

Praise for *Rethinking Christian Identity*

“This is a brilliant, compelling, agenda-setting book. As a growing consensus of theologians recognize the post-liberal, postmodern reality that discipleship is a training in a tradition, Volpe has written this thoughtful, passionate, informed critique that invites us all to think through precisely what is involved in being formed in the Christian tradition. This is the hard work of Christian identity. This book sets a stage for theologians, Christian educators, and practical theologians, which will transform their disciplines and create significant work for at least the next generation.” **Ian Markham, Virginia Theological Seminary**

“A model for those of us who seek to combine the vocations of academic theology and pastoral ministry, *Rethinking Christian Identity* offers a compelling vision of Christian formation. The author focuses our attention on the center of Christian identity: being and making disciples. Volpe deftly shapes her vision in conversation with contemporary theologians (Williams, Tanner, and Milbank) and voices from the history of the Church (particularly Gregory of Nyssa). Volpe helpfully dismantles the unfortunate barrier between the tasks of academic theology and soul-care, combining erudition with a passion for Christian discipleship. A fresh voice for those who seek to serve God with both mind and heart, this book reminds us of the goal of our life before God: the continuous process of being formed in the image of Christ.” **Kathryn Greene-McCreight, St. John’s Episcopal Church**

“Kierkegaard reminded us that one can only claim to be a Christian in the ‘banal sense of registry; at best, we are ever becoming one’ on a journey of formation central to that becoming, as every parent knows. Acutely aware that ‘identity’ will never capture the result, this parent mines Christian reflection contemporary and ancient (Gregory of Nyssa) to delineate the steps in that process, helping us identify our mis-steps as well.” **David Burrell, University of Notre Dame**

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Medi Ann Volpe

RETHINKING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Doctrine and Discipleship

Medi Ann Volpe

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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for Lewis, of course

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so also you must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 2:12–15

*Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring my to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling!
Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

Psalm 43 [42]:3–5

To suffer and be happy although suffering, to have one's feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father's right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly to sing the praises of God with the choirs of angels, this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth.

St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross

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Giving Thanks

It has taken me far too long to write this book. For that reason, I have incurred innumerable debts along the way; I owe so much now to so many generous people that it would require another book to tell the story of how I have been helped by each of them. Thus my list is bound to be quite long and still incomplete. But I must begin somewhere, and so, in no particular order, I give thanks: for Miroslav Volf, who first encouraged me to try my hand at theology; for my parents, whose differences in confessional identity eventuated in some memorable dinner-table conversations;* for friends and teachers at Fuller Seminary – I hope John Thompson and Marianne Meye Thompson know how much they inspired me; for Mary McClintock Fulkerson, my advisor at Duke, whose questions shaped my thinking; for Stanley Hauerwas' prompt and insightful feedback as co-supervisor; for Elizabeth Clark, who continues to influence me in myriad ways; for Warren Smith's close reading of my work on Gregory of Nyssa; for colleagues at Candler School of Theology, especially Ian McFarland, Gail O'Day, Roberta Bondi, Carol Newsom, Steve Kraftchick, and Luke Timothy Johnson, who were encouraging and welcoming; I will always be grateful for the years I taught at Candler, and for my students (many of whom have kept up with me over the years on Facebook and watched this project change shape), especially Julia Buckner, Jonathan Tompkins, and all the members of the early Christian asceticism and theology seminar (the icon of Gregory of Nyssa hangs on my office wall); for my research assistant, Craig Tichelkamp,

* Sadly, my mother died before this book went to press.

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Of course Lewis did far more than read a couple of chapters of this book. From the moment of its beginning as the germ of an idea, he has been a constant conversation partner and frequently a research assistant. Because of the fruitfulness of his thinking and the extent of his reading, Lewis was always ready with feedback, questions, and recommendations. Usually I was grateful for them; in retrospect I appreciate his support in the writing of this book as indispensable and I see it for what it was: an act of love. St. Benedict considered the monastery, under the guidance of his rule, “a school for the Lord’s service.” My time at Minster Abbey, brief as it has been, has taught me to yearn for the regulated quiet which has been a source of much peace. Yet my own “school for the Lord’s service” takes the form of the family Lewis and I have together. My daughters Anna and Lucy, and my sons Thomas and Iain, provide opportunities for growth (as I endeavor to follow the instructions to the cellarer: *fratres non contristet*) and for unspeakable joy. Thanks to Lewis, and to the children, I know certainly: *omnia disponit suaviter* – “he arranges all things delightfully” indeed, for I live in and by the love God shows me through you.

Durham
St. Bede the Venerable
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List of Abbreviations

FC	<i>Fathers of the Church</i>
GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i>
NPNF	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
SC	<i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>

Introduction

Rethinking Christian Identity

This book began its life as a doctoral thesis, perfectly representative of the adolescent kind of production that can be. I have seen and admired PhD dissertations that offered fresh insights clearly, in graceful prose. Mine was of a different type: halting and awkward language trying to express tentative ideas and say why they matter. The work of coaxing those pages into the book you have in your hands spans a few years replete with major life changes: then I was the mother of two children, teaching in Atlanta; now I am the mother of four children, teaching in Durham, England. And were I setting out today to begin the task of writing this book, I would do so with at least one major concern in mind that occupied far less space in my intellectual and personal landscape than it did when I was writing the dissertation. Even then, I was already concerned about the inclusiveness of accounts of Christian identity. My tendency – and not just because I am a theologian by training – has been to place a high value on understanding and articulation in Christian liturgy and teaching. As I have seen my daughter, Anna, grow from babyhood to pre-adolescence, I have been challenged constantly to see things differently: Anna has Down Syndrome, and that changes everything.

It changes everything, and yet there is a very real sense in which it doesn't change a thing. We don't think about Anna-with-Down-Syndrome or interact with her as if that's the most important thing

about her. But there are moments, as any parent, carer, sibling, or friend of someone with an intellectual disability could tell you, when the difference suddenly looms large. Usually those moments occur in the course of daily life, in things big (like deciding when Anna would make her first Holy Communion) and small. Some of those moments, however, have occurred for me in the course of revising this book. I would catch myself sometimes after writing a sentence (about the rational soul, for example) and ask whether I had just described some aspect of Christian faith and practice in a way that excluded Anna, or indeed anyone with a more severe learning difficulty. So I have given considerable thought to the construction of an account of Christian identity that is faithful to classical descriptions of faith and practice, and uses the language historically used in church, but that stretches to include those whose ability to practice or express the faith is limited – however severely.

I fear that some may see this concern as too personal and narrow to flavor a book on Christian identity, and as out of place in its introduction. But it frames everything I have to say in these pages, and it is of the utmost importance to me. I do believe that Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, John Milbank, and Gregory of Nyssa help me to find a way forward in this theological endeavor. If Christian faith and practice involves primarily a way of being in God and the world, that way of being can, in principle, stretch to include anyone who can receive God's love. At the same time, I know that my own ability to receive God's love, and so to give it, is disrupted by sin. It will not do, therefore, to stop at the reception of God's love as the full description of Christian identity for everyone. Insofar as I am able to set my heart elsewhere, I am in need of being reoriented toward God. I search the theology of Gregory of Nyssa for an account of the transformation I require. That quest is at once deeply personal and theological, though throughout the book it is set forth as the latter much more than the former.

Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, and John Milbank take into account the major shifts in concepts of Christian identity that have developed over the last few decades, especially the years following the publication of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*. While that text is not the subject of this book, it is an important precursor to the kinds of accounts of Christian identity with which I am

concerned here. Lindbeck faced a basic problem: if Christian identity is not to be defined by certain propositional content, nor is it simply the best and most accurate expression of religion in general, then what *is* it? Lindbeck's model in *The Nature of Doctrine* suggested we apply an entirely different paradigm. His model attempted to preserve the uniqueness of Christian identity and at the same time allow for diversity in practice and belief across space, time, and confessions. Lindbeck's success was not necessarily in convincing us of the accuracy of his own model, but in convincing us that a new way of thinking about Christian identity was required.

Each of these three theologians criticizes Lindbeck's model; yet they share his basic concern for rethinking the nature of Christian identity. The first question likely to be asked here is what is meant by "Christian identity." I cannot answer this question for my interlocutors in any simple fashion, as none of them offers a straightforward definition of "Christian identity" as such. Though identity is a notoriously slippery notion, I continue to use the term both because my three main interlocutors do so and because it can still serve as a useful placeholder for the intersection of a number of related questions. In this book, I use the term with reference to three dimensions of Christian identity. First, I use the term to refer to individual self-perception and self-affirmation. What it means to call oneself or another a Christian is the basic content of this dimension of identity. It might be asked, further, *whose* individual identity do I have in mind? My basic answer to that question might sound a bit flippant: *Christians'* identity. I do not mean that there is a single, one-size-fits-all shape of Christian life good for every Christian. I mean that there is continuity between the practice of the lay Christian and that of the theologian, the clergy or the religious. The relationship between "ordinary" and "professional" Christians should be not one of quality but of degree – as Athanasius set forth Lenten practices for lay Christians that were versions of the usual practices of ascetics, so also a high degree of continuity in the shape of Christian living should characterize the lives of laypeople and professionals.

The second sense of identity I have in mind relates to community: how does a *group* of Christians demonstrate its Christianness? What marks of continuity with the first Christians identify later generations as their heirs? These will not be the same in every

context, and so the discussion of this dimension of identity involves me in the thick of the debate about how and whether we can even conjecture as to what indispensable marks of Christian faith might be. And yet, trying to describe that which unites Christians past and present, here and elsewhere, into a community connected with the first Christians is a task each of my three modern interlocutors undertakes. The third sense of identity I have in mind, which is a dimension of the second, has to do with the character of the beliefs and practices common in Christian life. How do we understand, for example, almsgiving as a “Christian” practice? What makes Christian almsgiving different from other, secular forms of charitable giving – if there is a difference?

