Theology of Transformation

Faith, Freedom, and the Christian Act

OLIVER DAVIES

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Where Is Jesus Christ?

The theology presented in this book, which goes by the name of Transformation Theology, is not intended to be another theological paradigm to be compared competitively with other paradigms. It sets out rather to be more fundamentally a reorientation of theology, into the world of space and time. As a reorientation, this theology can have all kinds of continuities with other theologies or theological schools, ranging from those that are overtly metaphysical to those that are based on empirical research and ethnographic methods. There is no doubt also that Transformation Theology has much in common with other theologies in its concern with the world, since this has been a constant theme throughout the modern period: *extra mundum nulla salus* (Edward Schillebeeckx). Where Transformation Theology is distinctive, however, and becomes a reorientation, is in its commitment to think such a theological concern with the world both critically and historically.

Critique and a sense of history belong together in theological insight. Christianity is a historical religion, and the Church a community that endures over time. Indeed, the experience of time is central to most forms of Christian identity, if only through the antiquity of the Bible as our sacred text. But we also have the historical experience in the modern period of learning not to trust too easily the given points of departure for our thinking. It may be, after all, that we are already in subtle ways alienated, or at an incalculable distance from the world, at the very point at which our concern for the world arises. This has been a central insight of modern hermeneutics: language and habits of thought already shape us and our world in ways that may predetermine our responses. Deeply set historical processes, which can indeed be wholly concealed from us, may already set the limits of our horizon. We can still usefully use Marx’s term ‘ideology’ for the realization that we may live to some extent in the propagation of historically determined, false understandings of our relation to the world, or more exactly of how we are in the world as embodied persons who are both matter and mind. Furthermore, such ‘ideologies’ can indeed be the vehicle for forms of personal and social power that appear unquestioned, and which can in one way or another alienate us from our own deepest freedom.
This holds true for all human beings, but for the Christian theologian, the understanding of who we truly are in the world, in every historical period, must be tested against the person of Christ himself as historical, which means to say as sharing our own space and time, through the continuing humanity of his risen life. Therefore, we have to locate our point of departure for theological thinking as close to him as possible. In other words, we have to orientate our thinking to him, as he comes to meet us as fully human and fully divine in the reality of our everyday lives. We have to learn to calibrate our theology to the ways in which he calls us, in the Spirit, and calls others around us, to the life of discipleship, in the formation and re-formation of his Church. Our theology, as thought, has to be as proximate as possible to the distinctive intensity of the life that flows from him, in and through the Holy Spirit, as the ground of our Christian life and witness.

But how can we take that first step, towards what we hope will be a theological reorientation, if we cannot know and understand the historical processes that have brought us to this place and time? Perhaps such a point of departure will be a paradigm after all and not a reorientation? Perhaps it will be yet another way of making sense of things, another twist in the tale that is modern theology, and not what it really needs to be, which is the articulate and critical expression of the sense that many feel in this day that the time of modern theology is coming to an end, indeed perhaps already has come to an end? How can this theology, which is grounded in this now, be filled with the future rather than the past?

This moment of hesitation and self-doubt in the face of the consciousness of history is to be welcomed. It is at least the harbinger of the question that we must learn to ask, if our questioning is not to become ceaseless, since it alone contains within itself—even as a question—the possibility of the end of our questioning. We do not mean here the end in a straightforwardly temporal sense as if we could ever run out of questions. It is rather the end of our questioning in a different sense, more like a limit, in which we finally recognize and receive the shape of the reality that comes to meet us and which prompts the form of our questioning. This is end as fullness. It is finally the recognition that when we question, we do so as embodied human beings who are alive in a world that changes all the time around us. We question as living human beings. And Life itself can come to meet us, in this question, if we learn to ask it in the right way.

THE FIRST QUESTION

We must begin then with the most ancient question of all, which is surely the very first question of the Christian Church. It may be that it was in asking this
question, in the light of the empty tomb, that the community around Jesus became what we would today call the Church. Where is Jesus Christ? In the period after his resurrection, he appeared in ways that allowed those who had seen him to report back to the community that had grown up around him that the risen Jesus had been in such and such a place at such and such a time. The ‘where’ of Christ was finally answered at his exaltation when the Church believed that he was now and forever in heaven. That this was an answer is clear enough, but with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and with the increasingly eschatological sense of Christ’s presence in the poor and disadvantaged, and among the community who professed his name, it became clear too that this was a question which would still have to be asked and answered in different ways. In the early Christian world, to say that Jesus Christ was in heaven, was to affirm his universal Lordship and so was to say that he could also be present on earth. It was a question indeed that shaped human life as Christian life.

It is perhaps disconcerting, therefore, that we seem as a Christian community to have lost the imperative of this question and capacity to ask it in all seriousness: where is Jesus Christ? It may be, however, that this is nobody’s ‘fault’. It is simply part of who we are. After all, it is not at all clear that to say that Jesus Christ is in heaven means for us what it meant for the early or pre-modern Church. And if we cannot say that Jesus is in heaven in the same superlative way they meant it, then it is probably also the case that we cannot mean quite what they meant when they spoke of his parallel presence among the poor. Perhaps it is in fact the case that this most ancient of Christian questions is less meaningful for us today because, whatever our experience of encounter with the commissioning Christ may be and whatever we may see happening around us in terms of the active and transformative Christian life, we cannot today really understand how Christ can still share our space and time, in the living fullness of his humanity and divinity. Theology and faith seem to diverge at this point. This is not an argument against asking the ‘where’ question however, but a reminder that we should ask it with integrity and honesty, even if we have to recognize that we come to this question today in a way that is different from the early Church, and that we do so with a certain poverty.

In fact there are pressing reasons to think that it is a question we should learn to ask once again. At the heart of the profession of faith in any age, for instance, is the claim that the Christ we encounter is both real and universal. To say that he is real is to say that he transcends any cultural construction or image of him we may have and that he exists outside the parameters of those communities who confess his name. He is real in the sense that he transcends the experience we have of him, and indeed all possible experiences that we might have of him. To say that he is universal is simply to say that Christ is alive in a way that means he is unlimited by space and time. He is present of course in his particularity, or in what we shall call his identifiability, but is not
constrained by space and time. As Lord of space and time, Christ is in space and time, but is not himself subject to it. This is what we mean by the universality of Christ.

Belief in a universal Christ is already implicit in our profession of faith. But it seems particularly important that we should be able to give clear, explicit and theological expression to ourselves and to others of what we mean when we profess the reality and the universality of Christ today. In our own global age, we are surrounded on all sides by cultural difference and by a pluralism that inevitably fosters relativism. Why is witnessing to the ‘universal’ Christ not just a way of speaking? Why is it not just the product of one culture among many, for instance? Why does ‘real’ not just mean ‘real for us’? Faith argues against this, but where is the developed theological account today of what it means to profess Christ as universal which can support this faith? And how can we profess something of which we can make little explicit sense even to ourselves? The problems multiply. Why should we think, for instance, that we all worship the same Christ, in our different Christian communities, given the rise of new vibrant forms of Christian life in China and the Far East as well as Africa and India, and indeed the rise of new forms of charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity across the globe? How can we build unity and common purpose with others both within and beyond Christianity if we cannot make sense to ourselves of what must be the ultimate hospitality and radical inclusivity of Christ's body, namely Christ according to his universality?

It seems right, therefore, that at such a moment of rapid pluralization and contact between cultures, we should step back and look again at what it means to proclaim the universality of the living Jesus: how can he really share our space and time? We need in fact to ask: where might such a universal Christ be? The evident answer to this question would seem to be 'everywhere', but given the nature of the human body, for someone to be 'everywhere' would seem to mean in fact that they are only metaphorically present, and so would be more accurately described as being 'nowhere'. A universal Christ who is everywhere cannot be in any particular place and so cannot be the Christ we encounter in the situational reality of our own life as one who commissions and calls.¹

We shall have to approach this question differently then. Perhaps we shall have to think of his ‘universality’ as meaning that he is present at the point of the world’s becoming: where it becomes this world and not another. This in turn would imply that he is present at the place of our most radical creaturely freedom: precisely at the point where our free human agency is most realized in the flow of time and causation. This would further imply that these are times—moments of kairos—when the divine agency in him can shape the

¹ For Luther’s understanding of this, see Chapter 2, note 11.
human agency in us, through the advent of the Holy Spirit: bringing our human freedom into a perfecting convergence with divine freedom, or the loving sovereignty of God.

