the viewer/reader. Latour's philosophy allows us to appreciate the many forces acting upon us as a network of agents, even though these agents might be inert in the ordinary sense of 'agency.' She writes,

> Speed bumps, microbes, mugs, baboons, newspapers, unreliable narrators, soap, silk dresses, strawberries, floor plans, telescopes, lists, paintings, can openers. To describe such disparate phenomena as actors is not to overlook the salient differences between things, animals, texts, and people, nor is it to impute intentions, desires, or purposes to inanimate objects. Rather, an actor, in this schema, is anything that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference. Nonhuman actors do not determine reality or single-handedly make things happen — let us steer well clear of any technological or textual determinism. And yet, as Latour points out, there are 'many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence,' between being the sole source of an action and being utterly inert and without influence.[357]

The capacity of such non-human actors to determine or shape our behaviour and our perceptions of the world fits well within the phenomenological approach to the mythic being explored in this thesis: the mythic sensibility shapes and even determines our encounter with the world in a way not unlike the way that a floor plan shapes our encounter with a home (or a prison), or the way that unreliable narrators make us question the signification, let alone the meaning, of a text. Bultmannian de-mythologization seeks both to hamper the text of scripture's ability to shape our perceptions by undermining the 'mythological world-view' in its project of teaching us heaven is in the sky and hell beneath our feet, such that it is finally

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[356] Bultmann, 35.

[357] Felski, 163-4.

able to speak to us in our own language (the 'modern world-view') in unambiguous terms.[358] The very name of his project, however, betrays a tendency (not necessarily employed by Bultmann, but which certainly emerges in the tradition his work inaugurated) to a destructive approach to Scripture in favour of an existentialist essence of the narrative.

Bultmann is not wrong that we cannot return to a pre-modern worldview, nor should we want to. However, too enthusiastic a desire to disentangle the *kerygma* from the text and especially from the mythological elements of the narrative does not do justice to the mythic sensibility of the Christian *mythos*. The story, including the mythic and mythological elements, and its effect on the reader are important parts of the *kerygma* itself. The *mythos* of Christ is nothing other than the very mythological elements brought under the de-mythological scalpel by Bultmann: the Incarnation, the crucifixion, the Resurrection. It is by encountering the world through this *mythos*, in all its offensiveness to modern, scientific sensibilities, that it is able to interpret the world to the faithful Christian. Many of the first hearers of the Christian evangel of peace, which surely was shared in terms of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, knew as well as we do that the dead do not rise from the grave.[359] It is a mistake to believe, as Bultmann apparently does, that the first Christians would have entertained a naïve credulity in the face of the narrative of the Resurrection. It is a story 'designed' to offend the imperial sensibilities of the Romans, the philosophical sensibilities of the Greeks, and the holiness sensibilities of the Jews. The offence is also part of the *mythos*. Its unwillingness to be bound by the conventions of history, mythology, neo-Platonist religious philosophy, or imperial propaganda is a constitutive part of the Christian *mythos*. To return to the image of the spoil-sport, the *mythos* of Christ spoils the very *mythoi* that Bultmann wishes to allow to condition it. By entering the mythic sensibility of the Christian evangel, the narrative of Christ's life,

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[358] Throughout *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, Bultmann consistently refers to 'the meaning' of things, as though there were ever and always only one.

[359] This is, of course, represented in the Biblical opposition between Pharisees (who preached resurrection) and Sadducees (who did not). For more, see C. D. Elledge, *Resurrection of the Dead in Early Judaism, 200 BCE-CE 200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), especially Chapter 5. Celsus and other pagan writers similarly found the idea of bodily resurrection incredible, even ridiculous. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 31.

death, and resurrection interprets the *mythoi* of secular modernity. It becomes an actor and not merely the passive object of interpretation or a vessel, or even a tool (however transformative or transcendent) in the cause of the Church's preaching. As Bultmann himself notes above, the primitive church was concerned 'not only [with] his preaching of the Kingdom of God but first of all [with] his person.'[360] The person, the body, the life of Christ is itself the content of the Christian *mythos*, as borne out in the life of the Church, in the sacraments, *and* in the preaching of the Word.

One of the chief advantages of Felski's Actor-Network Theory approach to literature is the importance it places on the text as a member of a cultural network of signification, reference, and interpretation. The 'meaning' or meanings of a text are not only determined by, but embedded in the life-stories of the interpretive communities who have received and passed the text along,[361] and those lives are in turn conditioned by or even constituted by other lives. As Gerard Loughlin puts it, 'All human life-stories are woven out of and into other life-stories.'[362] For the Christian and the Christian community that is the Church, this is all the more true with regard to the life-story, the *mythos* of Jesus Christ:

> The story of Christ is not finished. It includes the stories of all those people who were touched by him, and of the people touched by them, and so on through the Church's touching history: through the laying on of hands. But there is another more important sense in which Christ's story is not over but continuing. It is the sense in which Jesus Christ is not dead but alive, having left the past in order to return from the future. The Church is not to look for the living among the dead, modelling itself upon a memory, for Jesus has gone on ahead, awaiting those who follow after. The Church is shaped by a story that is even now being told. It is shaped *within* a story that it has also shaped and is shaping: the story of the Body of Christ.[363]

The 'reading' of the *mythos* of Christ is its being lived out: this is the vocation of the Church, and the Church is most itself when it is faithfully living out that ongoing story. The *mythos* of Christ includes his ongoing, resurrected life and not merely the content of his eschatological

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[360] Bultmann, 16.

[361] See the discussion of myth and interpretive communities in Chapter One.

[362] Loughlin, 82.

[363] Loughlin, 86.

preaching. Bultmann is right to qualify the resurrection and the resurrected body of Christ as the subject of myth. He is mistaken, however, to write it off as 'mythological'. The quality of living within the story, or participating in its ongoing-ness, is constitutive of the Church's own story and the life-stories of those who are members of it. The *mythos* is lived out in that history of touching and being touched; in the tactile transmission and re-membering of the story, the Church is able to enact the unfinished story of Christ. As will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, this requires reflection upon the preaching, teaching, and indeed myth-making of Jesus himself, but the mythic participation *in* that story through its re-articulation and embodied enactment, rather than the reflection on the story, is what makes the Church church. And, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, incorporation into the Christian *mythos* is not simply a matter of choice and ethics, but of the sacramental in-bodying and corporate participation that comes with baptism.

The world encountered through the *mythos* of Christ is distinctive. Were it not, there would be nothing to recommend it over other *mythoi*. Through it, the Church has hallowed time and space, and believers have come to a new or renewed understanding of themselves and others. The liturgical year, orientated around the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, allows Christians throughout history to say in the Exsultet on the eve of Easter: 'This is the night when Jesus vanquished hell, broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave. This is the night when all who believe in him are freed from sin, restored to grace and holiness.' From the vantage of another *mythos*, the proposition is meaningless: Not only does the date of Easter change year to year, such that the very idea of 'this night' is confounded in terms of the annual return of dates to which we are accustomed in the secular calendar,[364] let alone what can be meant by 'this night' given that the events recounted in the Exsultet include not only the Resurrection of Christ, but the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt through the Red Sea and the Passover feast that commemorates and re-members it. Finally, it is only through by the hermeneutic presence of the Christian *mythos* that words such as 'deliverance',

[364] See George Jaroszkiewicz, *Images of Time: Mind, Science, Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), especially Chapter 4.

'resurrection', 'vanquished hell', and 'freed from sin' have any meaning at all. Its premises that we live in some sense separated from the God who is the source of our and all being, simultaneously at peril of utter separation and bearing the promise of full and final restoration to relationship with that God, interpret the terms of the encounter with 'this night', revealing it to be rich in significance and mythically resonant. That mythic resonance is the call that our response of mythopoiesis has enabled us to hear. The circularity of implantation of the Word and the Word's expression of itself through the believer's *poiesis* explored by Ward above points us to the inherent circularity of the mythic experience and the emergence of the mythic sensibility. The Christian is able to respond to God in faith (enact the *mythos* of Christ) through the already-given gift of that faith, itself accepted by having already been received. Once again, we participate in the self-offering of God to God, the perichoresis of the Trinity, analogically through our response to the text of creation, the grace of being, already given in our participation in God's being.

If we are able to understand mythopoiesis as a participation in God's offering of God to God's self and the Incarnation as the decisive, normative instance of this Trinitarian economy, then we can begin to discern how Christology grounds all mythopoiesis and how Christ is the condition of our myth-making. If the cosmos is revealed truly by the *mythos* of Christ as already peaceful, God as already victorious over sin and death, then it becomes possible to think of mythopoiesis, however disconnected from explicit reference to God, as an instance of participation in God's creativity in and through Christ. This is not to suggest that our myth-making is Christian no matter its content or context. However, it is through Christ that we can understand mythopoiesis as always already referring to God, pointing towards the infinite in halting and sometimes stumbling steps. The world revealed by the *mythos* of Christ is distinct from his preaching; misunderstanding this was Bultmann's error. However, the content of Christ's verbal teaching is inseparable from the shape of his life, and these together constitute the content of his *mythos*. So it is to Christ's own mythopoiesis that we now turn.