These three senses of Christian identity – self-identity, community identity, and the identifiability of beliefs and practices – are ultimately inseparable. One cannot very well ask what it means to someone to be a Christian without expecting to hear about the sort of community to which one belongs and the character of Christian action in response. Although the central focus of the book is individual Christian identity, the shaping of individual lives happens through the practices and beliefs of a community that carries a tradition. I therefore treat Christian self-identity as the identity of one who is, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s phrase, “one of the bearers of a tradition.” As such, the discussion of individual identity involves me – as it does my interlocutors – in discussions of tradition. Addressing the question more fully would also mean looking closely at the community implied in the account of Christian identity I describe here. I cannot undertake that here, but hope to develop the requisite ecclesiology in a future book. Williams, Tanner, and Milbank all consider in some form the basic question Lindbeck raised: how *do* we think about Christian identity so that it is meaningful and specific without tying identity to a set of propositions or behaviors that remain precisely the same from one local and historical context to another? Each of them gives a compelling answer to that question, and I will consider their accounts in detail in the following chapters.

In addition to providing an answer, however implicitly, to that question, these accounts share a number of overlapping themes. The first of these is *fluidity*. What faithful Christian practice requires is not the same in every context; therefore the practice of Christianity

is marked by differences in performance according to context. This is not to say that everything about what it means to be a Christian changes from one moment to the next. Rather, it is to say that living faithfully looks different in different circumstances, partly because the “background” is different, and partly because Christian action responds to the demands of particular situations. The concept of fluidity has to do with the relationship of present Christian performance to historical Christianity and secular culture. It is in negotiating this space, the space between Christian tradition and history, and the world “outside” the Christian community with which Christians are constantly in contact, that Christian identity appears.

Second, each of these theologians has an implicit account of the importance and the “constructedness” of *continuity* with Christian tradition. While the notion of continuity is a constant in accounts of Christian identity, the way in which this idea is developed varies greatly. Williams, Tanner, and Milbank all claim that their accounts of Christian identity are consistent with (and perhaps even anticipated by) traditional accounts in late ancient and medieval theology. How this is so, and why it matters for each of them, will be a topic for discussion in the initial chapters of the book. For the moment, suffice it to say that a sense of continuity is essential for their theological projects, and that at the same time they are well aware that what constitutes continuity with the past is a matter for argument. So their claims of continuity with the past are carefully supported, and their reasons for making those claims are carefully nuanced. Their individual accounts of continuity are chastened by developments in theory which suggest that our access to the “past” is never unmediated, and so our accounts of the past are necessarily provisional. Thus the theme of continuity in their accounts of Christian identity is expressed as the construction of a narrative, the production of which is done in full consciousness of the difficulty of reading the Christian past.

The fluidity of Christian identity and the manner in which continuity is construed imply that interpreting and articulating it is a function of the *imagination*. Not only does the neophyte begin to imagine herself as in some way united with this community, the body of Christ, and so to see herself as “a Christian”; she simultaneously learns to imagine the community of which she is a part as distinct from the “world” or the “secular” and as somehow continuous

with a past stretching back to the first Christians. This imagining also means learning to see the world in a different way, and learning to live on the boundary between Christian and not-Christian, as Tanner in particular emphasizes. Developing such an imaginative concept of oneself and one's community is integral to individual identity and for the description of a community by members or observers. To be formed as a Christian means imagining oneself in a distinct community whose believing and doing is continuous with the pattern of life of past believers. That self-understanding shapes the habits of mind and heart appropriate to Christian discipleship.

The imaginative and fluid construal of Christian belief and practice, in continuity with the Christian past, is rarely (if ever) straightforward. Thus, these accounts operate with a sense of *uncertainty* or *ambiguity*. Because of the obscurity of Christian history, and because of the fallenness of human beings and the world in which we live, it is very difficult to agree about what Christian faith calls for in the world. What should we *do*? The questions range from whether to give freely to beggars or whether to go to war. People who read their Bibles, go to church, pray, and expect the guidance of the Holy Spirit disagree, often very passionately, about what we should do.¹ The uncertainty, then, is not in the first instance a feature of individual Christian lives (but see below) so much as a part of community life. In these theological accounts of Christian identity this means that less hangs on particular political positions or social practices, and more on the concerns Christians ought to share – for example, for social justice or evangelization.

Uncertainty *does* also affect individual identity in myriad and subtle ways, as Rowan Williams' account shows especially clearly. Although I will say something about this aspect of uncertainty in the next three chapters, it is worth making a few observations here about the character and implications of the uncertainty inherent in Christian identity. For Tanner, the "empty center" (a concept she draws from Barth) means that we cannot name that which holds Christianity together (logically or practically) except by referring to God, especially the Logos of God. The uncertainty about our individual Christian practice falls under this rubric as well, in that we

¹ See, for example, Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 97–127.

can only judge our belief and action according to our finite and fallible powers of observation and reason. For Milbank and Williams, the uncertainty or ambiguity carries with it a kind of eschatological reserve. Our actions, for Milbank, only contribute to the one work of the body of Christ; thus they are not good or complete in themselves but find their place (or not) in the narrative of God's creating, redeeming, and consummating work. The ambiguity appears most clearly in Williams' theology in the incompleteness of selves. We glimpse fragments of ourselves; only God sees the whole picture, and the way all the pieces fit together. In Williams and Milbank especially, the notion that Christian identity is *given* shows through. The Christian life is lived in Christ, indeed *as* Christ, by virtue of our having been joined to his body at baptism.

Thus, as we will see in their accounts, Christianity is not conferred on us but lived by us; this living is a *performance*. Because Christian identity is fluid, constructed, imaginative, and ambiguous, it is not to be understood as possessed, but performed. That is not to say that it is not real, that we are not really Christians or that our actions are not really ours. What I mean by "performed" here resembles the performance of gender in Judith Butler's sense of performance. For Butler, gender is socially constructed; even so, we would not say that it is not real, or that our gender-expressive actions are somehow not really ours. Moreover, the unwritten rules governing good performances makes it incredibly difficult to see any of it as other than "normal." What is "normal" gendered behavior is arbitrary in the sense of Bourdieu's social-scientific notion of a cultural arbitrary. I do not mean that what constitutes Christian performance is arbitrary; instead I hope to convey the difficulty encountered in any attempt to identify what is *not* arbitrary about the practice of Christianity.

In the second place, that notion that we perform Christianity points to the provisionality of Christian identity, that is, that we are not essentially "Christians" this side of heaven. In describing the various ways in which human beings relate to Christ, Aquinas reminds us: "We must . . . consider the members of the mystical body not only as they are in act, but as they are in potentiality."² Thus, in the third place, the performance of Christianity means that

² ST IIIa, q.8, a.3.

(and here I think more of Williams and Milbank than Tanner) our Christian living is not solely our own: truly, in good performances, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” This dimension of our Christian identity comes to the forefront in Milbank’s account. However we understand the prompting to happen, the performance theme as it appears in these accounts of Christian identity conveys a sense in which we have not set the stage or chosen the scenes: all our strutting and fretting is improvisation, an attempt to live in and by God’s grace in a fallen world.

There is thus no easy way to discern Christian identity diachronically. For Tanner, continuity depends upon our continued participation in the work of becoming (and presumably making) disciples of Jesus. For Williams, continuity means faithfulness to an understanding of God he sees as preserved in traditional Christian sources: the Bible, the creeds, and the interpretations of these that have been given by theologians through the centuries. For Milbank, continuity depends much more explicitly on the Holy Spirit: it is the Spirit who guides believers’ actions and facilitates participation in God. This participation is what insures Christian identity. Milbank’s account makes explicit an aspect of Christian identity Williams’ account implies: the gift character of Christian identity. As much as Christian identity is described and performed, it is *given* – which is what Milbank’s emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit highlights. I suggest that when these accounts are brought together, an account of Christian identity emerges which takes into consideration many recent developments in postmodern theory and yet does so in a way that also takes into consideration the richness of tradition – without being enslaved to either the one or the other. The result is the beginning of an account of Christian identity that might just answer Lindbeck’s question: if we cannot define it propositionally or express it in terms of experience, how can we describe it adequately?

This account of Christian identity depicts the Christian as heeding the Bible and tradition (variously interpreted), and above all the Holy Spirit, critically and yet openly, and reflecting God’s love into the world. I like the flexibility and hopefulness of this account, but most of all I am drawn to its obviousness. Like the injunction “choose life” in Deuteronomy 30, it makes me wonder why anyone would do otherwise. “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse,” Moses says. The choice seems obvious. Of course

Tanner, Williams, and Milbank admit that, for us as for the ancient Israelites, sin gets in the way, but they do not dwell on it. So, I ask of Gregory of Nyssa in chapters 4 and 5, how does sin affect Christian identity? Further, I ask how doctrine is related to the account of Christian identity I have sketched. If it is, as it appears, all about following Jesus – which I consider the essence of this account – then what role does doctrine play? Although I do not say much about doctrine in the first three chapters, it reemerges in chapter 5, and I have something to say about it in the conclusion.

The question I raise about this synthetic account of Christian identity is twofold. First, I wonder, why does it not just happen this way? Why do we fail to choose life? The concise answer to this question, as I have suggested above, is sin. So one of the threads running through the discussion has to do with what sin does (and, to a lesser extent, what it is). The other question, however, builds on the fruitfulness of this way of looking at Christian identity. If it does not work in practice, is there any way to support it? Can we build into this account of Christian identity a *response* to sin? I think so: we need to see how Christians might be formed for this kind of practice, including some help in learning to resist sin.