But let us return to the loss of the ‘where’ question in the modern period. Are we saying, for instance, that the modern Christian does not know Christ as real and that there is a deep fault with faith as such in our times? Emphatically not. The first principle of this book is that the problem we are identifying here is not a problem within faith as such but rather a problem within the articulation of that faith. It is a theological problem. It is a problem that arises in the conceptualization of faith. We can be more specific and say that this is a problem within academic theology (which we can call ‘second-order’ theology in order to distinguish it from the ‘first-order’ doxological language of faith). Our problem is not that we don’t experience Christ as real then, but rather that the theological language which our culture provides us with, in order to articulate our faith, fails at the point of the expression of Christ’s present reality and, indeed, of his universality as the living incarnate Word of God.

But why should this be? Is it because our theologians themselves have no faith? Once again, the answer to this is an emphatic ‘no!’ The reason why academic theology cannot support faith in this respect has nothing to do with the personal faith of the individual theologian, any more than it has to do with his or her denominational background, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Pentecostal, for instance. It is not even a matter of whether he or she is a conservative or liberal. The reasons lie even more deeply in our history and culture and are to do with the profound changes in the way we came to understand and experience the world which followed the great scientific changes from the mid sixteenth century onwards. These changes brought about the interconnected, highly technologized, complex world we live in today. Such radical, cosmological change over centuries may be so foundational and so extended that it scarcely ever comes into view as a specific change at all. Indeed, it may be that what we can see in the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century was a change so immense and also so closely associated with Christianity itself, as a cosmological religion, that almost imperceptibly Christianity as a whole underwent a significant internal shift. We can observe that shift today in the simple fact that what was arguably the key scriptural doctrine of the early Church, which is to say the exaltation of Christ (understood in terms of the fact that he had ‘ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven’), has become almost wholly redundant in the modern Church.

But in the first place we may ask: does this really matter? The nature of the ‘ascended’ Christ was a critical question for the early Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin), all of whom held strongly to the doctrine, even when the science seemed to argue against it. But thereafter there seems to have
been remarkably little interest in reviving or renewing the doctrine of Christ’s ‘ascension’ or exaltation.\(^2\) Even such a conservative doctrinal theologian as Karl Barth tends to confl ate the ascended with the resurrected Christ.\(^3\) Nor do we find any notable interest in this doctrine among leading modern Catholic theologians. We could be forgiven for thinking that the lapse of the doctrine of the exaltation of Christ, which we find referred to implicitly or explicitly on thirty-five occasions in New Testament texts\(^4\) (and which is intimately associated, for instance, with the mediatorship of Christ,\(^5\) the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost,\(^6\) and the mission of the Church on earth\(^7\) ) was simply a non-event. The Church has got on perfectly well without it.

And in the second place we may say: but if the presence of the living Christ is in itself a profound mystery, then surely it is something that we should not attempt to understand at all? It belongs to life and not to thought. This would be an invitation for second-order theology to give way at this point (at the point of our encounter with the living Christ who commissions us) to the first-order theology of direct Christian life and experience. But two points need to be raised here. The first is that the early Church did have just such a strong, second-order theology, which set out how Christ could be present on earth as well as heaven. The fact that this was a cosmological account, based


\(^3\) See Andrew Burgess’s analysis of the implicit importance of the ascension in Barth in so far as resurrection and ascension are combined (Andrew Burgess, *The Ascension in Karl Barth*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 23–52). Barth certainly sees the importance of the ascension and Session as ‘the decisive element in the conclusion of the Easter story’ (CD IV.2, 153–4). And it is indeed the case that Barth notes that the resurrection and ascension represent ‘two definite points in space or time’ and that there is ‘a movement from one to the other which effects their unity’ (*Church Dogmatics* [hereafter denoted by CD] IV.2, 150). But Barth does not understand revelation itself to be historical as an unfolding in space and time. While he recognizes the sequential character of these two occurrences therefore, he does not offer a theological account of what this historicality means in the sense of placing the Lordship of the exalted Christ—even as irreversible or ‘eternal’—specifically within space and time: as the Creator transformatively at work in the creation. The exaltation of Christ as a discrete event is conflated in theological terms with Christ exalted (Burgess, *Ascension*, 17), and the non-inclusion of the historicality of the incarnation in favour of a paradigm of divine transcendence makes it impossible to pose the ‘where’ question, in all its spatio-temporal fullness, theologically. At this point the exalted Christ in power recedes from us theologically, for Barth, rather than coming closer to us—according to the transformed humanity which remains integral to identity as Lord—in the time and space of our own concrete situational reality. The tension at this point is that a certain philosophical transcendentalism in Barth’s thinking leads to the identification of divine sovereignty with a freedom from the world rather than the freedom in the world, which it should be according to an incarnational, transformational logic.


\(^5\) Heb 1.1–4; 4.14–5.10. \(^6\) John 14.7. \(^7\) Mark 16.19; Acts 2.33.
on the pre-modern understanding of heaven as being the ‘summit’ of the closed universe, from where divine glory could penetrate the whole universe, should not disguise the point that this was an explanation that made good sense of how the living Christ could be present in particular ways (through sacraments and in the poor, for instance) in our own space and time.\textsuperscript{8} It would be wrong to surmise that the widespread presence of this account in the life of the Church undermined the mystery of Christ’s presence. On the contrary, the ‘classical’ Church seemed to have a very strong sense of the mystery of Christ, which it brought to expression in its art, architecture, and sacramentality. It could in fact be said that since heaven was a place everyone believed existed, in continuity with our own space and time on earth, but no one expected to be able to see for themselves \textit{pre mortem}, the pre-modern belief that Christ is physically (i.e. ‘locally’) in heaven was a way not of resolving the mystery of the glorified Christ but rather of making that mystery present in our own space and time.\textsuperscript{9}

The further point that needs to be raised is that it has been the historical role of second-order, or more ‘academic’, theology to clarify the meaning of first-order theology within Christian experience at points of crisis or change in Christian life. The intense Patristic debates on the nature of Christ’s personhood, his role in the sacraments, or the equally intense Reformation debates on the nature of our salvation in him are a case in point. In developing a new, Reformed theology of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, following the collapse of the traditional, scriptural account of the universe, Calvin pointed to the first-order theology of a faith-based experience of real encounter with Christ in the Eucharist but showed no sign of believing that this first-order theology could simply be allowed to take the place of a now compromised second-order theology of Eucharistic presence based on the traditional cosmology.\textsuperscript{10} On the contrary, Calvin argued for a new second-order theology which could appropriately reflect first-order experience in a changing world in

\textsuperscript{8} Paula Gooder offers a helpful overview of the Hebrew heaven in her study \textit{Heaven} (London: SPCK, 2011). In her words, what was originally a ‘spatial’ reality became in later times a ‘spiritual’ one (8). For more on our reception of ‘heaven’ in the modern period, see Jerry L. Walls, \textit{Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Jeffrey Burton Russell, \textit{Paradise Mislaid: How We Lost Heaven and How We Can Regain It} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For more on the structure of pre-modern cosmology, see Chapter 2, note 17.

\textsuperscript{9} It can be difficult for us to grasp that this was a literal belief in Christ’s presence in heaven in his human embodiment. But this belief, from within faith, was in fact perfectly consistent with the structure of the pre-modern universe, which was extensively based on scriptural as well as Greek sources. See Augustine’s reflection on how his physical eyes will see the exalted Christ (\textit{City of God}, XXII, 29). W. G. L. Randles gathers many of the texts and discussions among theologians in his study \textit{The Unmaking of the Medieval Christian Cosmos}, 1500–1760 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), showing a strongly literalist inclination, but even Thomas Aquinas is careful to argue that in his exaltation in heaven, the body of Jesus, though material, must be located at a higher point than the angels themselves (\textit{Summa Theologiae} [hereafter denoted by ST] 3a, q. 57, art. 4 and 5).