II. Christ's Mythopoiesis

Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei.[365] Patristics scholars are rightly incensed by Christians who excitedly translate the most famous passage of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* as 'The glory of God is the human being fully alive', as though the second-century bishop were a modern self-help writer. Irenaeus was not advocating a piety orientated to modern ideas of personal fulfilment and self-actualisation. The matter turns, however, on what is meant by *vivens*. In countering the gnostic suggestion that Jesus only *seemed* to be a living, breathing human, to translate *vivens* not simply as 'alive' but 'fully alive' bears some of the same weight as the Creed's 'true God from true God' — when we say 'alive', we mean alive in every sense: fully alive. And this entails a 'fully alive-ness' including and beyond the dreams of the self-help industry. Rather, the state of being fully alive is John's 'that they might have life and have it abundantly': human being as revealed in Jesus as peace-making, self-giving, trusting in God's providence, reconciling difference.[366] Jesus is alive in every way that other human beings are alive, and because this human being is God incarnate, his humanity is a vision of God's own self: *vita hominis visio Dei*. If these two statements are accurate ways of speaking both about human beings and about God, then in some sense what is true of Jesus Christ is true of all human beings. God being in a human way appears as perfected human being; it is not analogically human being, in the way that our goodness is analogically related to God's Goodness, but the actual perfection and completion of what it is to be human. Christ is the archetype of human being, the firstborn of all creation, the new Adam. If this is so, and mythopoiesis is a constitutive element of the human way of being, then it remains to discover what we can say about mythopoiesis in light of Jesus' myth-making and what we can say about Jesus that cannot otherwise be said except in the light of his mythopoiesis. Together, these will illuminate how a Christian participatory theology of mythopoiesis can speak to discipleship

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[365] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.xx. *Sancti Irenaei episcopi Lugdunensis Libros quinque adversus haereses*, ed. William Wigan Harvey (London: Gregg Press, 1857/1965), 219.
[366] John 10.10.

and *theosis*, as we make toward God not only in ontological participation but in the double participation that comes in and through the Incarnation.

The Incarnation reveals that participation in God is not limited to the ontological participation in God's being that comes with being a creature. Jesus' human way of being participates perfectly in God's Triune way of being such that it reveals the possibility of human participation in the life of God through him. In what follows, we will seek to unfold this in terms of Jesus' mythopoiesis. Part of the Christian *mythos* is the insistence that in Jesus Christ, *mythos* and *logos* co-inhere, each expressing the other: that the principles underlying the universe, the very ordering which is made evident in the capacities of reason, are brought somehow into consonance with the meaning-full narrative and relational being that is peculiar to humans. To name Christ as the *Logos* is, in terms of mythic sensibility, to assert that our reason itself is underwritten by the Trinitarian offering of God to God. In this sense, the ordering principles of the universe, to which we have access through deduction and investigation, become most fully visible through the *mythos* of God's own making in the event of the Incarnation. Our *logos* participates in the *Logos* of God through the operations of the *mythos* of Christ, himself a myth-maker, in both his life and his words.

This participation by God in human mythopoiesis grounds and makes visible in history the Trinitarian dynamics of our making toward God, our mythopoiesis as a *poietic* response to the text of the world. It has been taken for granted to this point that this human making can be more or less faithful to the text as given, more or less resonant with God's revelation of God's self to the creation. Occluded by sin, our making toward God is faulty, inadequate to the task to which we have set ourselves, at times, tragically so. One need only think of the hateful *mythoi* of history to observe how our mythopoiesis goes awry even as we, at root, seek to glorify God. As was suggested in the previous chapter, if the mythic sensibility is a game, some games stand in need of spoiling: the work of the spoil-sport is part of Christ's vocation and the Christian's vocation. In this light, we can view the parables, Jesus' most obvious myth-making, as stories framed in terms both of the unthinkable peace of God and the disruption of

the presumption inherent in our faulty mythic sensibilities. Ricoeur introduces the idea of a tension or a rhythm within metaphor, the oscillation between 'is' and 'is not'.[367] The speaking of a novel metaphor is an interruption in the flow of language that opens new horizons of signification, collapsing the distance between what is and what is pointed to by way of an arresting image: that which is signified is perceived through the image and understood on the image's terms.[368] God's self-revelation cannot be otherwise than a disruption of our delusion and sinful mis-takes. Appropriating that revelation to our experience of the world, participating in the mythic sensibility so revealed, is not an activity wholly within the capacity of our wills, however.

We observed with Mark Allen Powell in the previous chapter how, in the case of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, existing mythic sensibilities will always already characterise our ability to hear and to enter into the mythic sensibilities of Jesus' parables, even when they are approached with the generosity of mind and heart that are brought by theological students.[369] If this is so, then it is difficult to see how Jesus' mythopoiesis can effect the kind of sport-spoiling disruption attributed to them. For instance, N. T. Wright writes that parables, 'seem designed, within the worldview of the Jewish village population at the time, as tools to break open the prevailing worldview and replace it with one that was closely related but significantly adjusted at every point.'[370] Like Bultmann, Wright considers the parables in terms of Jesus' preaching; that is, in terms of verbal-aural teaching, content delivery, and the impact on the hearers. As we consider Jesus as the archetype of human mythopoiesis and in the full light of the Incarnation, however, the Christological import of Jesus' preaching appears. From the vantage of mythic sensibility, the matter seems to be a complex of disposition, interpretation,

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[367] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 456ff.

[368] C. S. Lewis differentiates between the 'Master's metaphor' and the 'Pupil's metaphor': 'The first is freely chosen; it is one among many possible modes of expression; it does not at all hinder, and only very slightly helps, the thought of its maker. The second is not chosen at all; it is the unique expression of a meaning that we cannot have on any other terms...' from 'Bluspels and Flalansefers: A Semantic Nightmare' in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 255. The mythic operates all along this spectrum as the dynamics of mythic sensibility and mythopoiesis act and inter-act.

[369] Which, on reflection, may be less than one might otherwise desire.

[370] N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 175.

and practice. Heard with the ears of Christian faith, the parables are not simply the words of an itinerant teacher, but the praxis of God incarnate: the disruption and re-arrangement of our seeing is revelatory of something of the character of God's own self, and the parabolic preaching is a part of God's self-disclosure, including and exceeding the content of the teaching. In his reflection on the Epistle of James, Ward writes, 'The Christian act [...] realizes an unfathomable paradox in which that which is created in the image of God is crossed by that which is God himself. The activity of God crosses through the activity of being human.'[371] This crossing finds its ontological origin in the Incarnation: In Jesus' parable-making and mythopoiesis, God participates humanly in the specially human participation in the Trinitarian return of God to God. The parables are exemplary in this regard, in their character as both revelatory and disruptive of our sense of the world neatly, encapsulating the mythic sensibility. They enact both the challenge that the being of God poses to our assumptions about reality and the care of God towards us as creatures, who is unwilling to let us persist in mistaken delusion.

If the creation can be understood as the text of God's speaking and our making as a response to and interpretation of that text, a participation in that act of creation, then Jesus' own making is God taking up that human making properly into God's own being. When Jesus speaks in parables of the father of the prodigal son, of the unjust judge, of the widow who has lost her coin, of the king who invites strangers to the wedding banquet, we cannot stop at an understanding of this speech in terms of the historical Jesus speaking of a God wholly other than the one speaking, as if he were simply another teacher weaving new images for his hearers. For the past two centuries, discussion of Jesus' preaching and parables has conventionally been conducted under the auspices of critical New Testament scholarship and has been generally preoccupied with which sayings can be considered 'authentic' and how we can know.[372] As Marinus de Jonge reminds us, however, 'One of the main contributions of

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371 Graham Ward, 'Kenosis, Poiesis and Genesis', 172.

372 The Jesus Seminar's system of colour-coding and deciding by vote 'how authentic' a saying is represents this tendency drawn to an absurd if logical conclusion.

Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* was his demonstration of the close link between historical and theological motives behind the search for the real Jesus.'[373] That is, the authenticity so desired by historical and textual analysis is never wholly separable from a theology and so a mythic sensibility. Bultmann's genius is to recognise the role that mythic sensibility plays in our approach to the Gospels: their sensibility is different from that of the present, secular age, and the two are not commensurate. Bultmann's failure, however, is in the assumption that one can escape the mythic altogether, in seeking to extract from that first-century *mythos* something which can survive, as it were, naked and without the clothing of the narrative in which it was first encountered. By reading mythology as something to be interpreted,[374] rather than something to enter into, Bultmann robs the parables of their ability to speak on their own terms: 'The aim is not to eliminate the mythological statements but to interpret them. It is a method of hermeneutics.'[375] However, Bultmann's enthusiasm to strip the parables bare does not take adequate account of the speaker's identity and the soteriological dynamics of the event of Christ's speech itself.