Developing an account of Christian formation adequate to the account of Christian identity that I derive from these three theologians requires in the first place sustained attention to the question of desire. In his work on the history of Western spirituality, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Williams suggests persuasively that the center of Christian faith is an appropriate desire, a desire that is fixed on God and attentive to the movements of God's Spirit. I believe that Williams has captured something necessary for us as we consider the development of notions of Christian identity: during the first several centuries of Christian history, Christian spiritual development was marked by a particular structure of desire. Williams continues to reflect on this central feature of Christian faith in his constructive theology. Yet he does not offer sustained reflection on two important questions: how is this desire to be developed in individuals? How does disorientation of desire – or sin – impede that development? Thus while the account of Christian identity that Williams sets forth is quite compelling, one wonders how it happens so often that Christians fail to live in the ways he suggests are appropriate. Why, that is, does our desire so persistently stray from God and

attach to other things? Although the question of desire and the construction of desire is a common topic in some of the postmodern theorists Tanner discusses, she does not thematize desire in her own work. The omission of a developed account of desire in connection with Christian social practice is interesting, because the formation of desire and of desiring subjects is so common in postmodern theory.

Following on from this, an account of Christian formation adequate to the account of Christian identity being developed here needs an account of the soul. Such an account, I will suggest, can be developed without falling prey to criticisms of inappropriate essentialism or dualism. On the one hand, the soul is the seat of human capacity for the imitation of divine love, which is a key feature of Christian performance. On the other hand, the soul is that which is corrupted by sin. Desire for God is rooted in the soul, and it is the soul that needs shaping in order to reflect the image of God. Thus a theological account of desire and an account of the soul are interdependent. Milbank and Williams begin to give an account of the soul. I will suggest, however, that their approach is inadequate because they fail to attend properly to the place of desire or to the problem of sin in the practice of Christian life. Tanner seems to operate without any notion of soul.

I follow the lead of my modern interlocutors in approaching the topics of desire and the soul; each of them appeals to a variety of sources in making her or his argument, but one source important to all of them is Gregory of Nyssa. I suggest at the conclusion of the third chapter that Williams, Tanner, and Milbank all have the resources they need to develop an adequate account of Christian formation – and even, I submit, to see that such an account is necessary – in their ancient sources, but they fail to appropriate them. Thus in chapters 4 and 5 I turn to Gregory of Nyssa, to try to recover from his theology the accounts of sin and desire that are central to his account of Christian formation. Gregory's account of formation provides what we would call a vista point if we came across it on a mountain road. Because the scope of Gregory's thinking covers the now-divided disciplines of theology and spirituality, the way he considers theological topics is not separated from the spiritual practices he finds appropriate to orthodox Christian belief. That is, for Gregory, thinking Christianly, in a way that we would

think of as propositional and creedal, is inseparable from a host of practices that we would not consider connected intrinsically to those specific beliefs.

Despite the historical and cultural distance that separates us from Gregory, I believe we should turn to him as a resource for thinking about the question of Christian identity as well as formation. For Gregory, the practices that marked Christian life were habits of attention above all else. And it is precisely these sorts of habits that are required for the performance of Christian identity in the accounts of Tanner, Williams, and Milbank. Tracing Gregory's thinking on the soul, sin, and Christian formation will remind us also that the habituation appropriate to living Christianly runs counter to the structure of desire inculcated in us by the social relations in which we are inscribed. For the most part, the forces that form our attention to the world around us do not build in us the desire for God that Gregory believes is indispensable for Christian belief and action. Gregory observed this, and it continues to be the case in our own era.

While I have hinted at this in the preceding pages, Gregory makes it clear that the Christian life is one lived in and through and toward the divine love. What marks the Christian soul as well as the Christian church is a desire ordered to the self-emptying and yet endless love of God. Learning to recognize this love and to display it is the goal of Christian formation.

Between the Postliberal and the Postmodern

“True Discipleship” as Cultural Style

Throughout this chapter and the next two, I show that contemporary accounts of Christian identity need to be supplemented by accounts of Christian formation. Thinking about Christianity in cultural-linguistic terms fits nicely into theological reflection after the “linguistic turn” and in conversation with moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. *The Nature of Doctrine* is a landmark in this theological landscape. George Lindbeck began a fruitful conversation about what makes Christianity *Christian*, and how doctrine in particular functions in the process of evaluating and reproducing Christian beliefs and practices. But in this chapter I will call attention to a lacuna that Lindbeck himself observed: that his description of Christianity immediately raises a question about formation. Learning a new “language” to the level of adequacy Lindbeck imagined would require a thoroughgoing catechesis.¹ I will show that lack of attention to this problem neglects the problem of sin and opens the door to a misreading of the function of doctrine in the lives of individual Christians. Christian identity, as the cultural-linguistic model describes it, involves speaking *and* living according to a different set of cultural rules. I argue in this chapter that accounts of Christian identity that take Lindbeck’s as a starting place need to address the reality of Christians’ failure to speak and live by the

¹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 132–134.

“rules” that comprise Christian doctrine. I take Kathryn Tanner’s account of Christian identity as paradigmatic and examine the cultural-linguistic model as she renders it.

Following the logic of that model, Tanner begins from the assumption that Christianity does function like a culture; she simply chooses different conversation partners with whom to explore the contours of that culture. The description of Christianity that emerges from her engagement with postmodern cultural anthropology draws porous boundaries around a set of materials whose identification as “Christian” depends more on arrangement than essence. Tanner insists that – in keeping with the postmodern flavor of her argument – that the continuity of Christian identity requires an “empty” center, which allows God the freedom to act in new ways in each successive generation of Christians. Thus she describes the performance of Christian identity as consisting at least partly in participation in the conversation about how to construe beliefs and practices as Christian.

Tanner’s “new agenda for theology” also employs postmodern culture theory in an attempt to liberate our understanding of Christian identity from the taint of injustice she perceives in churches’ hierarchical structures. I will show that, in so doing, she inadvertently links discipleship to a certain sort of moral and intellectual agency that is ultimately accountable solely to God. Moreover, I will show that Tanner’s undue emphasis on the intellectual aspect of discipleship leads to a failure to account for the need for Christian formation or the corruption of both intellectual and moral agency by sin. Our failure consistently to practice “true discipleship” suggests that there is more to Christian identity than the honing of our intellectual and moral skills.

Postliberal or Postmodern? George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*

I discuss George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* here as a point of comparison, suggesting that, while Tanner does not identify herself as postliberal, she shares with Lindbeck (and others) certain postliberal theological instincts. Discussing Lindbeck here will also provide a point of departure for the next two chapters, as Williams and Milbank also criticize Lindbeck in the course of making their

constructive proposals. Their respective criticisms of Lindbeck reflect similarities and differences in the three accounts of Christian identity. While each is critical of the way Lindbeck uses culture theory, both Williams' and Milbank's critiques focus on the problems with Lindbeck's understanding of the history of Christian doctrine, whereas Tanner criticizes Lindbeck's choice of sources of culture theory. Milbank in particular goes on to criticize Lindbeck for failing to articulate a properly postmodern theology. My discussion of Lindbeck thus locates *Theories of Culture* in the context of theology in the United States, and helps to sketch the common ground the three share, without conflating their accounts.

Although Tanner draws upon both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, I suggest that the kind of agent implied in her account of Christian action is at odds with postmodern theories of culture. Tanner sees the Christian as a kind of *bricoleur* who works with the materials she has to hand, but portrays the *bricoleur* with the perspective of the architect rather than the builder. The difference in perspective is significant for Tanner's implicit account of agency, of which I am critical in this chapter. Drawing on aspects of Bourdieu's theory that Tanner does not discuss, I raise questions about her conception of Christian action, especially the activity that constitutes the task she identifies as the core of Christian identity. Tanner's implied account of agency is inseparable from her understanding of tradition.² There is an implied objectivity to the relationship between the Christian (especially the theologian) and Christian tradition, which at times seems to give the individual priority over tradition. I bring Tanner into conversation with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre to reveal the difficulties with her account of tradition. With respect to agency and tradition, I suggest that Tanner has not examined postliberalism – especially Lindbeck's – carefully enough, nor learned all she might have from the postmodern theorists whose work she esteems so highly.

In Tanner's case, attending to the question regarding agency and tradition would press her to pay closer attention to the process

² I have not attempted to synthesize Tanner's account of individual agency from her many partial and often implicit discussions. For the purposes of my argument, it is necessary only to draw attention to her persistent tactic of claiming the importance of individual judgment over acquiescence to any traditioned authority.

of Christian formation. I suggest that the lack of an account of formation is especially noticeable in *Theories of Culture* because the postmodern theorists to whom Tanner appeals thematize the construction of subjectivities and attest to the importance of the formation of desire. One has only to read Bourdieu's account of formation in education to realize (even if we do not grant Bourdieu every point he wishes to make) that the construction of Christian identity involves far more than learning the catechism (or equivalent) and reading some Bible. And this *more* is a crucial consideration in the articulation of Christian identity. Asking questions about the role of desire in the articulation and reproduction of Christian identity points directly to the need for an account of formation. Christians are not shaped only by the church, but are socialized by the broader culture – as Tanner herself points out. We can take it that the desires inscribed by social formations and the power relations in which the Christian subject is implicated are constitutive elements of the self.³

In what follows, I do not intend to show that Tanner *is* a post-liberal. Such a claim would raise a number of questions I cannot consider here.⁴ My aim is rather to argue that although Tanner criticizes postliberal theology and distances herself from what she sees as its basic ideas, she does not move beyond Lindbeck's turn to culture theory, even though she replaces the modern culture theory Lindbeck uses with a variety of postmodern resources.⁵ Tanner sees engagement with the broader (non-Christian) culture as central to

³ While Tanner does not thematize power as such, a critique of certain types of power relations within the church throughout its history is implicit in her theology. Her rejection of ecclesiastical authority as having virtually no redeeming qualities is one aspect of this criticism. Tanner is very suspicious of any theology that gives significant weight to tradition as received. See her reviews of Terrence Tilley's *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) and John Thiel's *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), *Horizons* 29 (2002), 303–311.