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, 1559, 4.17.32.
which the old cosmological arguments would no longer work. Calvin’s highly original and powerful theology of Eucharistic presence seemed to achieve just that.\textsuperscript{11}

We need to be concerned then that in terms of our reception of Christ’s presence for us on earth, as sharing our space and time, our second-order theology may have failed us. Instead of placing the mystery of Christ more firmly within our own space and time, or within the reality of our own ongoing lives, the failure to replace a traditional cosmological understanding of Christ’s presence may have left us with a lacuna in our theological thinking precisely at the point where our second-order theology needs to be closest to the normative Christian experience of our encounter with the commissioning Christ, as real, in the flow of life. Indeed, this failure may be linked with particular tensions that we can see in the theological life of the Churches today: the seemingly insuperable gap between practical and systematic theology, for instance, or the ‘broad river’ between University and Church. It may also be at the root of what seems to be a general problem in modern Church life that theology is frequently used as a tool of division within communions. Theology has not always served a properly communitarian and eirenic function in either the life of the Roman Catholic communion or that of the Anglican communion, for instance, and there are many comparable divisions also within contemporary evangelicalism. Second-order theology as abstract thinking can easily be collectivist and divisive rather than open, heuristic, and communitarian. We might also consider the extent to which two of the principal, new, global forms of Christian life, Pentecostalism and the Salvation Army, which belong in their foundation distinctively to the modern age, have both struggled to find their place in contemporary theological debates. It is not easy in the case either of the Salvationist ‘Christ in us’ or the Pentecostalist experience of the presence in power of the Spirit in the here and now to find the connections between this first-order theology and our modern second-order theology of the person of the living Christ. The evident link is again cosmologically framed and it is the heavenly Christ who ‘has poured out’ the Spirit upon the world (Acts 2.33). This is Christ according to his Lordship, and as present among the poor, therefore. It may be that in each case, we can see the failure of modern second-order theology to integrate and to support the intrinsic and ‘felt’ meanings of the first-order theology in powerful new experiences of Christian encounter, in times of crisis and change.

\textsuperscript{11} See for instance \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, 1559, 4.17.18.
Where Is Jesus Christ?

A SECOND SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

But what kind of crisis and change? Here we have to step back and recall that the question of where Christ is is a central question of Christianity and one that has been posed throughout Christian history. But it is not in fact a question that can be innocent of all the different kinds of presuppositions we make at varying points in our history about what space and time themselves are. Such is the long history of Christianity that we can identify three very different ways in which human beings have conceived of space and time, and so can identify three very different contexts for the belief that Christ lives in such a way that we can still and indeed must ask: where is he?

In light of its central concern with this question, this book has to include an account of the changing scientific narrative across the centuries. After all, the question was originally posed at a time when a traditional, scriptural cosmology obtained in the Christian world. This presupposed that the universe was finite and enclosed. This was Peter Berger’s ‘enchanted’ universe, filled with invisible spiritual presences. The cosmic spaces were likewise filled with light, music, and the ‘dance of the spheres’. Dante very exactly described this world for us in his ‘Divine Comedy’ in which ‘physical height’ coincided with spiritual exaltation. Within such a cosmology, the structure of Christ’s descent from heaven to earth and then returning ascent, in human form, made exact sense. It gave literal expression to what the Christian faith needed spiritually to affirm: the saving life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and his continuing presence ‘to the right hand of the Father in heaven’, at the very top of the universe from where his glory could spread throughout the creation.

By the time we come to the early modern period, from the early sixteenth century, a new scientific model is evolving. This has a very different understanding of matter. Early science discovered that matter is not what it seemed to be, but could be probed for its smaller physical constituents. Matter could be grasped as forces and then replicated. One commentator has called this ‘ergetic’ knowledge or knowledge that ‘works’ in the sense that it produces things.12 And the technology it developed brought ever faster change at the level of our most basic sense of embodiment and self-awareness in a spatio-temporal world. In a heliocentric universe, the scriptural heaven was not as, or where, people had thought it was. In contrast with the earlier, pre-modern paradigm, this new paradigm was markedly at odds with key elements in the Christian faith, and particularly the reality of heaven within the universe and the ‘miraculous’ nature of the resurrection of Christ.

This model has dominated until very recently. Early versions of quantum mechanics emerged in scientific circles around 100 years ago, but its findings

were so strange and counterintuitive, and so *fundamental*, that there has been little cultural response to it. Advances in both cosmology and neurology, the large and the small scale, are now bringing quantum effects to the forefront, however, as technological applications of this contemporary science come ever closer. Contemporary science seems to rule out the dualism which was so characteristic of the ‘modern’ period, and it points to degrees of integration of mind and body within the world which—*mutatis mutandis*—are more reminiscent of the pre-modern universe than they are of the modern one.

We know today that we are as human beings both body and mind, complex materiality and pure subjectivity, at the same time. This means that we are intrinsically and constitutively *historical* beings, for what we believe matter to be dictates also what we believe ourselves to be as matter. Since we are ourselves matter, what we think matter is will be part of who we are. The history of science is key to our own history therefore, and never more so than when it concerns the fundamental question of our incarnational faith, namely how does Christ still live, in his space and time (as one who is still fully human), in a way that involves or intersects with our space and time. How does his life intersect with mine in ways that go beyond simply what I think or believe? In other words, what is the meaning value of the question ‘where is he?’, by which we seek, as Church, to give articulate expression to the sense that we encounter a living Christ at the point of our calling or commissioning in faith?

In this book we are concerned with the history within its changing scientific contexts of one doctrine in particular, namely the exaltation or ‘ascension’ of Christ. Perhaps more than any other doctrine, the meaning of Christ’s exaltation is specifically cosmological in its association with New Creation. But it is cosmological too in its own framing or context, since traditionally for Christ to be exalted is also for him to be ‘ascended’ or to have ‘gone up’ to the Father in heaven. It is precisely the rejection of this particular cosmological framework that defined us as ‘modern’. Not even the most enthusiastically biblical Christian has suggested that we should return to a geocentric view of the solar system or to the ‘closed’ cosmos which underlies the imagery of the scriptural authors. While we can still read the classical theologians with passion, both Catholic and Reformed, we are in fact separated from our forebears in the classical Church (down to and including the early Reformation) by a cultural and scientific gulf of immense, quite unbridgeable proportions. While we can hold the same content of belief in a heavenly Christ that they had, for instance, we cannot do so in the same way. The manner of their believing and the manner of ours, are separated by whatever it is that makes us who we are as modern, scientific human beings who can, after all, now see for ourselves online the sun at the centre of the solar system and, through the Hubble or Kepler telescopes, can even see the ancient signatures of an open, rapidly expanding and infinite universe.

*Foundations*
The real question for us today is perhaps not: what was it that caused this significant and indeed quite fundamental change in Christian doctrine with respect to the exaltation or ontology of the living Christ? It is rather, what is it that is happening in our own present world which means that the cosmological question is on the table again? How are we changing in such a way that the first-order theology of Christian experience of faith as encounter with the commissioning Christ of St Paul, which is to say with Christ according to his Lordship, is pressing to return again to our second-order or academic theology? Why are we beginning to become so painfully aware of the fact that there is here such a gulf between faith and theology, academy and Church? What other kinds of change are causing that?

The uncontentious thesis presented here is that we are today in the midst of a second scientific revolution, or that the scientific revolution which defines modernity is entering a second phase. Inevitably this revolution is affecting who we are, not only through new understandings of matter and the material and through new advanced technologies, but also **anthropologically** in terms of how mind and matter relate in us, which is to say in terms of who we most fundamentally are. It is this reformulation of our self-understanding, not only in terms of ideas as these may be presented in books or in the media, but also in terms of the technologies that increasingly inform our own embodied spaces, which is the reason why what has been a consensus and a norm within theology for over 200 years is entering a period of unparalleled self-interrogation and crisis. As with any such fundamental change, its advent can be erratic and sudden. This is the case because of the way in which new scientific paradigms make themselves felt only gradually in society and do so also trans-generationally. Technology is experienced differently across the generations. We live today with elderly scholars, who embody our traditions, and yet who may have no or little familiarity with digital communications, preferring face-to-face or handwritten communications. Young scholars may type on their tablets more quickly than they can speak, and communicate ‘globally’ (if selectively!) through social networks in the present moment. And there is a pervasive sense in our society that the many breakthroughs in genetics and neuroscience, in chemistry and biochemistry, as well as cosmology and physics, are likely to change both ourselves and our environment in radical though also unpredictable ways over the coming decades.