Against this kind of hermeneutic, Eberhard Jüngel argues for the integrity of the parabolic narratives themselves. Jüngel's central concern is to avoid distancing any 'meaning' the parables might convey from the event of their speaking and from the speaker himself: 'The Kingdom comes to speech *in* parable *as* parable. The parables of Jesus bring the Kingdom of God to speech *as* parable.'[376] Because Jesus is the inauguration or first fruits of the Kingdom of God, his speech cannot be considered other than the arrival of the Kingdom of God. Because Jesus *is* God's arrival among human beings in this new way, and because Jüngel uses the logic of the 'speech-event' to conceptualise the parables, he is able to regard the event of their speaking (which occurs no less in the 'event' of the Gospels today than in the first century) as the arrival of the Kingdom and 'present-ation' of Jesus (and so God) himself. He writes, 'the parables not

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[373] Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: the Servant-Messiah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 20.

[374] Bultmann, 18.

[375] Bultmann, 18.

[376] Eberhard Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus. Eine Untersuchung zur Prdzisierung der Frage nach dem Ursprung der Christologie* (J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tubingen), 135, translated by and quoted in John Bainbridge Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (1986), 10.

only lead us to the centre of Jesus' proclamation but also point to the person of the proclaimer, to the secret of Jesus himself.'[377] For Jüngel, the form and content of the parables are inseparable because, by virtue of being Jesus' speaking-into-being the Kingdom itself, they are not reducible to a meaning behind or below the words, images, and mythic sensibility they present. The semantic oscillation between 'is' and 'is not' observed by Ricoeur becomes for Jüngel a point of fascination for the hearer. The novelty that emerges in metaphorical speech is generated by navigating the distance between the 'is' of a parabolic metaphor (God is an unjust judge) and the 'is not' (God is not a human being and is infinitely different from us), and the tension and interest of that navigation 'addresses' the hearer.[378] The metaphor catches our attention and invites a new way of seeing. The parallels with mythic sensibility are clear, but the active nature of parabolic speech, catching and directing the hearer's attention, invites reflection on the dynamics of the shift between mythic sensibilities. The fascination that analogical or parabolic speech can exert on a listener is an aspect of the aesthetic draw discussed in the previous chapter. As myth-making, therefore, Jesus' parables disrupt listeners' way of thinking and seeing the world (by metaphorical disjunction), offer a new way of seeing *as* in terms of the parabolic image contained in the saying (we relate to one another not as rivals but as fellow-supplicants before God, the judge), and also make present to listeners God's own self as the grounding and disrupting presence of Being itself, inviting us into fuller and more truly human being.

How, then, do we account for many or most of Jesus' hearers *not* undergoing the change in perspective the parables were meant to engender? In what sense can we think of Jesus' mythopoiesis (in both action and word) as archetypal and originary for all human myth-making if it proved so spectacularly unsuccessful? Is it a matter, as Bultmann might have it, of a different strategy of interpretation? Balthasar develops Jüngel's insights as he draws his logic into a more general and more explicitly analogical and participatory idiom: 'Christianity,

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[377] Jüngel, *Paulus und Jesus*, 87, quoted in Webster, 9.

[378] Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L Guder (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 290.

however, holds fast to the truth that the language of the flesh is, not a rough, but an adequate expression of the Word, even as it does not abolish the distance between them and so keeps in place the distinction between idol and icon.'[379] Christ's speech is, necessarily, human speech, but this does not prevent it from presenting the divine, any less than his human being fails to present divine being, even if in a human way. Like Jüngel, Balthasar rejects the idea that the parables represent mysteries to be unraveled or puzzles to be solved: 'Christ never intended the parables to conceal; rather, he intended them, in their very core, to unveil. For him, they were the divine love bearing witness to itself in him. He spoke them in order to show this love and to invite us to follow it.'[380] In this, the parables are not unlike Christ himself, revealing God by his human appearing: 'The created images (for man himself is an image) become transparent to the self-emptying love of God and are drawn into it.'[381] Nor, it should be noted, is the image of God otherwise accessible or finally expressible; the image *shows* God transparently rather than simply gesturing to something referentially. None of this is possible, however, without the gift of faith. Without faith, the pre-extension of the ability to hear by God to the hearer, both Jesus and his preaching are 'a strange incomprehensible language, which subsequent explanation must always decipher for the narrower circle of disciples.'[382] That is, perceived from the outside, the parables, and indeed any *mythos* is, as Armstrong would have it, incredible, a strange nonsense that must be decoded in order to be intelligible. From *within*, that is, from the vantage of faith, the parables, the *mythos*, are revelatory rather than veiling, interpretive rather than to be interpreted. It is not enough to *hear*, one must *act* in order for the meaning of Jesus' preaching to become real.

In the parables, Jesus tells stories in order for his listeners to encounter the world as meaningful. These stories cannot be separated from his life which itself forms a narrative through which we are able to encounter the world as meaningful. In Jüngel's analysis, the

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379 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory, Volume II: The Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985/2004), 271.

380 Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 275.

381 Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 275.

382 Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 275.

preaching in parables, the parables themselves, and the life of the one preaching them are all means by which God makes God's self known to the creation. They are God's self-interpretation of the text of creation. To hear, and even better to enter into and to participate in the mythic sensibility of Jesus' preaching and the narrative of his life, is to participate in the life of the *logos* of God in and through *mythos*, through the human generativity that allows meaningful encounter with the world. This is the means by which God has shown God's self to the world, and so we are able to speak of what Ward calls the Christological operations of culture.[383] The mythopoiesis of God in Christ's teaching and passion, the making of myths and the making of himself a *mythos,* takes up human myth-making into the life of God and demonstrates the power of mythopoiesis to speak toward God's own self. This is not to suggest that our mythopoiesis must mimic or mirror Jesus' preaching in order to be considered 'participating' in God's being and speaking, any more than we must imitate his way of life in its specific, local detail. Rather, participation in the concurrence of *mythos* and *logos* in Christ is a matter of *getting inside* and finding our way out, of putting on Christ not in imitation but in formation. The human living which Irenaeus tells us is the glory of God is not identical with itinerant preaching in Aramaic to first-century Jews and Samaritans at the fringes of the Roman Empire, nor is it crucifixion at the hands of that Empire's officials. If that were so, it would be forever beyond us. Rather, it is an entering into the oscillations of the analogical dynamics of Jesus, the parable of God. It is by entering into and living out the mythic sensibility so presented (and specifically presented in those historical and mythological terms) that we are able to become conformed to the way of being in the world that is God's being in the world and so a participation in God's way of being in God's self. As Balthasar makes clear, entrance into that *mythos* relies upon the first gift of faith, the in-drawing of desire for the beauty of God. We cannot get there on our own. Instead, through baptism, we are formally inaugurated into the mythic being of God in Christ and in the name of Christ. Like all

[383] Ward, *Christ and Culture*, 1ff.

sacraments, it represents both an action and a recognition of God's already-having-acted, and it is to this that we now turn.

III. Baptism

> *'Thus was he given his name by one very wise in the uses of power.'*[384]
> — Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

To affirm the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the normative instance of human being, and so of human mythopoiesis, is both to insist upon the *mythos* of Jesus Christ as the one most clearly revelatory of the meaningfulness of the world and to insist on participation in that *mythos* as the most humanly meaningful expression of mythic sensibility. It is to admit to having been captivated and seduced by the beauty of the *mythos* and to speak of the revelation of the fullness of meaning it reveals. Already we have observed with Balthasar that participation in the Christian *mythos* both requires and in some sense constitutes the gift of faith which Christian theology has always insisted is the pre-requisite to salvation, sanctification, and the growing into Christ which is the *telos* of the Christian life. The dynamics of this movement, from un-faith to faith, has been considered above in mythopoieic terms as operating by way of desire: the Christian *mythos* grasps the would-be Christian aesthetically before it convinces logically. There is nothing to say that this willing seduction by the Christian *evangel* must happen in the context of the Church or other than over the course of a long period of life. Nonetheless, the entrance into the mythic sensibility of Jesus' life and the disruptive encounter with the parables' disclosure of God is marked out sacramentally by baptism, as the formal beginning of the Christian's life in Christ and, through formation and sanctification, in some sense as Christ. It is a decisive response to the call of the beauty of the Christian *mythos* and the God to which it points.