⁴ See Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). I *do* think that there is such a thing as post-liberalism, but I do not have the space or need to discuss it here. See my review of DeHart's book in *Modern Theology* 24/3 (2008), 525–528.

⁵ For example, she remarks in “How I Changed My Mind,” in *Shaping a Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 120, that the core distinction of her approach is “taking seriously what disciplines such as sociology and anthropology reveal.”

Christian identity and its development, and her account of this engagement is grounded in a sustained discussion of culture theory, which she regards as an essential tool for constructive theology. Tanner's methodological similarities with Lindbeck are central to the difference between her reading of Lindbeck and that of Rowan Williams or John Milbank.

Before beginning my discussion of Lindbeck, I should note that Lindbeck's goal was to foster ecumenical dialogue. Its focal point is thus his theory of religion, and his account of Christian identity is implicit in that theory.⁶ Lindbeck believed that some common ways of thinking about doctrines misconstrued the function of doctrine in relation to Christian faith and practice. Thus Lindbeck saw what he called the cognitivist approach – which invested propositions with the power to determine the meaning of Christian doctrines – as mistaken. In his view, such an approach created a too-rigid system in which varieties in practice and belief, or in the explanation of what doctrines meant, could not be accommodated. Nor did Lindbeck accept what he presented as an opposing view: an experiential-expressivist model, in which doctrines (as symbols) “are not crucial for religious agreement or disagreement.”⁷ Lindbeck's main objection to this approach was that it abolished any necessary connection between a doctrine and its meaning. For Lindbeck, this is a type of foundationalism whose base is experience rather than reason or proposition.⁸

⁶ That Lindbeck offers a theory of religion creates problems for his constructive proposal. Assuming the notion of “religion” as a genus of which “Christianity” is a species sets the project off on the wrong foot; I will discuss this in more detail on pp. 21–23 below.

⁷ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17.

⁸ Lindbeck cites Schleiermacher as the father of this approach to Christian doctrine (see *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16), but he does not go unchallenged on this point. Whether or not we can claim Schleiermacher as the originator of this account of doctrine, we can certainly view it as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. We find a perfect example of what Lindbeck describes in Schleiermacher's predecessor, Immanuel Kant. Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason* interprets a variety of Christian doctrines as having universal and general meaning. See, for example, *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason* in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103–105.

Lindbeck therefore attempted to create an alternative model for understanding and expressing differences without forsaking fundamental Christian unity or the doctrines themselves. Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lindbeck devised a cultural-linguistic model for understanding Christian doctrine and its relation to belief and practice. This model, Lindbeck suggested, could account for diversity in practice without compromising the meaning of doctrine. Lindbeck's model of the structure of religions is based on the notion that

a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought . . . it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings or sentiments.⁹

On Lindbeck's view, moreover,

To become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms . . . to become religious – no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent – is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, nor *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.¹⁰

Lindbeck suggests that his model makes space for the cognitive and expressive aspects of religion while granting priority to neither of them. His insistence on the importance of practices in Christian life emphasizes the experiential dimension but without giving experience primacy over the language of the story.

⁹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

¹⁰ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

Lindbeck himself realized that the model he was proposing required some account of Christian formation (although he did not refer to it in those exact terms). Because he saw Christian practice as skill- and language-based, the process of learning to practice meant acquiring the skills and vocabulary (not to mention the grammar!) of Christian culture. Lindbeck's reading of the cultural context in which he was writing, however, was that the requisite instruction would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. It would, he suggests, resemble "ancient catechesis."

Instead of redescribing the faith in new concepts, it seeks to teach the language and practices of the religion to potential adherents . . . [catechumens in late antiquity] submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently and responsibly to profess the faith, to be baptized.¹¹

Although Lindbeck saw this as impractical in the contemporary church, he nevertheless viewed it as an important model for Christian formation in a postliberal scheme.¹² Lindbeck's theory of religion implies that Christian identity is functionally a *habitus*.¹³ For Lindbeck, the development of a Christian way of living in the world involves the acquisition of skills appropriate to the task: skills in imagination and narration. As we will see in subsequent chapters,

¹¹ *The Nature of Doctrine*, 132.

¹² Lindbeck saw premodern catechesis as able to produce a Christian imagination of the world, "an intimate and imaginatively vivid familiarity with the world of biblical narrative . . . that made it possible to experience the whole of life in religious terms. The popular versions of the biblical world may often have been gravely distorted, but they functioned intratextually" (132–133). In the contemporary situation, however, he believed that catechesis could not function to produce such a rich imaginative landscape. The key problem, in Lindbeck's view, is "the implicit assumption that knowledge of a few tag ends of religious language is knowledge of the religion" (133).

¹³ That is, insofar as learning "how to feel, act and think in conformity with a religious tradition" amounts to learning habits of being in the world, what Lindbeck describes as becoming religious is habituation.

a central feature of Christian imagination is the orientation of desire. Put into Lindbeck's terms, the organizing principle of Christian culture is its attention to God as the author of its narrative, to Jesus as its founder and pioneer. Central to the practice of life in a Christian idiom is the imitation of its "pioneer and perfecter," which includes at its very heart the joy in God's love and God's saving will that characterized Jesus' self-giving life and death. Unity of desire with the Father and the Holy Spirit funds Christ's actions in the world, and Christian practice is no less than an embodiment of this union with God. Cultures inculcate desires and shape the imaginations of those who operate within them.¹⁴ Likewise, Christianity conceived on a cultural-linguistic model does not simply ask for adherence to a charter, but shapes the imaginations of those who would be followers of Christ. Yet Lindbeck does not mention the character and structure of desire in his description of either contemporary Christian practice or ancient catechesis. Without attending to the importance of desire in the construction of Christian subjectivity, Lindbeck misses one of the central features of the catechesis he admires.

Moreover, the acquisition of language or vocabulary and skills Lindbeck describes as central to catechesis are not sufficient to produce a Christian *habitus*. Lindbeck's proposal lacks an account of the soul, which was the "object" to be transformed by the intensive religious instruction he describes. As a result, in Lindbeck's model the practices and skills to be interiorized appear to occupy an otherwise blank or non-existent space in the individual being catechized. But for ancient catechists and catechumens this was not the case. The model for catechesis Lindbeck describes presupposes an account of the soul as ontologically subject to the condition of sin as a result of the Fall. The sinful state reveals itself in the disordered desires common to human beings. As we will see in chapter 2, this disorder consists in desiring created things rather than the creator. Although humans were created for relationship with God and ought to desire God as a function of having been

¹⁴ This theme is one Tanner takes up in *Theories of Culture*, and owes much to a reading of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990).

created *imago Dei*, this desire no longer orders the soul as it should. Thus a central part of catechesis involved the restructuring of the soul's desire.¹⁵ Without an account of the soul or a sense of the centrality of the structure of desire to the practice of Christianity, Lindbeck is bound to overlook this indispensable aspect of late ancient catechetical instruction, and so are many of his followers.

Postliberalism as Theological Style

My aim in this section is to argue that postliberalism may be understood as a theological style, and that hence, despite Tanner's critical stance toward postliberal theology, she continues to share some of its basic features.

Postliberal theology centers on the understanding of the culture-like account of Christianity, and, like Lindbeck's proposal, responds to questions regarding the relationship between doctrine and Scripture and the role of each in shaping and articulating Christian identity. Lindbeck's effort to produce an inclusive account of Christian identity rests on two assumptions regarding the key elements of any description of Christian belief and practice, which in turn suggest two central concerns of postliberal theology.¹⁶ First, Lindbeck begins from the premise that determining principles of internal coherence is an essential theological task. Moreover, these principles must encompass the broad range of Christian beliefs and practices without becoming meaningless. Tanner criticizes Lindbeck's prin-

¹⁵ This is especially clear in Rowan Williams' *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990); see especially pp. 54–123.

¹⁶ The themes I mention here differ from the themes of postliberalism as James Fodor describes it in *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd edition, ed. David Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 230–231; I also owe much to William Placher's earlier discussion of postliberalism in the second edition of *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 343–356. I am considering postliberalism specifically as Tanner both criticizes and continues it. I therefore focus my attention on the relationship between Lindbeck's theology and Tanner's, and so do not discuss a variety of other theologians Fodor includes in his discussion of postliberals.

ciples and the boundaries they imply in *Theories of Culture*.¹⁷ Second, postliberals generally attempt to produce theology in continuity with Christian orthodoxy throughout history. The variety of ways in which theologians pursue this task raises questions about the style of retrieval of that tradition. The attention to historical Christian tradition is necessitated by the belief that discerning Christian identity in the present involves seeing contemporary beliefs and practices in relation to older iterations of what constituted Christian belief and practice. The articulation of Christian identity thus involves offering a reading of the Christian past. These readings of the past reflect a desire to understand the nature and function of Christian doctrine, and to grasp the role of Scripture in shaping Christian identity.