If the effects of the ‘first scientific revolution’ were to separate mind from matter, then the effects of the ‘second scientific revolution’ are to bring them back together again. For Newtonianism, matter was the domain of determinism and so a lack of freedom, while our subjectivity as mind was the privileged place of our freedom. We were free of the world by being in the deterministic world as self-aware subject who could exercise power over the world and its materiality through technology. According to this model, materiality as the field of determinism was either to be left behind by our spirit—through
transcendence—or to be overcome by our spirit—through technology—in order that we (who are most properly spirit) should be free. Here there is a separation between who I am as spirit (or mind) and who I am as matter (or body). From a historical point of view, we can note also the extent to which the language of human spirit and divine Spirit have merged here, when each is defined as being in opposition to matter and the material.\(^\text{13}\)

But the effects of the scientific self-understanding which is emerging today are quite different. Here it is presupposed that we are materiality all the way down. Neuroscience, genetics, and evolutionary biology show that mind and matter in us form a thoroughgoing continuity, each presupposing the other and each having causal effects upon the other within a continuum of human life as ‘intelligent embodiment’ in a material world. Quantum physics does so even more radically. Consequently, there is no point at which the mind can be ‘outside’ matter. We are free ‘within’ materiality and not beyond it. Science is teaching us that we are both pure subjectivity and complex materiality at the same time. And, in fact, there are no grounds for reducing the one to the other (despite the best attempts of some).\(^\text{14}\) Our human truth, as ‘intelligent embodiment’, is a paradoxical one and involves a simultaneity of matter and mind in us.\(^\text{15}\) We are not only in the world as subject but we are also far more of the world than we had thought. Indeed, we may need to think of ourselves even, first and foremost, as being world.

**Theology and Apologetics**

Such a scientific redescription of the human as a unity of mind and body clearly has the potential to change the parameters of Christian witness, and indeed of our own theological self-understanding in significant ways. As we will see, so much of our present theological inheritance was formed in the face of the rise of a deterministic science and therefore presupposes the worldview that emerged following the advances of the first scientific revolution. This fostered a theological rationale based principally upon the imperatives of apologetics. We can identify two kinds of apologetics here: one that is ‘collaborative’

\(^{13}\) See 36–7.

\(^{14}\) The reduction from the perspective of materiality has recently been stated in Nicholas Humphrey’s book *Soul Dust* (London: Quercus, 2011), while a refusal of reduction in favour of paradox can be found in Adam Zeman, *A Portrait of the Brain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). See also note 42.

\(^{15}\) We shall use the term ‘intelligent embodiment’ in preference to e.g. ‘rational animal’, although the Aristotelian trajectory is the same. ‘Rational animal’ appears to set *homo sapiens* apart from other higher primates, for instance, in a way that either neglects current accounts of the continuities between ourselves and other advanced mammals, or indeed can lead to a reduction of the human (as when our humanity is identified with our capacity to formulate rational propositions).
and another that is ‘dependent’. The former arises when we recognize affinities in the intellectual and cultural worlds around us and choose to link with and learn from them in the articulation of new theology. This is appropriate and right, and it creates the possibility of reciprocal learning. The emphasis in the modern period, however, has been upon an apologetics of the ‘dependent’ type, where we simply wrap ourselves in a secular thought form or ‘rationale’ in the hope that this will support our claim to being ‘relevant’ in the academy. This is an entirely understandable response, especially on the part of the Churches who might look to university theology for this kind of relevance, as well as to the world of Christian social action. The risk here, however, is that ‘dependent apologetics’ will only serve to deepen the disassociation between Church and academy, between theology as the articulation of faith and the meaning of the Christian life as instantiated in the unity of belief and practice, through calling, of discipleship.

The modern age has been the age of human meaning-making and of theological anthropologies in which the human person has been principally defined by secular intellectual culture. The current return to the world, driven by advances in scientific self-understanding, offers different theological possibilities since, as an orientation to the world, it can allow theological rationalities to be receptive to the meanings that are discovered in our encounter with the commissioning Christ. Discovery is also a mode of learning, and a theology whose rationale reflects the constant rediscovery of the person of Christ and of Christian meaning in the encounters of everyday life is in a position to do more than apologetics. It becomes possible to make theology an ‘export’ as well as ‘import’ economy in intellectual terms. A theology that makes its own the ‘where’ question is also likely to have its own method, since the theologian will now need to engage more dynamically with the life of the Church: with what we can call those ‘crowded spaces’ of power and powerlessness where grace is given, and freedom is in play (both human and divine). It may well develop a more ecclesial aspect methodologically for instance through its far-reaching and fundamental commitment to collaboration, especially collaboration between theoreticians and practitioners within specific contexts of calling in the Christian life. It may show an adaptability to new methods of enquiry, including the ethnographic. What is clear, however, is that if our contemporary scientific self-understanding affirms that in us there is a thoroughgoing unity of mind and matter, and if this actually points more towards an ancient ‘integrated’ configuration of the human more than it does to the dualistic ‘modern’ one, then there must be here immense opportunities for Christian theology. We have to reverse the emphasis on apologetics and so show that we can not only learn from secular society and thought, but can also

---

17 See notes 41 and 42. See also Chapter 2, note 32.
now positively contribute to human society more generally, since Christianity, with its long incarnational and cosmological traditions, is in fact remarkably well positioned to embrace in the present the challenge of the future.

**REORIENTATING THEOLOGY**

Since the theology presented in this book is a reorientation, we need to divide its presentation into two distinct sections. The justification for the view that we need a reorientation of theology today is primarily a *critical* exercise, whereas the development of an answer to the theological ‘where’ question is broadly a *constructive* one. These two separate tasks are drawn out as ‘Theology in the World’, to be discussed in Chapter 2, and as ‘Transformation Theology’, to be discussed from Chapter 3. We can think of ‘Theology in the World’ as being like a new tonality in the history of music therefore, while ‘Transformation Theology’ is a piece of music that is composed within the new tonality, but is not to be identified with it as such (since a new tonality can support a range of different compositions). The argument in Chapter 2 is that we need to undertake a reorientation of theology in order to ground it in both our contemporary anthropological and a methodological authenticity. We are presupposing here that the period of modern theology, which has dominated over the last 200 years, is now coming to an end and that, in this period, theology has sought to base itself on the ‘turn to the subject’, in common with other humanities disciplines. This means to say that it has preferred rationalities of meaning-making that arise from our own subjectivity rather than the more world-centred rationalities of theology in the pre-modern period. These tended to be based on the doctrine of the creation, therefore, while those of modern theology have characteristically looked to theological anthropologies as their rationale. The rational styles of theology in the modern period have been as diverse, of course, as the paradigms of the meaning-making subject they have borrowed, ranging from consciousness and interpretation to experience and language (reflecting the influence of idealism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and linguistics), as well as the liberationist capacities of the human. All of these point back to the human subject as the primary focus of meaning. Modern theology has been overwhelmingly a period of ‘dependent apologetics’ therefore, or the pursuit of relevance, with a focus upon the self and our current ways of subjective meaning-making.