In the previous chapter, we approached this beauty by way of the call, locating the beautiful at the genesis of language itself, which is, at its root, the practice of naming: 'The origin of the word "beautiful," *kalon*, does not constitute an etymology among others, but is

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[384] Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 16.

the very origin of language. The word *kalon* is the name of naming: it names that which, in speech, calls. [...] Beautiful, *kalon*, is what comes from a call, *kalein*, which continues to call through it and in it.'[385] The call of beauty and our response in myth-making forms the economy of mythopoiesis. At the climax of *Dialectics of Myth*, Losev condenses his analysis of 'mythic consciousness' from 'a miraculous personalistic history expressed in words' into the formula 'unfolded magical name.'[386] 'Unfolded' because the mythic explicates in a narrative way a hermeneutic sensibility, 'magical' because the mythic 'works miracles' in the revelation of meaning and correspondence with the mythic subject, and 'name' because just as a name refers to the whole being of a person, her history, physicality, and identity, the mythic consists a personalistic presence enabling the encounter with a meaningful world. All names bear some of this mythic charge. The renaming of Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul rank among the most important moments in the Biblical story, a doubling of the mythic quality of the Bible itself. Renaming is about more than personal identification: it is a matter of re-narration. The signification of names is only a part of it: from 'father' to 'father of many', 'heel-puller' to 'struggles with God', 'listening' to 'rock', 'prayed-for' to 'little one' — in each of these instances, the new name conveys a meaning, an agenda, a form of life, or a judgement, what Armstrong would call a 'plan for action'. However, it is in history, among company, that names take on their true mythic quality. As lover whispers his beloved's name as he falls asleep, a mythic depth is evoked for that person and they are brought into a kind of presence. As the dying man calls for his mother, the evocation of the name 'Mamma' rings with power for anyone who hears: the supplicatory name of all mothers evokes our own mothers and motherhood itself. As the judge recites the charges, the name of the accused is brought into the courtroom even if they are absent, their reference and history to be unfolded in the trial. When a feudal beadle reads out the law in the name of his lord, what is spoken is mythically bound up in the personhood, the narrative, and the meaning of that lord: the pronouncement participates in the lord's authority, it is given meaning and potency by the

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[385] Chrétien, 7.

[386] Losev, 186.

history and meaning of the one spoken of by name. To act in the name of another is to participate, justly or unjustly, in the mythic sensibility of the one named.

Just as the life of Christ is a *mythos* and the speech of Jesus is myth-making, so also, the name of Christ is mythic. It tells a story and it interprets the world. The name Χριστος tells a story of captivity and liberation, of patience and promise, of the culmination of hope and of the fragrance of blessed oils. The name distills the story into the person and the history into a word: to speak of Christ is to speak at once of the man Jesus of Nazareth, in his simplicity and complexity as the incarnate second person of the Trinity, as well as of the narrative of his life, death, and resurrection, and of the parables and preaching he made while among his followers, at a specific time and place in history. In the same way that the name of a loved one (or a hated enemy) conjures deep wells of resonance when it is spoken to one who knows well the person named, so, too does the name of Christ elicit, evoke, refer, re-present the story of Christ for those who are subjects of that *mythos*, to whom it reveals the world as meaningful in its light. Just as the sacrament of the Eucharist constitutes a re-entering and re-membering of the saving events of the Passion, the sacramental washing and naming of baptism re-figures and re-establishes the one baptised in and into the name of Christ. If Christian theology can meaningfully speak of the *mythos* of Christ as possessing the mythic sensibility which reveals the world most truly, most transparently to the God who is the source of its being, then it is through baptism that we can speak most clearly of entering into participation in that *mythos* and of the redemption and renewal of which it speaks: in baptism, the Christian takes on the name of Christ and all that it entails. Construed in terms of mythic sensibility and of formation in and into Christ, the re-establishment of right relationship with God that Christians have called and experienced as 'salvation' is not finally a matter of earned reward, of legal pronouncement, or even of gift suddenly received, but rather it is intimately bound up with discipleship the process of being drawn by the beauty of God into the name, that is the *mythos*, of Christ.

This is not to say that salvation in Christ is not a gift, nor that its irruption into our fallenness is not sudden or radical. It is rather to say that considered from the perspective of naming and of participation in the saving history and person of Jesus Christ, redemption is inseparable from a way of being in the world, drawn to and oriented by God. The hardening of the Reformation imperative of *sola fidei* against the idolatry of 'works' into the twentieth-century reduction of salvation to 'accepting Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and saviour' occludes the role in salvation of discipleship and formation, of growing *into* Christ within the historical, spatial context of created life. Baptism, as incorporation into the divine life of Christ, speaks then of entering into the ludic space afforded by Christ's *mythos*. The life Christ enacts saves, and baptism is the entering into of *that* life, of participating in that salvation, in and through history. It is thus that Christians can speak of action in the name of Christ, that is, in Christ's life, his *mythos*, all of which collapse into each other in the experience of salvation: 'I am in you, and you are in me.' The action of Christ is eternal, but we are situated in history. It is thus possible to speak of the interruption of history by the eternal event of Christ's saving life, as well as the historical process of growing into the fullness of that life after baptism. Whether spoken of in terms of sanctification, deification, or *theosis*, the process of living more fully into the life, the *mythos* of Christ occurs in time, and it can be thought in terms of relating to God and the world through the mythic sensibility operative in Christ's *mythos*.

As St Paul has it, baptism incorporates the Christian into the body of Christ. The catechumen 'puts on Christ' as her self-narration is woven into Christ's self-narration; she begins to participate in the mythic identity of Christ. This mythic-narrative mode of understanding baptism challenges the conventional insistence that baptism is primarily a sacramental washing from sin, as though such stains prevent one meriting the reward of Heaven. Rather, the baptismal re-narration of the self, the re-inscription of the person into the *mythos* of Christ, represents the beginning of a participation in the peaceful ontology of Christ's mythic sensibility. It is a re-orientation of the person in community toward the

emerging Kingdom of Heaven, peace beyond understanding. To return to the analogy of the game, once baptised, one begins 'playing the game' of the Christian *mythos*. Through sin, deviation from the 'rules' of the game as revealed by that *mythos*, one can receive 'penalties' or even be ejected temporarily from the game. However, one remains a player and one remains characterised by the rules and hermeneutic frame of the game. In this sense I am not thinking of the formality of a practice of excommunication (which itself is only meaningful relevant to the *mythos* of the Church), but rather the distortions of perception and meaning-making that come with sin: the self-justifications, the compartmentalisations, the rationalisations that remove one from the game that the others are playing even as one *thinks* one is still on the pitch. Baptism is the beginning of the formation of a Christian *character*, an ongoing process of *theosis*, of growing into Christ's, and so the Trinity's, mythic resonances. Being baptised into Christ, Paul says we have 'put on Christ'. This, in mythic terms, is another way that it can be said we both are Christ in baptism and are not: the tensive relationship of the parable once again becomes the space in which meaning is encountered and the Christian lives. By taking on the name of Christ in baptism, by 'putting on' the name of Christ, the Christian is folded into the continuity of mythopoieic naming that undergirds the whole of creation, the exchange of names that constitutes the relationship of creator to creation.

Names are given and they are taken. In the *mythos* of creation in Genesis 2, the first human gives names to all created things, and this is the mythic birth of human language. The giving of names in the Bible has often been construed strictly as a gesture of power-over. The named is understood to be subject to the namer, and the namer is held to exert control over the named by virtue of the act of naming.[387] Under this interpretation, the first human's giving of names is an aspect of humanity's 'dominion' over the rest of the created world. While this dynamic of power-over represents one dynamic in naming, naming in the Bible is complex and variable. It

[387] This dynamic has been forcefully argued by feminist theologians at least since Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). This interpretation also has roots in ancient and widespread conceptions of the magical power of names. In his *Magic in Names and Other Things* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1920), Edward Clodd offers an early catalogue of the global incidence of this relationship.

may also be understood more generally as the establishment of a relationship, as a recognition and an appreciation.[388] To give a thing its proper name is to accurately discern what is there, and what it can be, a Heideggerian calling-into-being as itself. As participants in the Trinitarian economy of call and response, naming (and so language, too), is also a participation in the divine creativity. What follows is not an attempt to wade into linguistic and Biblical-historical arguments beyond the scope of this thesis or my own expertise. It is rather to reflect on what the 'meta-mythic' qualities of these foundational *mythoi* reveal about our mythopoiesis generally, and the specificity of the Christian *mythos* in particular, especially as it relates to Christian formation and growing into the person of Christ.