The structure of postliberal theology is also influenced by Hans Frei's reading of Karl Barth's theology. For Barth, the culture-likeness of Christianity only goes so far: while Christianity may resemble a culture in certain ways, the church is constituted by the Word speaking. The idea of church as particular and as constituted by the presence of God implies an understanding of Christianity not as one religion among many, operating according to a similar logic or pattern, or united by a common experience, but as the community brought into being by the Word. Thus, those influenced by this view can say that Christianity operates according to its own internal logic, which is not simply a form of "religion." At the same time, the true logic of Christianity is hidden from us, revealed only insofar as God is revealed to us in the incarnation. So Christianity is like a culture, with one key difference: whereas the logic of a culture cannot be defined because of its inherent contestability, the logic of Christian faith cannot be defined because it is the Logos of God who provides the principle of order and unity in Christian practice. The internal logic on the one hand,

¹⁷ The most important treatment of this topic among second-generation postliberals is Bruce Marshall's "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69–102. For discussion of the concept of "second-generation" postliberals, see Gary Dorrien, "The Future of Postliberal Theology," *Christian Century* 118 (2001).

which owes its appearance in postliberalism to Barth,¹⁸ and the cultural logic on the other, whose genesis is Lindbeck's application of Geertz and Wittgenstein to theology, together provide the underlying structure of postliberal theology. It is an understanding of Christianity as connected by a set of cultural rules and as having a particularity that can be traced through history without being reduced to an instance of religion as a general phenomenon.¹⁹ The culture-likeness of Christianity and the narrative at its heart form the basis for an account of Christian identity in which the Christianness of an idea or practice is measured by asking whether it fits in the contemporary arrangement of Christian beliefs and practices, and whether it is compatible with the history of those Christian beliefs and practices.²⁰ One way in which many postliberal theologies display this logic is through the application of the notion of the "plain sense" of Scripture. An idea originally set forth by Hans Frei, it has since been developed in a variety of ways by Tanner and others.²¹ For these theologians the "plain sense" has a regulative function in theological reflection and Christian practice, and in certain cases it becomes a technical term. The technical flavor of the plain sense offers the basis for making authoritative judgments about Christian beliefs and practices. Part of the problem in articulating Christian identity is the problem of authority: deciding how

¹⁸ Lindbeck's "reading" of Barth was mediated by Frei.

¹⁹ The internal logic of postliberal theology is constructive and not simply a reaction to liberal theology. For an alternative view see Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Tanner provides an interesting variation on this, however, in trying to incorporate what she values in liberalism, especially Chicago-style liberalism, in *Theories of Culture*.

²¹ See Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59–78. Others who develop this theme include, but are not limited to: Eugene Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 64–81; Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); and Bruce Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology in Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69–102.

to decide is therefore a central methodological question for postliberal theology.²² I will return to this topic below.

I also suggest that postliberalism is a characteristically modern theological style, and that both Lindbeck's and Tanner's accounts of the soul, sin, and Christian formation suffer from postliberalism's debt to modernity.²³ I do not intend to give here a synopsis of modern understandings of religion, but to list three specific ideas common in postliberal theology – especially in Frei and Lindbeck – and which affect the development of Tanner's account of Christian identity in *Theories of Culture*.²⁴ First, there is in much postliberal theology (especially in the earlier generation) a fundamental distrust of religious authority. In Frei and Lindbeck's theology this attitude shows up as hesitation about granting authority to confessions and creeds.²⁵ Tanner appears to resolve the problem of authority in theological judgment by placing it in the hands of individual

²² See Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 147–193.

²³ I do not give a full account of the philosophical conditions of modernity here. What I hope to show with these three basic ideas is how some fundamental assumptions create problems in accounting for the soul or sin, or thinking about Christian formation. And I am not including the search for foundations here. Although it is certainly one of the key features of modernity, it is one that Tanner implicitly criticizes in postliberal theology – that is, in the cultural-linguistic model. Tanner approaches theological method as a non-foundationalist. Thus she criticizes a foundationalist tendency in Lindbeck. What she doesn't do is reject the assumptions about the subject I have described above. Those assumptions persist in her implicit account of human agency.

²⁴ The modern divorce of academic theology from “spirituality” may contribute to this; see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially 1–8.

²⁵ See Frei, “The ‘Literal Sense’ of Scripture: Can It Stretch or Will It Break?” in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 117–152, in which he never considers the way in which the literal or plain sense of Scripture develops together with the creeds of the church. Cf. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 74–88, in which Lindbeck implies that the relationship between doctrine and Scripture does not require creeds – even though most Christians have some form of creed. Tanner parts ways with many continuing postliberals who attribute greater significance to creeds and ecclesiology in theological reflection. Bruce Marshall provides one example of this tendency; see “Absorbing the World.”

Christians. "Being a Christian at all, even in the simplest of circumstances," she writes, "requires theological judgment; one must either take responsibility for that judgment or decide to acquiesce in someone else's judgment."²⁶ The phrasing of her statement clearly shows suspicion, if not outright antagonism, toward those whose religious beliefs and practices consist primarily in following the guidance of church leaders. Deciding "to acquiesce in someone else's judgment" implies shirking one's responsibility to make such judgments, and suggests that there is no way of discerning trustworthy authorities. Second, a characteristically modern epistemology accompanies this attitude. At the heart of Kant's epistemological revolution was the notion that the capacity for knowledge lay in the structure of human understanding. The parallel in Tanner in particular is that faith is primarily a feature of individual Christian lives.

Third, this modern epistemology focuses on rationality and intuition rather than desire. Postmodern theorists call into question the notion of a rationality based freedom that grounds the individual and gives the self its character. The subject is rather less free than Kant supposed, moved not by duty so much as by the habits of thinking and desiring that are inculcated as a matter of course as a person matures within a society. That is, even if there were such a thing as transcendental freedom (which even Kant does not claim with absolute certainty), it would be seriously mitigated by the desires formed in a person by socialization. Modern theological method does not generally involve sustained attention to the way in which desire shapes and is shaped by religious beliefs and practices, and Tanner's work is no exception. Although she turns to some postmodern sources to interrogate certain assumptions basic to postliberal theology, these sources do not lead her to ask questions about the role of desire. This is problematic because such desires are implicated in the social relations by which we are constituted as individuals. The construction of desire is a part of the socialization process to which Tanner refers in *Theories of Culture*, yet she does not offer an account of the way in which Christian desires might be distinguished, much less constructed. In the next two sections, I turn to Tanner's account of Christian identity. Even

²⁶ *Theories of Culture*, 160.

though she suggests some difficulties with aspects of postliberal theology – especially Lindbeck’s version of it – I argue that she does not identify or address its lack of an account of formation.

Theories of Culture I: The Critique of Postliberalism

In *Theories of Culture*, Tanner uses postmodern theory to develop an account of Christian identity that has postliberal theology as a foil. Of course, the modern understanding of culture and its application to theological problems extends throughout the whole range of theological methods, as Tanner is quick to point out.²⁷ Lindbeck’s postliberalism comes in for the sharpest criticism. Tanner argues that the notion of culture on which Lindbeck’s account of Christian engagement with non-Christian culture is based is erroneous – or at least outdated. This dependence on a mistaken view of culture leads to a succession of other problems Tanner identifies with postliberalism, including insularity and rigidity. These criticisms occupy a prominent place in Tanner’s proposal. And yet, as I will show, Tanner herself approaches the whole problem of accounting for the continuity of Christian identity in a manner that bears the marks of postliberal influence. Tanner’s argument in *Theories of Culture* thus places her between modern and postmodern method.²⁸ While she continues to address the problems that drove Lindbeck to write *The Nature of Doctrine*, in a similar fashion, her account of Christian identity proposes a different means of establishing or discerning continuity.²⁹

My first step is to describe the relationship between Tanner’s proposal in *Theories of Culture* and Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*

²⁷ See *Theories of Culture*, 61–63.

²⁸ See, for example, Reinhard Hütter’s review of *Theories of Culture* in *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 499–501.

²⁹ Her “new agenda for theology” might be taken to supercede Lindbeck’s “religion and theology in a postliberal age.” Lindbeck intended *The Nature of Doctrine* as prolegomena to a systematic theology, which he has not published. See *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. Michael Buckley (London: SCM Press, 2002), 169. So also I would argue that Tanner’s *Theories of Culture* serves that function for her intended systematic theology, of which *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) is a down-payment.

as her primary example of postliberalism. I list four of Tanner's criticisms of postliberal theology, through which she distances herself from some of its basic premises. Although Tanner admits that the basic picture of postliberalism with which she begins is something of a caricature, she suggests that it captures some key features of postliberal theology.³⁰ First, Tanner describes postliberalism as beholden to modern cultural anthropology, with all its shortcomings. So, postliberal theology "projects onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation require – a coherent whole."³¹ She claims that postliberal theologians mistakenly assume that cultures are holistic, internally coherent units. When they apply this view to Christianity, they tend to look for clear principles of coherence, which might guarantee continuity and unity in Christian practice. Second, she suggests that postliberals try to identify a Christian cultural boundary, which involves exempting "from outside influence whatever ensures Christian identity." This insurance is primarily doctrine.³² But Tanner argues that it is not possible to identify a frontier between the "secular" and "Christian" worlds. Assuming such a boundary begins the process of theological reflection on the wrong foot and leads to an ahistorical view of

³⁰ It must be observed that part of the reason Tanner's picture of postliberalism remains a caricature is that she mentions only one follower of Lindbeck in her critical discussion of postliberalism. Thus also it is not clear what is the relationship between "postliberalism" as a rather broad category with the three approaches to the question of Christian identity she criticizes in chapters 4 and 5 – defining Christian identity in social terms, in view of a cultural boundary, and through commonalities in Christian practice.