But the turn away from theological rationalities based primarily on the subject’s own powers of meaning-making does not mean that we have to neglect or omit the subject. Our criticism here is not that there should be no place for the human subject but that theological anthropology, being driven by ‘dependent apologetics’, has been allowed effectively to *replace* the doctrine
Where Is Jesus Christ?

of the creation in the modern period. In this way we have lost our sense of the self as embedded in the world of shared space and time, which is the place of our encounter with a present or living Christ and which must, therefore, hold an unparalleled authority for Christian thought and reflection. This is neither to confine Christian enquiry to such ‘liberal/scientific’ questions as ‘where does the world come from?’ or ‘who created the world’, nor is it to invoke a ‘post-liberal’ scriptural account of the real (in a way that would subvert the conviction that in the real we exist in a shared space and time). It is rather to return to the more ancient position, which is that theology of the creation engages with the meaning of what it is to live in God’s world as God’s embodied creature. This is again not ‘where does the world come from?’ but how does the fact that the world is God’s creation shape my life as his creature, in terms not only of what I think, feel, believe, and do, but in terms also of where I am. The Christian experience of encounter with the commissioning Christ in history does not dissolve our sense of the real as something we have in common with all living things. It points rather to what the final meaning of that reality may be, as disclosed to us in Jesus Christ. This disclosure is not something imparted to cognitive intellect alone. Although cognitive intellect always has a vital role in second-order theology, the meaning of revelation is not learned first in that sense. It is rather learned in the first place through a life lived, where that life is grounded in encounter with Jesus Christ and a repeated return to him, in openness and desire, through the Holy Spirit. And so the reception of this disclosure becomes itself a human life, the meaning of which becomes over time, through repeated fall, effort, and the indwelling of grace, the meaning of Jesus’ own life. And since he is raised and lives among us, it becomes over time also a life whose meaning is the risen Christ himself: its meaning is his life.

Theology and Transformation

It is from this life and this meaning that we need to build our second-order theology. In doing that we will find that the axis of Christian meaning has moved from ‘transcendence’, which suggests a distinctively modern account of escape from (deterministic) materialism, to ‘transformation’. ‘Transcendence’ is a term that already presupposes its opposite ‘materialism’. ‘Materialism’ presupposes that it is not God but an impersonal material causation which governs the universe except where moderated by free human mind or agency. For ‘transcendence’ theologians, God has to be thought in some space ‘outside’ the deterministic material. For this theology, the power of God is already

vanquished at the level of the material. Since it presupposes a dualistic opposition between human spirit and matter, the only possible space there can be for us to think God is within ourselves as ‘spirit’, which is to say within our own subjectivity or ‘subjective community’. Here the historical elision between human spirit and divine Spirit is significant.\(^{19}\) In such a ‘transcendence’-based metaphysics and anthropology, it becomes inevitable that there will be no space for the eschatological within history, as evidencing divine power within the material and within history as the flow of material causation, except—of course— perilously as the destruction of history through human agency rather than its transformation through divine agency.\(^ {20}\)

In contrast, a ‘transformational’ hermeneutic within theology acknowledges God in Jesus Christ precisely as the Lord of history. Once again, the emphasis may lie upon the human subject. I am \textit{changed} in my life by the power of God, and it is to this change that I bear witness in who I am or who I have become in him. But there is implicitly here the claim too that Christ is raised and that it is this raised and exalted Christ who we encounter in history or in our own situational reality. We cannot say simply that Christ is only subjectively real. We cannot deny him the fullness of his humanity if we assert that he lives. Here we are very close to the deficit in second-order theology that obtains. The key point is that Transformation Theology seeks to make explicit here what is already implicit in faith: namely that Christ is real, that he genuinely shares our space and time, and that he is known in power as the one who effects change, through the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this is a kind of change in which I too am taken up. In my being changed, others too are changed; just as I am changed by the transformations in them brought about in Jesus Christ in the power of the Father and Spirit. Nothing is more personal than this kind of reorientation of life. But it is precisely where my life becomes most personal in this sense of undergoing real change, that I find myself positioned, in unity with others, before God the Triune Creator in Jesus Christ. At the point where I am most me, I find that I am most him, or he is most in me, as I am in him. Where I am most in my space and time, I find, in the encounter of faith, that I am most in Easter space and time, and so most in Church. This is an inclusive, life-giving Trinitarian space. I know that others too are with me there, in whom he is and who are also in him, and I know too that it is the world—as it is transformed in him—that is the true source of the change in me.\(^ {21}\) In the same sense, the world too is in him, just as he is in the world, and to be encountered there. It is here, in the encounter of faith, that theology must seek the proper ground of its own meaning, at the point where the meaning of the world as God’s world

\(^{19}\) See note 13, this chapter.


\(^{21}\) See Chapter 5.
which is made flesh in the incarnate Word, intersects with my own life as the shape and form of my own meaning.

**Theology and Freedom**

To speak of ‘me’ here is already to speak of freedom. It is the condition of the creature to be free. But freedom can often be a burden. Do we really want to be free when freedom is simply the consumerist freedom of having lots of choice? Consumerism quickly becomes a form of bondage. If freedom is defined as something that I take for myself (as it commonly is), then the way that we think about freedom will never approach how we actually experience it. After all, the deepest freedom we have is the freedom of life. All human beings have a right to life, and this is the first and most fundamental right cited in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). But let us consider for a moment what that freedom is. We can point to nutrition and housing, but what it is in effect is the freedom to have pulse and breath. If these fail, then we will have no freedom at all. But neither our breathing nor our heartbeat is something that we do for ourselves. Both are automatic bodily processes which are the result of brain activity over which we have no possible control (except marginally, or disruptively, as when someone brings their life to an end). Our deepest freedom of all then (without which we have no other) resides paradoxically in the *involuntary* movement of heart and lung.

This places the view that in faith we become free in Christ in a different light. If our most basic freedom of life is one that is in fact dependent upon processes of the autonomic nervous system, then it doesn’t seem so strange that we should receive our deepest spiritual freedom, from another, rather than take it for ourselves. But at the same time there has to be an element of our own will, if we are to be genuinely free in faith. We can be free dependently, but not passively. Our dependent freedom must also be active. This is the paradox of faith: in him we are set free, and so are free in Christ’s own sovereign freedom, but precisely as myself: one who acts at this time and place in his name and, through the Holy Spirit, by his power.

The lesson we learn from faith then is that Christ’s freedom is inscribed as enacted love. He is present to us, in and through the Holy Spirit, as one who gives his life for us, in accordance with the love of Father and Spirit for the Son and for the world. Therefore we can only receive his sovereign freedom with a reciprocating love. He is not present in our lives as a force from outside, any more than he is what Paul Ricoeur called ‘heteronomy’ or incomprehensible law.\(^\text{22}\) He is present rather in the warmth and vitality of the divine life.

communicated by the Spirit, as this informs and enlivens us in our concrete acts. We receive him as gift in the actuality and intimacy of our own everyday existence, as the universal Christ who summons and calls, but who nevertheless shares with us our own space and time.

In the face of a divine imperative of love then, the only possible free response for us is equally one of enacted love. This is a possibility of freedom that is grounded in Christ's own freedom, as universal and dominical. It makes sense to understand faith, therefore, as the free response to him which takes the form of the active love for our neighbour. This is the nature of our freedom in him as gift. The presence of the Spirit in us, and in our own situational reality, perfects us in our freedom and makes us free to act for and with others in his name.23

Theology and Enacted Love

It is a little salutary, therefore, to think that academic theology in the modern period has had relatively little to say about the structure and form of the loving act, as a point of departure for theology (though it has frequently been its ending).24 This seems to be the case even though there is a widespread consensus that this is central to what we mean by discipleship and certainly has a critical place in what we have in mind when we point to the meaningfulness of the Christian life. It may be here too that we find the communicative power of Christianity as a form of social transformation at its most dynamic. Loving acts are infectious: they challenge our experience and our imagination. They unbalance the shallow conventions of society with their radical spontaneity. Moreover, if we recall our 'where' question, then it is reasonable to think that it is in the free response of enacted love in Christ's name, which is always situationally located, that we find our faith is most real, and that we are closest to Christ himself as living reality in our lives. If this is so, then it must also be here that we experience him most as a truth that extends beyond my own subjective apprehension of him. I know him as historical and as sharing my own space and time, but as being, at the same time, infinitely beyond me. In this way we can say also that it is in enacted love, when I am most ‘in’ Christ as he is ‘in’ me, through the Holy Spirit, that I know him most according to his universality.