The distinction between the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3 is well-established, and a naïve conflation or concatenation of the two is an error.[389] However, not only do they come to us side-by-side, they are united in at least one regard: they both demonstrate and rely upon the importance both of language in general and naming in particular. Naming and call are the medium of creation: God calls the world into being and gives names to creatures in Chapter One, and the first human participates in that naming, giving names to the animals in Chapter Two, and using the gift of language created by God. Jewish as well as Christian theology has always emphasised the omnipotence and unmediated nature of divine action.[390] That both creation narratives rely on language for creation is more than reliance on the conventions of folklore and important beyond the distinctions that the writers of the Priestly account sought to draw from the creation narratives of Babylon.[391] Language is the medium of creation because divine creation is fundamentally a *communication*. It is not first an exercise of power or dominion, but rather the establishment of the means by which God can be God for *others*.[392] And so, the first thing created is language:

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[388] For instance, many of the etiological stories of naming in Genesis, such as Abram's naming of Bethel in Genesis 12.8, represent the encoding of a relationship between the land and the people.

[389] Westermann, 16.

[390] David Burrell, CSC, 'Maimonides, Aquinas and Ghazali: distinguishing God from world' in *the Scottish Journal of Theology*, 63/3 (2008), 270-287.

[391] See Chapter Two.

[392] Barth would have this as *for us*. Eco-theology and the crises of the twentieth century around precisely who constitutes 'us' invites a certain reticence in this regard.

in speaking, 'Let light be', God creates creating.[393] Further, as human beings participate in this gift of language, they can only do it partially, in a finite way, divided between finite individuals. The gift of language is the means of bridging the difference between individuals, of expressing and elaborating meaning. From God to the creation, this expression is identical with creation: to speak to the creation is to create the creation. Between creatures, the birth of language is also the birth of culture: the making and interpretation of limited, finite expression. This very finitude provides the possibility of sin, that creatures should choose otherwise than for God.

It is no coincidence that the rupture of sin should emerge mythically not in the *mythos* of consummate order that culminates in 'it was very good', but in the *mythos* which, after a prologue of divine creativity, begins with the first human participation in that creativity, in the naming of the beasts and the rest of creation. From the beginning, the *mythos* tells us, our participation in the divine creativity has been partial, limited, and subject to failure. The second creation myth has its climax in the first, wilful *mis*identification of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as *permissible* when it has already been declared *forbidden*. Or, put another way, the story that had been told about the tree by God (if you eat of this tree you will die) is distorted into another story about the tree told by the serpent (if you eat of this tree you will not die).[394] If the first human's naming of the beasts is the inauguration of mythopoiesis, the eating of the fruit is the inauguration of the misapplication of this gift. Sin begins in mythopoiesis gone wrong: a story told in order to encounter the world as *meaning what the first humans would have it mean*, the introduction of self-delusion into the process of making toward meaning. Even before the disobedience of eating the fruit comes the distortion of the properly human mode of participation in God's creativity: from naming to mis-naming, from myth-making to mis-making the story we tell ourselves. This distorted mythopoiesis then

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393 'The only explanation for the use of language in Gen. 1:3 then is that fiat lux is the true instance of the creation not (only) of light but of language.' Jonathan Yovel, 'The Creation of Language and Language Without Time: Metaphysics and Metapragmatics' in Genesis' in *Biblical Interpretation*, 20/3 (2012), 207.

394 In the context of the myth, the serpent enjoys the distinctly human capacity for story-telling. The way that the first humans appropriate the serpent's story by their action makes it their own.

reveals the world as meaningful, contrarily to God's first narration: a misreading of the text of creation and a faulty interpretation emerges in the mythopoiesis of self-justification. The shame that follows is itself a product of bad mythopoiesis: the man and the woman see themselves in their nakedness wrongly, not as beloved creatures but as objects of anger and derision. God re-initiates the call to which the creation has responded and to which the creation is the response, but in place of the effortless flow of call and response into which the man and woman were created, there is embarrassed shuffling and hiding from the one who has called them into being. Distorted mythopoiesis has disrupted the human beings' participation in the divine creativity, even as it *is* a participation in the divine creativity. The response that the man and woman give is a cascade of distorted mythopoiesis, casting blame from the man to the woman and from the woman to the serpent. Even as as *mythos*, this story accurately reveals something fundamental about fallen human nature. It would, of course, come to be misapplied in history, replicating the cascade of blame as it becomes the cornerstone of the Church's institutional misogyny. It both names and inaugurates our misapplied participation in God's creative economy. The second creation myth is, then, not only about the genesis of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, but also the genesis of our myth-making and our mis-application of it. It is about the giving of names and the mis-application of them. It is a myth about the power of naming and the power of stories to establish relationships and to rupture them.

In this way, the Christian narrative of salvation begins in the mythic and the meta-mythic: a narrative about the mythic power of names to shape identity, relationships, and the meaning of the world and of the self. When St Paul speaks of Jesus as the new Adam, of the Christian putting on Christ, of the Church as Christ's body, and salvation as new life, he speaks of the restoration of our right relationship with God, and so of our full humanity, in the terms of the *mythos* of these creation stories. All accounts of creation are mythic, whether folkloric, scientific, or simply conjectural, inasmuch as they shape the way that we encounter what is as pregnant with (or devoid of) meaning. What makes the Creation narratives of Genesis 1 and

2-3 especially germane to the consideration of mythopoiesis is how the mythic itself is the means of creation. As such, it is fitting the the mythic be implicated in the means of salvation. Our understanding of the meaning of the mystery we have named 'God' is itself mythic, of course. However, at this moment it is vital to return to the admonition made in Chapter One: though mythic it is never '*just* mythic'. We are never free from a mythic sensibility so long as we use language that is the product and medium of culture, that has signifying resonances that echo though history, and which is bound up with the stories we have told and continue to tell about ourselves and the world. The cosmos encountered through the mythic sensibility of Christ is one in which Christ's saving action is eternal and real: it is not merely a story; it is the meaning of the story, the reality which confronts us. Just as the Kingdom is made present through Jesus' parables, the saving operations of Christ's incarnation and passion are made available through the *mythos* manifest in scripture, the liturgical and sacramental life of the church, and in the historical weight of Christian lives. By adopting the Christian *mythos* as one's own, by allowing it to overcome you, the Christian is able to participate in those saving operations, both in and finally, in some sense as, Christ. This entering-in is spoken of and practiced in the sacrament of baptism, the taking on of Christ's name, and so *mythos*, as one's own.

Into the Name of Christ

> ὅσοι γαρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύθσασθε
> 'For as many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ.'[395]
> — Galatians 3.27

In 2015, a transgender man asked his vicar if he could be re-baptised in his new name. His vicar, Reverend Christopher Newland, replied that 'Once you've been baptised, you're baptised.'[396] While Newland did arrange a re-affirmation of baptismal vows and a blessing in the man's new name, the man's question and the confusion in the media who covered the story reveals the complex relationship between baptism, naming, and how we understand ourselves in light of our identity in Christ. Sarah Lawrence observes that while *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* both grasped Newland's insistence that the liturgy he planned constituted 'a ceremony akin to a baptism', the BBC repeatedly referred to it as a 'second baptism', even over Newland's objections in an interview on *The World at One*.[397] The reason for this confusion is to be found largely in the peculiar connection in English between naming and baptism. That many priests in the Church of England are frequently asked to perform 'christenings' on the children of people whom they have never met and who would not understand themselves to be Christians attests to this dynamic. A christening, once the preferred name in English for the Christian rite of initiation until the Norman introduction of 'bapteme' eventually outpaced it, is now seen by many as a church-administered naming ceremony, with some connection to the Christian world of 'the old days', but now only redolent of 'religion' without being explicitly theological.[398] The confusion even for a regular churchgoer, such as the man requesting a re-baptism in his new name, reflects not only the historical role of the church in

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395 Translation is mine.

396 Karen McVeigh, 'Church of England to consider transgender naming ceremony' in *The Guardian* (21 May 2015): https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/may/21/proposal-for-transgender-baptism-to-go-before-church-of-england (accessed 16 July 2020).

397 Sarah Lawrence, 'Christening and the Giving of a Name in Baptism: Some Linguistic Reflections' in *Practical Theology*, 9/1 (2016), 55-56.