³¹ Tanner suggests that postliberals take as the principle of unity of Christian practices "some underlying body of rules or patterned order to which the theology of practice conforms despite its messiness. This body of rules or patterned order is not explicit in the day-to-day practice of Christians; they have the know-how but are incapable of telling academic theology what their know-how is. Its expression is reserved for the specialized theological investigation of clerics or educated elites . . . The theologian is only uncovering a force for coherence that is already a part of practice, but whatever this is is only apparent once the theologian points it out" (*Theories of Culture*, 76).

³² She also suggests that postliberals appeal to "the kind of contextualism typical of a modern understanding of culture . . . any borrowed material takes on a new sense in a Christian context" (*Theories of Culture*, 106).

doctrine.³³ Tanner insists that, far from being exempt from “outside” influence, doctrines “are susceptible to change in the historical course of decisions by the human actors involved.”³⁴ Third, Tanner disagrees with Lindbeck’s construal of the function of doctrines as cultural rules. Part of this difficulty is the difficulty of knowing the rules.³⁵ Tanner suggests that Christian communities, like cultures, can only be seen as having rules in the *application* of those rules, and extrapolation of rules from practice always runs the risk of misjudging. Moreover, even if one could identify them with precision, the imagined consensus on how to apply the rules in a particular situation does not exist.³⁶

The fourth criticism Tanner makes is that postliberals assume an isolated Christian community that socializes its own citizens in distinction from the secular surroundings. She attributes this view to John Milbank. Tanner observes, as a part of her criticism, that “nobody is literally born and raised” in the church. The question

³³ *Theories of Culture*, 131–132. It should also be noted that this is a very common criticism in the reception of *The Nature of Doctrine*. Tanner is not the first to notice it, and the criticism is not dependent on having read any postmodern culture theory. *The Nature of Doctrine* raised the question for many: what is theology about? The criticisms vary widely, but the question about how Lindbeck’s “unchanging” rules are grounded is pervasive. The question takes various forms, but in most cases asks what justification there can be for any particular rule. Why this is problematic differs among reviewers: some (e.g., Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones, in *Books and Religion* 13 [1985], 7) think that there *ought* to be reasons for adopting particular rules and that these reasons should be articulated; others (especially liberals) think that the adoption of particular rules can never be anything but arbitrary and criticize the very suggestion of “permanent” rules.

³⁴ *Theories of Culture*, 141.

³⁵ Tanner is very critical of Lindbeck’s reading of Wittgenstein, whom she rehabilitates for her own proposal. Oddly – or perhaps not so oddly – Tanner does not question Lindbeck’s reading of Geertz, perhaps because she has already rejected Geertz as a mistaken, modern theorist of culture. Both Lindbeck and Tanner seriously misconstrue Geertz, however. The representation of Geertz in *The Nature of Doctrine* is a selective reading, one that takes what is useful for Lindbeck and ignores the possibility that Geertz may not say so strongly what Lindbeck wants him to say. As for Tanner, she takes this representation and others like it without considering the possibility that such portrayals might themselves be caricatures.

³⁶ *Theories of Culture*, 138–143.

she raises is thus not so much whether the boundary is what postliberals consider it to be, but whether the church can form its members in such a complete way and distinguish this formation from the cultural formation of the secular. While it is certainly true, this is not a particularly useful criticism without more clear indication of what is at stake. Tanner suggests that postliberals do theology as though the church had its own set of social institutions alongside the “world.” Whether or not this is true for postliberals, it is not *Milbank’s* view.³⁷ Like Tanner, Milbank leaves the question of formation for Christian faith and practice largely unaddressed. The criticisms Tanner makes of Lindbeck, moreover, would have benefited from a more careful engagement with Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, which I will describe in chapter 3.

Tanner presents the postmodern revision of anthropological theory deftly at the beginning of *Theories of Culture*. Her criticism of postliberalism, however, is less adroit. Her criticisms of Lindbeck as the figurehead of postliberal theology focus on the shortcomings of his method deriving from his foundations in modern theory.³⁸ Tanner’s attitude toward postliberalism more generally in turn reflects her reading of Lindbeck. And that evaluation centers on Lindbeck’s modern assumptions and theoretical foundations. In one sense she is correct: in *The Nature of Doctrine* Lindbeck dealt with problems inherent in modern theological method in a modern way. But Lindbeck is not the sum of all things postliberal, nor does he provide the summary statement of what now constitutes postliberal

³⁷ Tanner’s inclusion of Milbank under the heading “postliberal” is a minor but telling feature of her caricature. Not only is Milbank not a postliberal, the view she attributes to Milbank is not in fact his view but one he himself disavows. Tanner’s dismissive attitude toward Milbank and the carelessness with which she engages his work call into question her judgment about the accuracy of the caricature of postliberal theology with which she begins. For an assessment of Tanner’s account of Milbank, see Philip Kenneson’s review of *Theories of Culture* (*Anglican Theological Review* 51/1), 174.

³⁸ I suggested above that Tanner’s criticism of the rule theory Lindbeck presents is not unique. In fact it is one of the most common criticisms found in the reception–response to *The Nature of Doctrine*. Moreover, the observation that Lindbeck’s employment of rule theory is problematic does not require any knowledge of postmodern theories of culture.

theology. Often, then, when Tanner says she is describing postliberalism, she is only talking about Lindbeck.³⁹ And yet she does not mention what Lindbeck himself saw as necessary for his account of Christian identity: an appropriate form of catechesis. Moreover, the postmodern theorists of culture whose work forms the foundation for Tanner's argument would also attest to the importance of considering formation. Attending to the appropriate structure of desire for Christian subjects would strengthen Tanner's proposal and would also call attention to the need for an account of the role of desire in the construction of Christian identity. Her implicit account of agency raises questions about theological anthropology, including the problem of sin and growth in Christian life. In the next section, I turn to Tanner's constructive proposal.

Theories of Culture II: Constructing Christian Identity

In *Theories of Culture* Tanner offers a compelling answer to the question Lindbeck raised in *The Nature of Doctrine*: the "Christianness" of beliefs and practices is to be measured according to their contribution (or failure to contribute) to "true discipleship."⁴⁰ Her use of postmodern culture theorists helps her to devise an account of Christian identity that is flexible enough to include a wide range of beliefs and practices and yet not disconnected from a sense of the importance of tradition sources for the articulation of faith and practice in contemporary Christianity.

Drawing on the anthropological theory she has used to criticize postliberal (and other modern) theology, Tanner offers her own account of Christian practice. Tanner's point of departure is the premise that the postmodern theories of culture she discusses in the first section of *Theories of Culture* displace older understandings such as Geertz's: cultures are characterized by conflict and their boundaries are porous. Tanner suggests, by analogy, that Christianity

³⁹ For a contemporary example, she could also look to Bruce Marshall (with whom she graduated from Yale in 1985), as well as to Gene Rogers. Lindbeck was not the sum total of "postliberalism" even in the late 1980s. See Placher's discussion in *The Modern Theologians*.

⁴⁰ *Theories of Culture*, 123–124.

(or Christian theology) is not defined by agreement about core beliefs and practices and does not have clear boundaries. Christian practice is a form of regulated improvisation, a performance in which the practitioner/believer simultaneously acts upon and acts according to the various beliefs and practices s/he sees as central to Christian faith.

Tanner presents Christian practice as improvisation; as we will see in the next chapter, this is a view she shares with Rowan Williams. The concept of improvisational performance as the mode of Christian practice emerges from an understanding of culture as characterized by conflict and change. Tanner suggests that cultural change is not

primarily externally generated . . . Culture has its own internal principles of change – fluid forms susceptible of varying interpretations, loosely connected elements that can therefore be ordered and reordered to support or contest various social arrangements, perhaps logically incompatible beliefs or values that might be pushed and pulled, one against the other, by politically opposed factions, or the potentially subversive remains and traces of alternatives to now-dominant cultural forms, interpretations, or arrangements. Cultural changes are not, then, the result of a failure to follow culture; they are the product of efforts to conform with a culture that has its own indeterminacies and internal strains and conflicts.⁴¹

Tanner sees such conflict at the heart of Christianity as well. Whereas Lindbeck and other theologians might have attributed differences in belief and practice to cultural difference, Tanner suggests that they are often entirely internal to Christianity.⁴² That is, although different cultural contexts certainly shape Christian practice, there is no reason to believe that differences in practice

⁴¹ *Theories of Culture*, 51–52.

⁴² Tanner sees this as a widespread tendency in modern theology. “Theologians . . . typically account for differences in Christian belief across time and space by attributing those differences to the influence of culture . . . Theological discussion of what people across all such differences in time and place might have in common as Christians often avails itself, too, of ideas that are associated . . . with a modern anthropological understanding of culture: some sort of social transmission of heritage, characteristic spiritual affinity, or ruled patterns of behavior” (*Theories of Culture*, 62).

derive solely from “outside.”⁴³ Another difference that emerges from Tanner’s view of culture is her revised understanding of the functioning of cultural rules. She does not believe that cultural rules operate in the way Lindbeck’s grammar does. Tanner suggests that cultural rules function as a set of possibilities available to a subject at any given moment, in a manner that is much more fluid than Lindbeck’s grammatical rules.⁴⁴ Furthermore, these rules are not enough: “no explicit rule is sufficient to produce good judgment apart from training.”⁴⁵ And good judgment is necessary, since beliefs and practices are not evaluated for “Christianness” with reference to a set standard, but against the backdrop of the set of beliefs and practices that comprise the whole. For Tanner, the faithful practice of Christianity does not include all the same beliefs and practices from one generation to the next, and there is no means by which we might ascertain which of those beliefs and/or practices *ought* to remain the same.⁴⁶ Because the shape and organization of Christianity are subject to change, what marks a belief or practice as “Christian” is fluid.