23 On the role of the Spirit in the loving act, see Chapter 3, 9–10, Chapter 4, 106–7 and Chapter 5.
I encounter him in my everyday world, but I do so as the ultimate meaning of the world: at once personal (identifiable) and cosmic (universal).

But before we look more closely at the loving act, in the context of our ‘where’ question, we need to observe that the word ‘love’ can in fact be as obstructive as it is helpful. It is very inexact. It is one of those ‘big’ words we use every day without ever quite being able to define it. In theological usage, for instance, we have two quite different terms for love (agape and eros), the first of which suggests ‘altruistic love’ and ‘self-giving’, while the latter suggests ‘attraction’ and ‘yearning’. We are likely to feel the former for our fellow human beings and the latter for God. Inevitably these words can be used in different ways, sometimes contrasting with each other, and sometimes complementing each other, but inevitably tending to divide our love for God from our love for our neighbour. We have to consider also the tendency of the terminology of love to bring us back to a particular kind of relationship between persons who know each other, whereas the notion of ‘charity’ in modern English suggests a positive intervention for people we do not know but for whom nevertheless we feel compassion. Even though the idea of ‘love’ used in this book is actually a very commonsensical one (we always attach it to the ‘act’, for instance, so love is ‘something done’), it may be the case that ‘compassion’ is a better word than ‘love’ for what we mean here in many contexts. ‘Talking about love’, as Ricoeur remarks, ‘may be either too easy or too difficult’. The ordinariness of love comes through in Martha Nussbaum’s description of compassion as the ‘basic social emotion’, or the glue that holds society together. Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, speaks of ‘the paradox of the exchange at the very place of the irreplaceable’ in quite ordinary compassion, and research has shown that it is those individuals who already practise ‘compassion’ in their everyday lives who are most likely to respond heroically to the acute needs of others in moments of crisis. The heroic is already hidden in the ordinary.

A theology of ‘love’, therefore, has always to be also a theology of the ordinary. And yet this is the ordinary as construed theologically as the site of our potential encounter with Christ. Here we use the term ‘transformation’ and

25 Anders Nygren, Agape and Eros (London: SPCK, 1954). There were also important debates during the Middle Ages which concerned the link between ‘love’ and ‘knowledge’ and how it is that the saints can in a sense ‘possess’ God without distance from him in their vision of God at the end of life. This stressed both the ‘appetitive’ and ‘assimilative’ dimensions of love, adding further complex and contrary elements. See Pierre Rousselot, The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages, transl. Alan Vincelette (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001).


'transformative' to do the work of the word 'love'. We do this not only in order to avoid the ambiguities which may otherwise be in play (everyone knows what love is but we struggle to define it), but also to draw out from the moment of faith that what we call 'love' is fundamentally mysterious within the everyday and is, for the Christian, fundamentally bound up with what we mean by 'God'.

THEOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

But what are the consequences of the fact that Transformation Theology is a reorientation of theology rather than a new theological paradigm from the perspective of how it can be placed within modern theology? There is a significant difference between the two. If it were a new paradigm, then it would be competitively placed with respect to other paradigms. But as a reorientation (as what we are also calling 'Theology in the World'), it has in fact a critical relation to theologies that presuppose a different orientation. We can summarize this critical relation in the more technical terms by describing Transformation Theology as being based in the rediscovery of Christ as present material as well as formal object of theology. This contrasts with the structure we find more generally in second-order theology in the modern period, which tends to presuppose a past Christ as its material object and a formal Christ (or the idea of Christ) as its present formal object. Subjectivity intervenes in the gap left in second-order theology between a past Christ, who is remembered, or recalled to mind by Bible and sacraments, and the idea of Christ as one who still lives. But in the calling of faith, subjectivity—while present, of course—cannot be said to intervene. There is at that point no absence of the real: no gap which needs to be filled by an industrious subjectivity motivated to create something by its own powers of reasoning or imagining. What this is rather, in the moment of faith, is an attentive and receptive human subject awaiting formation and realization as creature through the disclosure of the Creator in the person of Jesus Christ, whom we encounter in the gratuity of the moment (where he wills and not where we will). That is a quite different ontological and epistemological structure. The principal critical interaction between Transformation Theology and modern theology in the round lies in the critique, therefore, that what is implicitly present in faith—notably this whole-person receptivity—is not made explicit in the second-order theology of faith. Something essential is left out. Something indeed which concerns our humanity as this comes into view in faith and which is intimately bound up with the sense we have in faith that we have come into a new, deep and enlivening sense of being free.
To what then does such a critical reorientation lead? In the first place, it might mean that theology can come back into a positive and constructive relation with the experience of faith, which is precisely the encounter with Christ as the imperative of love and as the meaning of the world. Theology needs to capture again the sense of the reality of Christ in his divinity as well as humanity: as incarnate Creator in the midst of his world. We need to set aside our single-minded focus upon apologetics and rearticulating Christian faith in the languages of the contemporary world, re-grounding theology first of all in the very distinctive meaning of the Christian life itself. This points to an overcoming of the division between academic theology and the Church but also of the methodological and institutional barrier between systematic and practical theology. Typically, systematic theology has concerned itself with the fundamental areas of anthropology, epistemology, and ecclesiology. It engages with the coherent relations between these things, and tends to reflect the philosophical presuppositions of the broader society. On the other hand, practical theology typically asks questions about specific social and ethical issues and often reflects social and ethical thinking in these areas. Although it arises from within systematics, Transformation Theology can be reduced neither to systematic theology as it currently is, nor to practical theology. Its goal rather is to be a new kind of theology, predicated upon a new theological method, which is the overcoming of these kinds of barriers and distinctions. To this extent it looks back to theology as a ‘practical science’ of the medieval Franciscan tradition, which flourished particularly with the work of John Duns Scotus, but also to the ‘practical’ and ‘pastoral theology’ of the early and principal Reformers, much of whose theological work was embedded in the ecclesial life of their new communities. It looks back in fact to the pre-modern period before the rise of modern theology with the foundation of the University of Berlin (1810), but it does not do so with nostalgia, but rather with hope that this return to our roots will paradoxically make possible a new theology that points more to our future than our past.

Affirmations

In terms of the implied method of Transformation Theology, we can see a good deal in common with the ethnographic approach to theology and ecclesiology. The difference lies, however, in how the ethnographic movement is practised and understood. We have to understand firstly the methodological implications of the reflexive character of the Christological ‘where’ question. If I am asking as a theologian where is Jesus Christ and seeking to orientate myself to where I find that I discover him to be, then does this ‘where is he?’ not also

30 See Chapter 8, 202–5.
have methodological implications for theological self-reflexivity or ‘where am I as a theologian?’ Am I doing theology in the right place? If my theology needs to be orientated to the living Christ, what does this say for the ‘where’, ‘when’, and ‘with whom’ of my own theology?

But just as it was the case that the need to integrate theology within faith could not simply be reduced to the question of whether the theologian is a person of active faith or not (it is more complex than that), so too it is impossible to reduce this question of where theology is done to institutional issues only. It does not so much matter whether the theologian works in the environment of a modern research university (the so-called ‘Berlin’ model of specialization and withdrawal), or in the denominational context of a Bible college, for instance. The question is rather how theology is being done. Is it being done, for instance, in partnership with those who work directly and creatively in the ‘crowded spaces’ of conflicting social interests, of power and powerlessness? If the Spirit of Pentecost, whom we can associate with the exalted Christ, is at work transformatively in the world, then is the theologian in his or her work in touch with that Spirit through the transformed lives of others? Another way of putting this is to ask how ecclesial is this theology, in the sense not just of intention but also of belonging: how is it in service of the Spirit in the Church?

These kinds of questions and openness to Christ suggest that the ethnographic method which involves movement towards groups of people, with whom we reflect together, itself needs to have a Christological grounding, and so also an ecclesial one. We are close here, on the one hand, perhaps to Robert Orsi and his bold experiments in ethnographic theology, in which the prior movement of the theologian into an ecclesial community is a condition of reflection upon it. But it lies close too to what Maurice Blondel called the ‘Tradition’ of the Church, whereby he meant the unity between doctrine and thought, practice and action. There has to be a sense then that if this method is properly applied, systematic theology cannot fail to emerge as something distinctively new.