398 The role of godparents in much English fiction likewise attests to the attenuated relationship between christening as rite of passage for a newborn and baptism as a Christian sacrament. The importance, for instance, of Sirius Black as Harry Potter's godfather is taken for granted by the novels, and Christianity is largely invisible in the fictional world.

the life of English society (being the only place to register the birth of a child until the nineteenth century), but the importance of names both for the individual and in the context of community. It was not enough for the man requesting a re-baptism that he adopt a new name to signify his new identity as a man. That decision had to be ratified both in the community of the church and in the presence of God. As Sarah Lawrence puts it:

> Baptism was not just associated with naming in the past because it was the only way of registering a birth and was the only opportunity for new babies to be given a name and a place in the community. It was associated with naming because the ceremony was seen as being all about the identity of an individual in the community, because the community was a Christian community. The person is christened, made a Christian person, a member of the community, one of 'us' and not of 'them', in this ceremony.[399]

Lawrence's study is based on a large-scale corpus linguistic study of how English speakers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used the words 'christen/christening' and 'baptise/baptism'. She notes the increasing importance on the naming aspect of baptism during the Reformation, as the other symbolic practices of baptism 'such as the giving of new clothes, the use of salt, oil and movements from outside to inside the church' were discarded in favour of the simpler reformed marking of regeneration in Christ.[400] Lawrence's linguistic approach has the benefit of allowing a small degree of access to the assumptions of Christians in this time of great theological and liturgical upheaval, as their views on Christian faith, social signification, and personal identity began to take on their modern form. The mythic resonances of naming, the sense that the giving of a name to a child bears an eternal charge, continues in contemporary England, even if explicit adherence to the faith of the Church stands largely in question or doubt.

What the interviews with Newland do not make clear is *why* re-baptism was not possible. The conflation of baptism and christening-as-naming has elided the second naming that constitutes the sacrament. From the earliest days of the Church, baptism has been understood

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[399] Lawrence, 56.

[400] Lawrence, 54.

as a baptism 'into the name of Jesus.'[401] Lars Hartman examines in detail the linguistic implications of the phrase 'into the name of Jesus', noting that the form is both un-Biblical (not appearing in the Septuagint) and un-Greek (atypical for ordinary Greek speech).[402] Hartman's conclusion is that the form is an Aramaicism, reflecting formulae to do with the authority sanctioning a sacrifice or offering. Sacrifices are said to be given 'into the name of' a god. This appropriation of a ritual phrase into the very different context of the earliest Church goes some way to explaining the significance of the strange usage for the first Christians. Hartman identifies, but does not elaborate upon, the conjunction of the 'into...' form with the Pauline imagery of 'putting on Christ'. Recognising the importance of clothing in establishing and communicating social standing and identity (the Christian is identified by his putting on of Christ in a way not dissimilar to a Roman being identifiable by the wearing of the toga), Hartman's analysis does not offer adequate consideration of how an offering or sacrifice to a god constitutes an incorporation of the offering into the god's identity. As Rowan Williams notes of Aristotelian language in the Christological debates of the third and fourth centuries, familiar language bends around Christian doctrine, giving it new meaning in order to accommodate the new reality of the Incarnation.[403] In this sense, it does not seem too far out of order to argue that the Pauline borrowing of the Aramaic ritual formula into a Christian context represents a considerable change in the meaning of the phrase; its very strangeness to Greek ears allowing the hearer to approach a new meaning through it. Because the change of baptism is not simply a matter of divine sanction for even the self-offering that constitutes one dimension of the sacrament. Rather the radical identification of the Christian with Christ's life, death, and resurrection (his *mythos*) engenders a new kind of identity. The 'I' of the Christian is fundamentally changed, identified with and as Jesus Christ. To be baptised into the name of Jesus is to take on Jesus' name as one's own, with all of the participatory consequences of that identification. The Christian's form of life changes as a result of this

401 Lars Hartman, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

402 Hartman, 38.

403 Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

naming; how she is seen by others and how she sees herself and the world. This name is shared by all Christians: all are one in Christ. The unique and beloved individual is given her own name as well. *This* one is given her 'Christian' name in the sight of God and the Church and is made new in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The importance of the 'Christian name' is not to be understated: the making of a Christian in baptism is a matter of the importance of *this* new Christian *in the context of* the Church which shares the one name of Christ. The merger of the mythic character of both names is what makes the event of baptism important and unique: it is both a naming and re-naming, an affirmation of the beloved child and an incorporation of the one into the pluriform name and body of Christ.

Viewed in this light, it would be a mistake to understand baptism merely in terms of the promise of salvation. As liturgists Charles Price and Louis Weil have it, 'Baptism is no insurance policy for salvation, but rather a commitment to a lifestyle radically different from that of the world.'[404] In time, baptism's cleansing by water would come to preoccupy the Christian imagination. From Constantine's reticence to receive baptism until his death bed so as to ensure dying in a state of grace to the medieval concern for the souls of unbaptised infants, the importance of baptism for the soul's fate came to overshadow the importance of baptism as a new birth that cannot be rescinded or undone any more than one can, as Nicodemus puts it, undo one's natural birth by returning to the womb. Approached in terms of the mythic, of Christ's mythopoiesis and own mythic sensibility, baptism in and into the name of the Trinity (incorporating baptism into the name of Jesus), represents a culturally-mediated act of divine agency, in which the catechumen participates in the enactment of the sacrament, and into which the catechumen grows in discipleship and the formation of character. Understood in this way, it becomes easier to see how the affirmations of the baptismal creed, 'Do you believe...' become less a theological litmus test for membership, and more a commitment to a new relationship to God, the self, and the world. As has been

[404] Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living* (New York: Moorehouse, 200), 69.

extensively demonstrated, the *credo*/πιστευω of the creeds bears at least as much of a charge of trust as it does cognitive assent.[405] By affirming the creeds of the Church, the body of Christ, the catechumen aligns herself in terms of mythic performance, inscribing her own story into the mythic account of Christ, orientating her perceptions in the way that the *mythos* of Christ directs them. The Christian *mythos* speaks of alienation from God in terms of mis-naming and the resulting distortion of identity and perception that follows. Mythopoiesis fails with humankind in mis-naming and mis-narrating our relationship to God. Re-entering the faithful mythopoiesis of Christ begins in baptism, the re-naming and re-narrating of the human being and the human being's relationship to God.

Conclusion

When St Matthew reports Jesus instructing his disciples to 'go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', the effect is one of a wholesale re-orientation of creation toward God. It is a re-inscription of the world into the practiced *mythos* of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It is on this basis that the Christian may speak of the universality of the Christian *mythos*: not in terms of a hegemonic authority in service to empire (as, of course, the Great Commission would later be employed) but as a universal perception of the whole of creation through the name, and so the life and operations, of the God who creates the world, who appears in history as the living body of Christ, and who continues to enact the return of God to God through the Holy Spirit. Baptism, as a re-naming, and so re-narrating and re-myth-making, enables this revelation of meaning and seeing the world as both the scene and the action of participation in God's being, and as the invitation into participation in God's life. Through baptism, as incorporation into Christ's name and body, the possibility opens for growth *into* the fullness of that mythic identity. As mythic, the participatory identity with Christ will always remain beyond simple identification and understanding: the sensibility remains, for lack of a better

[405] See for example, James Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 1: Prolegomena (London, England: T & T Clark International, 2006), 68. The derivation of *credo* from *cor* + *do*, 'I give my heart' points in this direction as well.

word, 'numinous', revelatory without exhausting that which is revealed. The infinite beauty of God is intimated, but never fully communicated, by the Christian *mythos*. As such, the Christian is always able to grow further into it, more deeply grasping and being grasped by it. This, of course, is the matter of mysticism and the mystery of prayer. Understood in terms of the mythic, however, one is able to speak of the capacity of the Christian *mythos* to shape the way that we perceive the world and shape the way that we live in it, in terms that are both common to all people and firmly rooted in the witness of Christ himself. As an aspect of the dynamics of creation itself, Christian theology can speak of the *mythos* of Christ in fundamental terms, embracing all human beings and grounding mythopoiesis in God's revelation of God's self to the world.

The mythic dimension of the Incarnation, the *mythos* of Christ himself and Christ's mythopoiesis in the parables, represents to Christian faith the definitive expression not only of myth-making, but of the union of human life, myth-making, and the meaning that is revealed by the union of the two. Jesus' Passion and teaching, as constituted by social relations, linguistic practices, and historical situation, are mediated by human culture: myth-making, and so the encounter with the meaning that is God, is revealed to be necessarily implicated with the cultural, which is always a mixture of the sacred and the secular, the divine and the human. The mythic is not necessarily revelatory of the divine, but as it is assumed to God through Christ as the means of God's definitive self-presentation and self-offering to the creation, mythopoiesis is shown to be, like all that is human, redeemable when properly oriented toward the divine. In Christ, myth-making is revealed to be *the* human way of speaking of and embodying the life of God in a human way, and in baptism, human beings are able to enter into this way of being: participation in the saving history of Christ is only possible through the processes of mythopoiesis, of being seduced by the beauty of the *mythos* of Christ, by allowing it to shape one's perceptions and to interpret the world, by enacting it in the process of Christian formation, and, ultimately, *theosis*. The witness of Christ to fallen humanity includes the disruption of our misapplication of our mythopoieic generativity, by