⁴³ It is not clear, however, that doctrinal development – or changes in Christian belief and practice – occur according to the same pattern as cultural change. Tanner extrapolates from postmodern theories of culture in precisely the same way Lindbeck applied modern anthropological theory. Her account leaves open the question whether Christianity really has developed as a culture would: if it has, one wonders whether the empty center is not open to God but rather closed. To deny the possibility of at least glimpsing the logic that holds Christianity together is to come very close to offering a Kantian postulate in place of a living God.

⁴⁴ See *Theories of Culture*, 144.

⁴⁵ *Theories of Culture*, 141. This is a statement, however, with which Lindbeck would have agreed. See *The Nature of Doctrine*, 82–84.

⁴⁶ Tanner lists the tasks of the theologian as: “(1) elucidating the meaning of cultural elements, (2) forming an order among them by selecting and selectively emphasizing elements out of the available, socially circulating pool of symbolic resources, and (3) determining the way in which social practices are part of those inferential and associative networks, the way certain social practices are to be interwoven with meanings and organization of cultural elements which the theologian produces” (“‘New Social Movements’ and Feminist Theology” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, ed. Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], 186).

Of course Tanner does not suggest that the whole set of Christian beliefs and practices is completely dismantled and constructed anew in each generation. Tanner's use of the term *bricolage* for the mode of this theological construction indicates certain constraints on the activity of working with the array of beliefs and practices in the pursuit of "true discipleship."⁴⁷ There is a sense in which the material with which the theologian works remains the same, and the changes in the shape of "true discipleship" come from the rearrangement of materials – practices and ideas. Yet the materials themselves have no inherent claim to being (the) "tradition."

Rather than discerning Christianness on the basis of adherence to an unchanging essence of belief and practice, Tanner looks at the practice of Christianity as consisting in disarticulation and rearticulation: taking materials that are not in themselves "Christian" and organizing them Christianly. This definition of the central task of Christian discipleship implies that we cannot measure beliefs and practices by any standard but by how well they fit together. Presumably this standard is more easily applicable than the question whether a belief or practice contributes to "true discipleship"; I will give further attention to this topic later in the chapter. The strength of Tanner's view is that it eliminates the need for any consensus on the core of Christian faith, and allows for practices and/or beliefs accepted in one generation to be rejected in the next (and vice

⁴⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 166. Tanner refers to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988) as sources for this concept. Hebdige's work on punk subculture in Britain is fascinating in connection with Tanner's argument, because one of the main points he makes is that punk subculture is parasitic on the mainstream culture it subverts. While the suggestion that Christian cultural style is dependent on the broader culture may be accurate, there is a more interesting implication of Hebdige's work for Tanner's proposal. That is, even as Tanner suggests in *Theories of Culture* that the fluidity of Christian identity means that there are no *de jure* authorities, when she turns to the task of developing her own systematic theology (in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*), she draws upon the sources/authorities for theological reflection about which exactly the sort of consensus she accuses Lindbeck of fabricating *exists*. Without that consensus, the appeals she makes to theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom would not have the weight they give to her discussion.

versa). Hence the fluidity of Christian identity is a quality of the continuity of common belief and practice over time rather than being primarily a characteristic of individual or personal identity.⁴⁸

It is a fairly short step from these suggestions to the argument that Christian identity is best thought of as a shared task. The point is not to establish consensus on the question about what it really means to be “Christian,” but to persevere in the face of disagreement. Another way of putting the point is to say that faithfulness is about staying in the conversation, even when there seems to be no hope of coming to agreement. Tanner understands Christian identity as “constituted most fundamentally by a community of argument concerning the meaning of true discipleship.”⁴⁹ For Tanner, there is no core set of beliefs and practices that necessarily defines Christianity; therefore the task of identifying the marks of Christian cultural style is highly complex. It is also a task that is as old as Christian practice itself.⁵⁰ Tanner’s revised account of Christian identity thus fits nicely with approaches to questions of tradition and orthodoxy developed over the past three decades. With respect to tradition, for example, Tanner is implicitly in agreement with Alasdair MacIntyre, who has influenced many contemporary theologians.⁵¹ Also, although she may not realize it, she shares some basic ideas with historians of Christian theology, like Rowan Williams, who reject the depiction

⁴⁸ And yet the individual remains the primary agent in Tanner’s discussion. For Tanner, tracing the identity of Christian *community* is the focal point. It follows that the community is also the central figure in the improvisation, although Tanner does not discuss this. Christian practice is marked by the style of its improvisation. This has ecclesiological implications, which I assume Tanner is not interested in following up. In fact, she might well disagree about the community being the important unit. Still, I think her account of community identity is more prominent in *Theories of Culture* than individual identity.

⁴⁹ *Theories of Culture*, 156; cf. Tanner’s “Tradition and Theological Judgment in Light of Postmodern Cultural Criticism,” paper presented at Duke University, 2004.

⁵⁰ See *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, where Tanner suggests that her account of Christian identity is anticipated by many of the late ancient and medieval theologians she discusses.

⁵¹ I will discuss MacIntyre in more detail below; although Tanner generally takes positions that accord with MacIntyre’s work, close attention to what he says helps us to see that much of Tanner’s discussion of questions of tradition is insufficiently nuanced.

of the fourth century as a battle between the “orthodox” and “heretics,” favoring a more nuanced account of an ongoing debate about the identity and significance of Jesus.⁵² In *Theories of Culture* Tanner describes the core concept under discussion at the heart of Christian tradition as the question about what constitutes true discipleship: what does Jesus mean, and how do we live accordingly?

The theme of discipleship, though not always at the forefront of the discussion, links these first three chapters. Each of my modern interlocutors gestures toward the reality of Christian identity as discipleship. The fluidity of their accounts of Christian identity stems from a sense that this identity is more pilgrimage than possession, a lived reality rather than a set of propositions or a means of interpreting experience. What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? Tanner centers her consideration of Christian identity on this question. Principally, her answer concerns the marks of Christian discipleship in a changing world; she asks what it is that identifies Christians as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes the answer seems to be “not much” – not because the Christians concerned are not faithful, but because Christians are not the only people who feed the hungry and care for the poor (for example) in the world today.

In envisioning the forum for discussion of the question concerning true discipleship as a conversation in which each voice has the right to be heard with respect, Tanner implicitly criticizes the typically hierarchical polities of mainline Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church.⁵³ Her emphasis on the con-

⁵² See Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 233–245.

⁵³ But see her discussion of power in anthropological theory. She argues that the perspective of the anthropologist, who is looking for the principles of cultural unity and coherence, obscures “the power dimension of meaning. How situations and the actors in them are understood makes a difference in what it is those actors can conceive of doing. Power is therefore at stake in the interpretation of beliefs, values, or notions with a cultural currency. Struggles over power come to be enacted in struggles over meaning. In that space that poststructuralism opens up between a cultural form and the multiple possible meanings of it, contests over power are engaged. Culture, like a text, ‘produces meaning through the struggle over the definition of signifying forms – a struggle that conveys the sense people make of history in their desires to preserve, alter, or revolt against the terms in which it appears to them’” (*Theories of Culture*, 47).

testability of Christian norms at the heart of Christian discourse reflects clear suspicion about the ways in which homogeneity, harmony, or consensus as goals for Christian community invite the exercise of a potentially repressive power. Her attitude implies a view of ethical and moral decisions in Christian communities as involving complex judgments as befits a perspective that sees mostly gray, rather than black and white. Tanner shares this approach with some contemporary postliberals who likewise pay close attention to the difficulty of discernment in the context of conflict about social issues. For example, Stephen Fowl and Eugene Rogers explicitly consider the method of discernment in situations of ecclesial conflict, emphasizing the impossibility of asserting permanent standards.⁵⁴

Tanner's criticisms of the postliberal (primarily Lindbeck's) view of culture and construal of doctrine as the "grammar" that guarantees Christian continuity show some of the weaknesses of Lindbeck's model. At the same time, I have suggested that Tanner fails to observe deeper weaknesses in Lindbeck's account, including the lack of an account of Christian formation. Lindbeck saw a consensus of sorts on the central doctrines of Christian faith, and lamented the impossibility of appropriate catechesis through which competent

⁵⁴ In *Engaging Scripture* and *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), respectively. As I suggested above, Fowl and Rogers provide examples of postliberal attention to the complexity of moral judgment and the insufficiency of "the" narrative in that context. In comparison with Bruce Marshall, however, Tanner looks quite different. Marshall takes the concept of "absorbing the world" and develops an account of the way in which the web of beliefs functions in the process of evaluating "alien" truth claims. The description of procedure Marshall provides does suggest an almost technical approach, and thus Tanner's criticism of the step-by-step procedure or mechanical execution of rules might apply. But the complexity of Christian engagement with truth claims not generated by the Christian narrative itself is not lost on Marshall. It is by no means clear, at any rate, that Tanner is really after a more complex process: she is simply more suspicious of any standards that might become authoritative and so jeopardize the role of theological judgment in individual cases. If there are authoritative criteria to be consulted in cases of questionable claims, then the burden of responsibility for theological judgment does not fall so heavily on the shoulders of the individual.

practitioners might be formed.⁵⁵ Tanner takes Lindbeck to task on the existence of such a consensus, but neglects the question of appropriate catechesis. As such, she never appears to consider the need for an account of formation in her own discussion of Christian identity. Her interest in discipleship, however, leads directly into the question of Christian formation. In the next two sections, I turn to the questions of agency and tradition as aspects of an account of formation missing in Tanner's proposal.