Underlying these questions of method are further theoretical questions, which we can recognize from debates within Liberation Theology which concern the relation between theory and practice. An important interlocutor in this book will be Clodovis Boff, whose Theology and Praxis was the fullest expression of reflexive or theoretical thinking arising from ‘the option for the poor’. Identifying the points of similarity and difference between Transformation Theology and Liberation Theology is a key task in this book.

34 See Chapter 3, 86–8.
More generally, among modern theologians who share this concern with the relation between how we think and how we act in this world, and how we are to understand theology as a thinking that is orientated towards Christian action, we can point to the work of Nicholas Healy, for instance, on ecclesiology. We can point too to Reinhard Hütter in his grounding of theology on Church practices and his understanding of agency of the Spirit in them. Kevin Vanhoozer is right to critique static, grammar-based theologies, while David Ford, with his turn to Wisdom, or Paul Fiddes, with his world-centred theology, are clearly fellow-travellers. We can point also to a writer such as Ivan Petrella who, with Gustavo Gutiérrez, understands Liberation Theology to be a renunciation of the apologetic attempt to woo the sceptic and to ground theology in the recognition of the oppressed. With respect to its philosophical inheritance, the work ‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’ by Mikhail Bakhtin is important, as well as the thought of Hannah Arendt and Maurice Blondel. More recently, we can point also to the early philosophical work of Karol Wojtyła (especially ‘The Acting Person’) and his extensive thinking as Pope John Paul II on the “Theology of the Body.” In terms of contemporary work, we find parallels with Darlene Fozard Weaver’s turn from a person-centred approach to Catholic moral theology to one that is more act-centred. With respect to engagements with science, theology of transformation resonates positively with the work of Philip Clayton and Nancey Murphy who, in a philosophical theological register, have defined a ‘non-reductive physicalism’ through an influential development of ‘emergence theory’. Most recently, Philip Clayton has brought these perspectives into a more


doctrinal and ecclesiological format. A very recent study by Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn begins specifically to ask pertinent questions about the Christian life and the Church in the light of advances in neuroscience that undermine our accustomed ‘dualism’.

Among the major authors of Catholic tradition in the modern period, it resonates in particular with the work of Edward Schillebeeckx and his extensive interweaving of theological theory with practice as a relation of learning, as it does with his critique of hermeneutics on the grounds of deeper Christian values. There are also parallels, of course, with Rahner and von Balthasar, but here the differences are more marked. Rahner’s transcendentalism is implicit in human cognition itself according to its openness to the infinite. This openness grounds our human freedom and makes us ‘hearers of the Word’. For Transformation Theology on the other hand, our ‘transcendence’ lies in the self-reflexivity which is constituted within our free acts. In our acts, we are confronted with the objective reality of who we are becoming when we act in such and such a way. This prompts a moment in which we can repent and withdraw from what we have done, or we can affirm and embrace it. The reflection which is integral to our acts brings with it the potential for the highest realization of our human freedom as self-determination, therefore, but self-determination in Christ. This is not a moment that is outside community and culture however. For the Christian, self-reflexivity in the act is always informed by the person of Christ himself, as imaginatively and spiritually mediated by the culture of the Church. It is the Holy Spirit who, through grace, draws us before our own freedom to choose ourselves, in the presence of Christ, who chooses us.

In parallel with the work of von Balthasar, Transformation Theology places a strong emphasis upon the role of aesthetics within faith. But, in contrast with von Balthasar, it places the encounter with Christ in enacted faith as loving act, in specific space and time, at the centre of theological reflection. Transformation Theology follows Scotus in underlining the aesthetical dimensions of faith, which concern our own integration through the loving act into the ground of the world order as divine creation. As Paul Janz argues, aesthetics plays a role here in the nature of the reasoning which motivates these acts. These always occur in situations of unpredictable complexity, and in


42 Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology and the Church (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also the earlier work of Nancey Murphy on ‘non-reductive physicalism’, of course (e.g. Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)).


44 Paul Janz on the aesthetics of the Christian act is in preparation.
circumstances of grace. The reasoning which informs them, however, is not *ad hoc* but rather principled. Its principledness is not primarily deductive or inferential, however, but aesthetic, and so akin to the judgments of rightness and appropriateness which we make about what constitutes the beautiful in concrete works of art. The beauty of Christ is not something we primarily behold therefore, within epistemology, with implications for life (as von Balthasar has it), but is something we primarily encounter and enter into in life, through acts, with implications for epistemology. Since this is Christ in *us*, it is the practical reasoning of our loving acts that is always simultaneously the disciple’s discernment of his ‘form’: the active presence of Christ as divine Word or Wisdom, transforming us and transforming the world.

The ‘Christ in us’ theme brings Transformation Theology into alignment with important motifs in both Martin Luther and John Calvin, around their Christocentric theologies or participatory grace. The three closest interlocutors in the Protestant world are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Stanley Hauerwas, but also Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer sought to ground his radically Christological ethics on a present Christ to whom he orientated theology through the ‘who’ question (into which he assimilates the ‘where’). In contrast with this, Transformation Theology recognizes that in today’s globalized and pluralistic world, the ‘where’ can no longer be taken into the ‘who’, since this itself is now inevitably assimilated into our collective cultural identity and so becomes indistinguishable from it. The identification of the ‘where’ breaks the hegemony of culture in modern theological thought. But we share with Bonhoeffer the sense that theology has to take its orientation from Christ as encountered in the midst of life and not from its cultural milieu. The difference lies in the perception of Transformation Theology that the world, in which we can pose the ‘who’ question, has itself undergone rapid and significant change, in a way that now traps the Christian ‘who’ question within the particularity of a Christian culture, against the background of a highly diverse and pluralistic landscape of global interactions.

The continuity with Hauerwas lies also in his powerful and articulate convictions about the primacy of ethics in contemporary Christian witness and the ultimate unity of ethics with theology. The distinction lies in the identification of the *exalted* Christ as the ground of a theological ethics. This allows a Christological critique of the dominant narrativism by testing narrative against our human freedom of judgment: in the ethical challenges that confront us, in the particularity of our situational reality.

---


47 See Chapter 3, 74–5.
Although Transformation Theology has a quite different trajectory from the theology of Karl Barth in many ways, it is impossible not to acknowledge what is nevertheless a significant and clear symmetry. Barth contests the primacy of apologetics and insists on a reorientation of theology to Christ according to his Lordship. He understands this Lordship to be a Lordship over space and time. Where his thinking is very different from the theology developed here is in his account of revelation. For Transformation Theology, God does not stand as self-contained, untouched, and transcendent with respect to the created order. Rather, he is hidden within it, and so can be recognized by the creature. He is, of course, not recognizable in himself as divinity (Barth is right to contest the complacency and controlling impulses of a liberal theology in this respect), but he is known rather in his transformational effects. In brief, the theology developed here differs from that of Barth to the extent that it is a transformation-based rather than a transcendence-based paradigm. This does not point towards process theology, however, despite the apparent ‘change’ in God which follows from a transformation model in its development through Christology and Trinitarian theology. In fact, the conviction is that the presence of God within the creation is maximally transformative. As God freely enters the world more deeply, through incarnation and Pentecost, the world itself is changed in such a way as to become more transparent to him. What seems to be a change in God is a change in the world therefore, brought about by ‘compassionate’ divine action.

It is in the calibration or renewal of anthropology against the background of doctrine that Transformation Theology shows an affinity also with the work of the Orthodox theologian Metropolitan John Zizioulas. In his Being as Communion, Zizioulas argues that the concept of the person as a relational entity derives originally from Cappadocian Trinitarianism. Transformation Theology offers a Trinitarian reading of incarnation, according to which the loving human act itself becomes the primary form of the realization of Trinitarian revelation in history. This places theological anthropology in our capacity to ‘go beyond ourselves’, and to become free in the loving act in the name of Christ, by grace, as the way in which the Triune God freely elects the world.