his life, death, resurrection, and teaching. The mythic sensibility of the *mythos* of Christ reveals our misapplication of these gifts to be, at best, failed attempts to encounter God through the world as meaningful, or, at worst, wilfully contrary to the truth, deceptions intended to confuse, distort, or manipulate. The Christian *mythos* reveals these diverse *mythoi* as reflections of the mythopoiesis of God in Christ, and so at least potentially redeemable. In the Conclusion to this thesis, I will reflect on the possibility of the redemption of human culture through the *mythos* and mythopoiesis of Christ and Christian faith: how by faith, we may say with Gregory of Nazianzus, 'All that is prays to you'.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to give a phenomenological account of the human participation in the divine creativity in mythopoiesis, the telling of stories to encounter the world as meaningful. I have argued that the Christian can speak meaningfully of Christ as the ground and norm of this mythopoieic faculty and that mythopoiesis in contemporary secularity is finally judged by the *mythos* of Christ as both myth and myth-maker. Beginning with an observation of the mythopoieic elements in the fantasy fiction of Tolkien, Rowling, Pratchett, and Le Guin, I have attempted to contextualise their employment of and delight in a 'mythic sensibility' within a Christian theology of human participation in divine creativity. I have argued that the implication of all such mythopoiesis into the mythopoiesis of Christ and in Christ, ultimately a seeking after God, a being-drawn into the Trinitarian return of God to God. Even when this desire has gone astray, I have argued, it remains bound-up in the Trinitarian procession, by virtue of God's grace in creation, and in the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. However erring or compromised by sin it may be, our mythopoiesis remains redeemable because it, like all human endeavour, remains hallowed by the Incarnation and taken up by the risen Christ.

A sense of that which lies beyond the surface is a basic attribute of our perception of the world, from wondering what is on the other side of that hill (indeed recognizing that there is an other side of that hill) to speculating on the constitution of matter, represents our desire to pierce the surfaces of the physical. The search for the meaning of a text or the resonances of a piece of art is often rendered in terms of a seeking beneath or beyond the surface of an

expression or idea.[406] The mythic sensibility, as discussed in Chapter One, differs from these impulses in its willingness to be acted upon by that which lies beyond the surface, respecting its mystery not out of an idolatrous ignorance, but in humility and a recognition of its inaccessibility. Felski's employment of Actor-Network Theory to the study of literature points in this direction: the text becomes an actor capable of speaking and influencing the reader, rather than submitting to excavation and dismemberment. Indeed, the capacity of narrative as narrative to act *upon* the reader constitutes an important part of the power of the mythic sensibility. By submitting oneself as reader or subject of the narrative, one allows one's imagination and perceptions to be directed, shaped, and formed. The meaning comes in terms of the shaping of perceptions and 'resonance' as Ward puts it.[407] The fruit of considering the relationship between mythopoiesis, secular culture, and fantasy fiction is that the latter explicitly assumes by the norms of its genre that mythic sensibilities are made things: they are crafted and craft-able, and so the mythic sensibility through which one encounters the world is reparable, or in the more traditional language of Christian theology, redeemable. This redeemability opens the door to an understanding of the secular not as a realm entirely cut-off from the God's activity. Instead, as the *mythoi* of secular modernity emerge visibly *as mythoi*, they, too, become plastic and formable. The seeking after the mythic represented in the contemporary 'mythic turn' in popular culture may be read as another aperture for this redemption, a captivation of the secular by the possibility of something deeper, in its shameless fictionality, somehow more real. The aim of this thesis has been to give form to the possibility of this redemption. Not the redemption of specific authors or texts in the sense of baptising their work by giving it its 'true Christian meaning'. This would be to do violence to the authors and their work, which must have their own integrity. Rather, it is to allow all works of myth-making to be seen to participate in Divine creativity in their own measure. And finally, this must include the language of participation in Divine creativity itself: resonant and evocative without exhausting the object of its reference, which, in the end, is infinite and unspeakable.

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[406] Felski, 52ff.

[407] Ward, *Unimaginable*, 10ff.

All theologies fail in the end, just as all mythic sensibilities permit only a seeing *as*. This being the only option, however, we persist in our mythopoiesis, however imperfect.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the suggestion that in the *mythos* of Christ and self-offering of God to God in the Trinity, the imperfection of our mythopoiesis can be set in the context of an ultimate love, desiring our perfection without demanding it. So understood, each instance of mythopoiesis, however imperfect, remains in principle an attempt by the restlessness of the soul to praise God. If our mythopoiesis is, as discussed in Chapter Three, a participation in God's creativity as a function of our created desire to praise God, then it is possible as a Christian to celebrate all such participation as such an attempt at praise. That myths differ in their quality and qualities cannot be denied. Whether one takes a historical approach by judging myths by their 'survival value' or an ethical approach by judging them according to their moral rectitude (both approaches still judging mythic sensibility by the criterion of another mythic sensibility), it becomes apparent that one *mythos* can be found to be wanting in any number of ways and another preferable. As discussed in Chapter Four, this process largely comes down to a matter of taste, though that taste is always already implicated in the dynamics of mythic sensibility, already captured and seduced by the attractions of one *mythos* or another. The irruption of one *mythos* into another, however, demonstrates the possibility of *spoiling* the game of a *mythos*, laying bare its limitations and making plain its imperfections. This dynamic need not be construed so violently, however. Ultimately, the non-necessity of a violent ontology is revealed to be so by the *mythos* of Christ the non-violent myth-maker. By opening the door to full human (and fully human) participation in the return of God to God, as discussed in Chapter Five, Christ represents both the paradigm of mythopoiesis and the ground of our capacity to encounter the world as meaningful at all. In this way, the Christian *mythos* both provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of mythopoiesis throughout culture, as well as the means for our own mythic sensibility to be re-oriented more faithfully toward its ultimate end.

As Baudelaire put it, 'the loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade you that he does not exist!'[408] The same, of course, can be said of the *mythos* of secular materialism, the primary *mythos* in which the *mythos* of Christ finds contrast in twenty-first century Western Europe and America. The *mythos* of secular modernity is predicated on nothing less than the establishment of itself as *other* than the mythic and the sole means of knowledge and encounter with the world. Other mythic sensibilities are to be understood on its terms. This is, of course, true of all *mythoi*: they claim ultimacy, and the Christian *mythos* is no different. However, Christ the myth-maker reveals the Christian *mythos* to *be mythos* and situates all other *mythoi* relative to itself, not necessarily as truth against lies, but *mythos* interpreting *mythos*. The Christian is freed from the need to assert the dominance of the Christian *mythos* by its very mythic sensibility, revealing the world to already be at peace, already reconciled through Christ to God. The panoply of mythic sensibilities at work in the 'marketplace of ideas' so beloved of the capitalist *mythos* of improvement through competition, can be read relative to the peaceable creation inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ. Even as it approaches the subject with varying degrees of irony, it is the spiritual discomfort imposed by the hegemony of the secular *mythos* to which mythopoieic fantasy addresses itself. Indeed, a certain ironic distance from the question of mythic sensibility is part of what gives mythopoieic fantasy its power and attraction: its very 'shameless fictionality' is what enables the reader to enter into its play of mythic difference. There is a delight in taking on the outlook of a new *mythos*, even in a provisional way. The reader knows that what it describes is a play of mythic sensibility, but when mythopoieic fantasy is skilfully executed, the reader is taken in by its mythic sensibility nonetheless. Occupying the hinterlands between the material and the supernatural, mythopoieic fantasy explicitly explores the possibilities opened by a shift in mythic sensibility: what does the world look like in the conditions of *this mythos*? Approached with reference to secular modernity's insistence on a materialist view of the world, the self, and

[408] Charles Pierre Baudelaire, 'The Generous Gambler' in *Devil Stories: An Anthology*, ed. Maximilian J. Rudwin, trans. Arthur Symons (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 164.

questions of meaning (the discourse of Tolkien's jailer),[409] the fantastic becomes an act of mythopoieic resistance, daring to imagine that things can be otherwise. Even though we may not imagine sincerely a world of dragons and wizards and fantastic realms, doing so can represent a 'practice of anarchism', what James C. Scott describes as the vital means of preparing oneself for larger acts of disobedience in the face of actual oppression in 'anarchist calisthenics'.[410] Entertaining the reality of the Gospel, in the face of the degrading and destructive consequences of the *mythos* of secular materialism, is the ultimate such act, the final spoiling of the games that reduce the world to object, profit, and cost. It is the paradigm of the mythopoieic act which insists upon a meaningful cosmos; mythopoiesis *qua* mythopoiesis is a rejection of nihilism.[411]

Any insight to be gained from an appreciation of mythopoiesis, however, is predicated upon a willingness to recognise the value of desire and the kind of knowledge that emerges out of relationship rather than analysis. Such a willingness requires not only the ability to admit that one has been wrong (frequently cited as the chief virtue of the 'scientific mindset'), but also a consent to being changed by the knowledge so gained. Desire requires a permeable self, able to undergo the meaning it encounters. When noticed or activated, the 'vibrations' of a mythic sensibility animate the self with delight, wonder, dread, or awe. Otto's *mysterium tremendum* returns in the light of the Christological dimensions of mythopoiesis, not as a generic expression of religious feeling, but as the soul's intimations of the presence of God. These intimations might be distorted through *mythoi* of domination, degradation, corruption, or dishonesty, but it is this animation of the soul's desire to praise God which gives resonance to the mythic. When Gregory of Nazianzus writes 'all that is prays to you',[412] this prayer can be construed in part in terms of this engagement with the mythic resonances of creation. The 'stuff' of mythopoiesis, however fantastic, is always composite of the stuff of creation: *nihil*

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[409] 'Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?' Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 55-56.