Critique

As is evident from the above, Transformation Theology has a great deal in common with a host of act or practice-orientated theologies from both the

---

48 John Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).
Where Is Jesus Christ?

past and the present. Its nature as a ‘reorientation’ of theology rather than a new ‘paradigm’ allows it to relate non-competitively with many other theologies. But at the same time, there is a consistent undertow of critique. Transformation Theology cannot be assimilated into any one theological trajectory or school, past or present (though perhaps it sits closest of all to John Duns Scotus). It is important, however, that we understand exactly what the nature of this critique is. This will be important too for understanding the shape of the present book: why its chapters come in a specific order and how they form a whole. It is not possible to communicate a reorientation straightforwardly, since—like a new musical tonality—it has to be communicated also as a new theology which is the realization of the tonality. To extend the musical analogy, the practised musical ear would have recognized in Arnold Schoenberg’s second quartet, Opus 10, not only a new piece of music but also a new musical language, indeed a new way of being musical. But in the case of theology, the notion of this ‘new tonality’ also needs to be made explicit (as ‘Theology in the World’) at the same time as it is performed (as ‘Transformation Theology’).

But in what does this newness of Transformation Theology reside? As the reader will see in Chapter 3, where there is a more detailed discussion of modern theologians, the focus of difference, and so of critique, lies repeatedly in the area of the human self. But this is not simply a question of anthropology, still less a new exploration of our subjectivity and the way in which we can ‘make meaning’. Rather the underlying shift in the human, which leads to a prioritization of the themes of judgment, agency, freedom, and the act (and to the self-reflexivity—or potential for choice—which inheres in the act), is itself based in a new understanding of the world in which we live and of which we are a part. It is in fact a consequence of allowing once again the ‘exalted’ Christ to shape our theology.

Science and its reception (sometimes assimilative and sometimes reactive) have shaped the foundations of our Western culture in which modern theology was born. That science is now changing, indeed very substantially has already changed, and its new genetic, neurological, and quantum technologies are just beginning to penetrate not only our medical but also our economic and social world. Inevitably such a change in science will have far-reaching consequences for the ways in which we understand ourselves as human beings. The argument throughout this book is that theology cannot escape this change. Indeed, it must be at the forefront of its reception. Theology is, after all, a human thought form which is deeply embedded in materiality and embodiment, as it is in cosmology. These are precisely the areas that are most undergoing change, and they cannot but set up deep resonances with Christianity. If the last scientific revolution had its most immediate impact upon the Christian Church, through its re-evaluation of materiality and cosmos, it follows that the Church should be particularly
equipped to understand the nature of the cosmological change which is affecting us all and should be at the forefront of managing the change that is now once again coming upon us. If the first scientific revolution led to dualism, as a response to a materialist reduction of the body and world through Newtonianism, then the second will lead to a new paradigm of the mind and body and of body and world as far more deeply integrated than we ever supposed.

Neurology, genetics, and biology, as well as quantum physics (which is now engaging profoundly with brain science), all point to the human person as being embedded in the material universe in quite remarkable ways, and to a degree that makes dualism untenable. Dualism is the assumption that consciousness is ‘outside’ the world and is inalienably an observer of it, and so not in fact a feature of the world at all. As we shall see in Chapter 7, this has its most concrete expression in the neurobiology of our fundamental social cognition (the extent to which we are hard-wired to ‘discover’ the embodied other as potential collaborator), but it has its most radical expression in quantum physics with its understanding that even the ‘observer’ or scientific consciousness is in fact so deeply one with the world that to be an observer is already to be a participant and even agent in the world. Being within the world, as conscious life, we are never so far apart from the world as not to be ‘co-creators’ of it.

The critical posture of Transformation Theology towards modern theology resides in its conviction that our new scientific self-understanding, which through its technology will surely soon come to shape us as deeply as did Newtonianism, has deep implications both for Christology and for our own self-understanding as agent in the world. It leads us to the view that it is when we act that we are most human (or created, as we would say theologically) and so, from a theological perspective, to act deliberately and freely in the name of Christ, through personal judgment in loving engagement, is the point too at which we are most in the world, or even most world. Quantum physics in particular allows us to understand mind and matter as being part of the same deep structural principles of time and world. Our freedom, and our freedom in love, implicitly becomes the possibility of a cosmic event. This theology then opens up the possibility of a retrieval of a cosmic or universal Christ, not as a new Christ to be thought but as a way of recognizing the commissioning Christ we encounter and receive in the situational reality of our everyday lives. The extent to which Transformation Theology is a ‘new’ theology is the extent to which it learns to recognize the features of the ‘exalted’ Christ of tradition in the commissioning Christ who we encounter in the situational reality of our everyday lives. This is a Christ who we approach through the most basic human functions of reasoning, willing, and feeling, in moments of choice and decision, when we feel called to act in ways that will ‘make a difference’.
But the centrality of the Christian act for this theology also poses a particular set of problems for the presentation of this theology. How do we write and think about the act in ways that are adequate to the human unity and density of meaning which it brings about? By and large, what we write must be an account of the unparalleled meaningfulness of the Christian act of lived discipleship that the disciple remains a disciple. But how do we capture that?

The present book offers a linear series of chapters which begin with foundational questions of theology, before proceeding to the themes of Church and then social transformation (or Church in the world). This broadly follows the pattern of fundamental theology. The first section ('Foundations: Theological Reorientation': Chapters 1, 2, and 3) sets out the principles of this reorientation of theology towards the encounter with Christ in the act. It is here that we have included a more detailed engagement with the work of other theologians in order, primarily, to highlight the differences between a subject-focused theological base and an act-based account. Chapter 3 includes a section on the work of Clodovis Boff, in order to highlight continuities and differences between a theology of transformation and a theology of liberation.

The second section ('Church and Life: Christ in us': Chapters 4, 5, and 6) shows the nature of Transformation Theology in greater detail, beginning with a Trinitarian, doctrinal analysis of the Christian act in Chapter 4, and an incarnational–anthropological one in Chapter 5 ('Christ in Us'). Chapter 6 focuses upon hermeneutics and Scripture in the light of an act-orientated Christianity.

The third section ('Social Transformation: Newness of World': Chapters 7, 8, and 9) explores the points of intersection between Church and World. Chapter 7 focuses on the new understanding of the anthropology of faith which becomes possible in the light of contemporary neuroscience and philosophy (phenomenology), followed in Chapter 8 by an examination of the implications of a new orientation to the act in modern philosophical theological debates. Finally, in Chapter 9, we make an assessment of contemporary debates in political philosophy, focusing in particular on those discussions which centre on an engagement with the person and inheritance of St Paul.

But, in addition to the linear development of this book, we must also take note of the attempt throughout to allow this development to be also a circling around the Christian act, as its central focus and its own proper object. We have marked this in the text by repeated reference to the 'where' question (i.e. 'where is Jesus Christ in the world today?'). This question constitutes the needful openness before the reality of the Christian act, in which human, Christological and so also theological truth can converge. In this way it is hoped that a linear development can also be a development of depth.
All theoreticians of the act, from Blondel, to Lukács and Clodovis Boff, have had to confront the problem that the there is something originary about the act, while discourse is ‘after the event’. But act and thought also seem to inhabit a different timescale. The act is fixed in time and, though originary, has to be reflected upon in life as something in the past. Discourse on the other hand seems linear and extended. Discourse is notoriously never-ending, while the act seems to us so immediate that we cannot grasp it even in the doing of it. Act and discourse are opposite poles of the human. It cannot be easy, therefore, to write a discourse of the act, through memory and reflection, which does not automatically distance itself from the act. This intractable problem is addressed here by the attempt to place the discourse of this book as far as possible within a linguistic and intentional space marked out by the ‘where’ question (though of course this is to draw upon a uniquely theological resource). In this way there is a better chance that Transformation Theology in its critical and constructive phases can—as an academic or second-order theology—remain nevertheless in contact with the first-order theology of living Christian communities, and so can prepare itself for what must finally be its application as ‘theology in act’ in the ‘crowded spaces’ of our contemporary reality.

49 See Chapter 2, note 53.
50 See the following website: <http://www.theologyinact.com>.