[410] Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, 1ff.

[411] Even the *mythos* of a nihilistic universe rejects its own premises by its participation in the divine creativity.

[412] *Carm.* I.1.29

novum sub sole, but rather an encounter with the resonant being of the created world. The postmodern discomfort with sincerity and privileging of the distanced and ironic would seem to undercut the possibilities of the mythopoieic: surely this kind of self-consciousness diminishes the capacity of a mythic sensibility to interpret the world when an ironic sensibility seeks to undercut it from the very start? The lesson of Pratchett's ironic mythopoiesis in the *Discworld* novels suggests that, on the contrary, this shamelessly fictive mythopoiesis is a natural and attractive 'way in' to thinking mythically about our experiences of the world, and so an appropriate entry point for thinking theologically, as well. The delight to be found in fantastic mythopoiesis mirrors the divine delight in creation itself: creative play with hermeneutics and the stuff of the world.

Further Research

This thesis has, of necessity, only been able to give a sketch of the many implications for theology that result from consideration of mythic sensibility and the human capacity to participate in God's creative action by 'telling stories to see with.' I have been constrained by a very limited sense of the mythic, of narrative, of theological anthropology, and sacramental theology. Possible avenues of research and theological reflection abound, as I have suggested in this thesis that the quality of our language and our ability to discern meaning in our lives are shot through with mythic resonances. Concern for the space allocated to this thesis has kept me from examining them in more depth or in broader conception, but in what follows, I hope both to acknowledge the deficits of what has gone before and to look ahead to work I or others might yet undertake.

Further consideration of mythic sensibility and its relationship to faith, culture, and redemption must make a deeper study of the doctrine of sin. I have insisted throughout this thesis that, as the means of God's self-disclosure to humanity, culture must be in some sense redeemable, and mythopoiesis is no exception. If Ward is right that culture itself has a Christological aspect, then this must also be true of our myth-making. That being so, there must be a sense that, even at its worst, our mythopoiesis bears traces of that Christological

character, what I have discussed in terms of the 'Trinitarian return of God to God'. The ethical import of this is that no human act of participation in divine creativity is ever beyond the reach of God's redemption. Harmful mythopoiesis must be rejected or reformed, but it cannot ever be ignored or taken for granted as a given aspect of the landscape. This means that a Christian view of mythopoiesis is one that is always seeking to recognise the Christic in the manifold appearances of human mythopoiesis: to recognise Christ, even in the least and worst. Such an ethical demand, however, must be undertaken with a sober consideration of the real impact of sin. If Barth is correct and sin by its very nature is un-knowable as a negation and an irrational *nihil*,[413] then perhaps it can only be considered on these very Christological, redemptive terms: we may not be able speak in a positive way about sin, but we can speak constructively about the objects and process of redemption in Christ, and of the emergence of the knowledge and vision of God that emerges even from artefacts of a fallen culture. A more developed theology of sin and redemption would be better able to explore that which was begun here in terms of the spoiling of mythic sensibilities which are distorted or broken with regard to the fundamental mythopoiesis of God in Christ, as a means of speaking about the process of redemption of the human being through the medium of the mythic. If the mythic can be spoken of in terms of a desire for and ultimately an encounter with the divine, then perhaps it is also speakable in terms of God's restoring and reorienting love.

Because this study has been conducted in primarily phenomenological terms, focusing on the mythic quality of experience, more remains to be said about the kind of knowledge communicated in and by a mythic sensibility. I have referred often above to 'another kind of knowledge', different from that acquired through analysis and experimentation. A further explication of mythic sensibility could engage with the epistemological questions raised by my contention that the meaningful encounter with the world that is constituted by engagement with a mythic sensibility communicates not only an affective quality but also something like real knowledge about the world. This is especially true, I have suggested, with regard to the

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[413] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III: The Doctrine of Creation*, *Volume. 3*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), III.3/50, 291ff.

mythos of God in Christ. Further engagement with the philosophy of mind begun by Nicholas of Cusa might help this bridging of *mythos* and *logos* through the Triune God. By engaging more thoroughly with the findings of cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy of knowledge, a further theological reflection on mythic sensibility could help us better understand if and how it is possible to make claims about the world from within the hermeneutic field of a particular *mythos*. This would also go some way toward illuminating the mythic quality of theological discourse itself. Considered in the light of mythic sensibility, the narrative qualities of theology can be appreciated not merely in narratological terms or in terms of the Biblical story,[414] but as a function of the relationship between speech about God and the experience of the world and of the divine in faith, which bears some affinity to the encounter with meaning explored above as mythic sensibility.

If the insights of mythic sensibility can be taken to have content and force in a human life and to be intimately bound up with the creative operations of the godhead, then they may be usefully employed in a more thorough-going way in the work of sacramental theology. While I have brushed the surface of mythic theologies of Eucharist and Baptism, more work remains to be done in theorising the relationship between the poiesis and praxis of the sacraments and divine action in and through them. If the Eucharist and Baptism, as the dominical sacraments and so part of Jesus' own mythopoiesis, provide the archetype of how human and divine action co-inhere, then there remains to be examined how a sense of mythopoiesis can inform the Church's approach to the lived reality of sacramental life. This might apply equally to the personal appropriation of the act of participating in a sacramental rite such as marriage or ordination, as well as a further understanding of how the sacramental story provides a way of understanding the meaning of objects such as rings and actions such as the laying-on of hands. By elaborating in terms analogous to those used in unfolding the phenomenology of

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[414] See, for example, Johann Baptist Metz, 'A Short Apology for Narrative' in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 251-262. A seminal example of a narrative theology of the Bible can be found in Hans Frei, *Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

mythopoiesis above, it may be possible for a 'mythopoieic sacramental theology' to make the *quid faciens* of the sacraments speakable in a new way.

An Ending

We make things up as we go along. This is what the wizards of Unseen University, a fantastic and farcical stand-in for the University of Oxford, conclude as their world is overrun by the figments and fantasies of a wildly believing populace in Pratchett's novel *Hogfather*. This observation has also stood as the guiding insight of this thesis, theological though this work may be and secular though *Hogfather* most assuredly is, at least at first blush. As the Discworld of Pratchett's novel was filled with gods, spirits, and the stuff of human faith given physical form, so, too is our world filled with the works, dreams, and effluvia of our own mythopoieic imaginings. As every person seeks to find rest for their restless hearts, responding to our created drive to praise God by making stories and mythic sensibilities that will reveal the world's meaning, we find ourselves amidst the multiplicity of our creations, some wonderful, some terrible. The ongoingness of this participation in the divine creativity is one of the engines of culture and the means of theological encounter and reflection; it does not end as long as we continue to breathe and continue to hunger for a fuller, deeper, richer sense of the world and ourselves. The interpretive presence of our mythopoiesis may not have the flesh-and-blood tangibility of the apparitions of Pratchett's novel, and they may be tinged by the ironic detachment that is the mark of this post-modern, post-Christendom, post-secular age. However, an appreciation of our continuing capacity to know that we, by gift of our created nature, are able to manifest in our myth-making something of the truth-making speech of God in the world and in the Incarnate Word may enable thoughtful Christians to consider how we speak of God and the world that faith reveals. If theological discourse can become informed by the insights of mythic reasoning, such as is to be found in forms as diverse as fantasy fiction, advertising, political messaging, self-help manuals, binge-watched Netflix series, and the conventional wisdom of a consumer culture emerging from long-effaced theological convictions, then perhaps it can begin to speak in new and perhaps more

intelligible ways. As the terms of the Christian faith are spoken in terms of mythopoiesis, perhaps the distinctive character of its witness can also be understood in continuity with other forms of speech. Which returns us to Paul on the Areopagus, in the seat of classical myth-making, seeking to relate the Good News of Christ to the stories and traditions of a foreign people. Though perhaps the silence of the shrine to an unknown God might remind us that for all of our words, and all of our storytelling and participation in God's creative work, that of which we seek to speak remains finally beyond words, something finally un-speakable and no thing at all, and so bring and end to all our words and our making towards God. But, as the one of whom we would speak remains the seat and source and end of our desire, I would not count on it.

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