Habitus and Agency: Tanner and Bourdieu

I have suggested that Tanner's appeals to postmodern social theory do not sever her from the field of postliberals. Not only is her use of culture theory in continuity with Lindbeck's own method, but also the way in which she uses the work of theorists of culture does not lead her to question certain modern elements of postliberal theology, such as inattention to formation. Tanner might have developed the conceptual framework she draws from Lindbeck by attending to the question he raises regarding catechesis. The theorists to whom she turns in *Theories of Culture* offer resources for reflection on precisely the kind of process Lindbeck described in *The Nature of Doctrine* – a process of habituation. Tanner's reading of Pierre Bourdieu offers a key example of her use of postmodern theorists.

Whereas a modern moral philosophy like Kant's avoids the topic of formation, Bourdieu thematizes formation, paying careful attention to the reproduction of belief and practice. What Bourdieu calls *habitus* includes habits of thought and habits of practice, both of which depend on the structure of desiring: a subject desires according to social formation.⁵⁶ Tanner takes from Bourdieu her understanding

⁵⁵ While it might be inferred from *Theories of Culture* that Tanner does not affirm any positive, historically consistent doctrinal content, one has only to open *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* to find that she nonetheless takes certain dogmas as read. See, for example, her discussion of God (on p. 4), in which she affirms the ancient proposition that "God is not a kind of thing among other kinds of things," which she goes on to explain using the same conceptual apparatus as her patristic and medieval interlocutors.

⁵⁶ See *Reproduction*, 35–39; *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

of how cultural rules work, but seems to have overlooked Bourdieu's lengthy discussion of the way in which those rules are inculcated. To say that Christian cultural rules might function in the same way as such rules do for Bourdieu is to beg the question: how do Christians learn these rules? Bourdieu offers intricate analysis of the role of family, school, and society in training an individual to act, interact, and react according to certain cultural rules. Because Tanner rejects the idea that cultural rules follow a pattern similar to the rules of a game, she misses an important subcultural analogy that directs our attention to the learning process. She suggests that in a culture:

Innovation is a possibility even in cases where determinate cultural forms function as rules directing action. These rules do not resemble the rules of a game or the formulae of mathematics; they do not, like them, require mechanical execution but the tact, dexterity and artfulness to act appropriately in unpredictable and highly complex social circumstances. Following cultural rules may therefore mean "necessary improvisation."⁵⁷

One doubts, on reading this, that Tanner has much experience of sports, in which the interpretation of rules – even on the field – is always a part of the game. In particular, I suspect that a quarterback would bristle at the implication that his maneuvers in the pocket are “mechanical execution.” On the contrary, the post-snap scramble is a fine example of an “unpredictable and highly complex” situation. Players train intensively, but can never predict with certainty what the opposing team will do; thus decisions have to be made in precisely the way Tanner says cultural rules train us to act. The analogy is a useful one because it reminds us of the indispensable role of training (in addition to memorizing the playbook), which Bourdieu emphasized.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 52.

⁵⁸ *Reproduction*, 18; cf. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 125–126, 135–139. I owe my understanding of football, insofar as I understand it, to my dad, who probably never dreamt that I would apply it in this way. Thanks, Dad!

The absence of discussion of training is a key problem with Tanner's *Theories of Culture*. Tanner's account of the individual within a tradition of argument (which I will discuss in more detail below) raises questions both about the individual and about tradition. In the first place, Tanner's implicit view of agency is problematic: individual agents collectively provide the vehicle for the transmission of cultural materials, but she offers no account of how they are formed as agents. Behind my criticism of Tanner's account of agency is the connection between agency and desire. While the postmodern account of the subject and the society through which subjects are formed (or socialized) shapes her account of Christian identity significantly, she leaves the question of the construction of desire largely unaddressed. How are the desires that characterize the Christian life to be formed? Why do they frequently fail to take precedence over other desires? In the next chapter, I will examine Rowan Williams' study of the history of Christian spirituality, which indicates that one of the distinctive marks of Christianness is the form and orientation of desire. Attending to the centrality of desire in the formation of subjectivity (Christian or otherwise) implies a rejection of the kind of agency of the individual that lurks in the background in *Theories of Culture*.

Tanner's account of agency is implied in her discussion of the activity of arranging and discerning the nature of Christian discipleship. It appears that each Christian participates in the conversation about what constitutes Christian discipleship, making judgments about the beliefs and practices that constitute Christian faith. The rationale for identifying particular practices as Christian is not intrinsic to the practices themselves, nor is it to be found in materials which are themselves intrinsically "traditional." Such a principle must be construed by "human beings . . . in the messy course of history."⁵⁹ Tradition is a matter of interpretation: each interpreter, she says, "puts [the materials of tradition] in an order" before making any judgment based on the witness of tradition. In this process, a Christian plays the role of the *bricoleur*, arranging the materials at hand and giving them a particular shape. To justify this view of the individual's role in the construal of Christian identity (for that is

⁵⁹ *Theories of Culture*, 132.

precisely what this is), Tanner appeals to Karl Barth: “What holds all these different practices together as a unity is nothing internal to the practices themselves; the center that holds them together should remain, as Barth says, empty.”⁶⁰ Thus each Christian (or would-be Christian, or perhaps even a non-Christian) occupies a place at the great roundtable discussion of what constitutes faithful Christian practice:

one stands at a particular place in the ongoing course of [Christian] history and, looking back and across to what others have understood by Christian discipleship, one forms judgments about the consistency of it all so far, to use in assessing the appropriate shape of Christian discipleship now.

To those others in the conversation one “owes . . . a respectful hearing.”⁶¹ At no point do the claims of others have any specific authority over us: “One remains the disciple of God, and not the disciple of God’s witnesses.”⁶² It seems that, for Tanner, the final authority is one’s own conscience.⁶³

The way Tanner construes discipleship is somewhat problematic. Whereas I have described discipleship in relation to Jesus, she insists that we are “God’s disciples.” This emphasis misses the point of the incarnation: before Jesus, the descendants of Abraham were God’s people; Abraham was called “friend of God”; and the Hebrew Bible is full of imagery depicting the relationship between God and God’s people in a variety of ways. Jesus himself makes the way for us to be restored to friendship with God, to be children of God in a new way, after his own example, by being drawn into the love of God as we are joined to him as members of his body. But in all that the New Testament says, it is clear that our relationship to God is yet imagined in terms that would have been familiar to Jesus’ contemporaries: we may be God’s children, or God’s friends, but we are *Jesus’* disciples.

⁶⁰ *Theories of Culture*, 135.

⁶¹ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

⁶² *Theories of Culture*, 138.

⁶³ I will discuss the role of tradition in more detail below.

Another aspect of Christian agency is connected to what Tanner believes is the place of “God’s witnesses” in the life of the believer. Discipleship is a matter of hearing God through these witnesses – though she admits that those witnesses and we who hear them are tainted by sin, it seems that we have to trust that their hearts and our own are turned toward the free God, whom we freely obey. And, it seems, no one else can fully be trusted: she criticizes Lindbeck’s notion of theological competence as requiring instruction. The idea of Christians as children playing at “a game that one never fully learns to play” reminds one of one’s own fallibility, that one is justified by *faith*, she reasons. This dependence on faith for our salvation should also remind us of our equality before God and in the conversation about what constitutes faithful practice. But she suggests that, in Lindbeck’s (postliberal) iteration, “justification by faith loses its usual function as a great equalizer. Not everyone is a child; good training requires good teachers who somehow avoid the difficulty – either by natural talent (religious virtuosi) or by dint of constant training (the members of an ecclesiastical hierarchy).”⁶⁴ To be fair, it must be admitted that Tanner sees inequality around the table: not everyone’s judgment about what constitutes faithful discipleship is “equally proper.” Her point, however, is that there is no means of discerning in advance what might constitute a “proper” judgment. The question then becomes, how do we adjudicate among differing judgments?

In principle, Tanner’s answer to that question is a good one: arguments must be offered for any given judgment. The interpretation of what constitutes Christian identity is a judgment that must be offered to that community. But this does not provide a complete answer to the question, particularly in light of Tanner’s view of the individual agency of Christian subjects in determining their own course of action. The capacity to render judgments and support them with compelling arguments is a skill: where does one learn

⁶⁴ *Theories of Culture*, 143. Tanner is referring here to Lindbeck’s discussion of competence; she offers no further examples of the way competence might be developed. See Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (100–101) for his understanding of competence. For other postliberal versions of the development of theological discernment, see, for example, Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 97–127, and Eugene Rogers, “The Virtues of an Interpreter.”

such a skill? And the capacity to listen charitably and evaluate arguments is not a human instinct. It also is a skill we learn – but how? And who is qualified to teach such skills?

These questions point to what I suggest is a serious failing in *Theories of Culture*. I agree with Tanner's judgment about the usefulness of social and cultural theory in rethinking our approach to Christian identity. Such theory reminds us that "the effort to live Christianly" is "often messy, ambiguous and porous."⁶⁵ The main difficulty with her account is that although she describes the central task of Christian life, she offers no discussion of how individuals (or communities, for that matter) might be prepared to undertake it. I argue that the notion of agency Tanner displays in *Theories of Culture* is problematic philosophically and theologically. In the first place, with regard to its philosophical underpinnings, her account depends upon the kind of rational, individual agent one finds in a characteristically modern view of the subject.⁶⁶ Tanner depicts Christian subjects as able to interpret the array of cultural materials available for Christian use and use them as resources in developing a concept of faithful Christian discipleship. Such interpretations might be possible, if we could depend upon a Kantian rationality at the core of every human being, able to judge impartially and determine duty without the interference of self-interest.

But Tanner has not listened well enough to Bourdieu. The fact of the matter is, of course, that human subjects are constructed in and through traditions, and the fact of our constructedness implicates us in social relations that shape our perspectives on all the "others" with whom Tanner expects us to be in conversation. And none of us are without teachers, none of us without heroes.⁶⁷ Although Tanner insists that we are disciples of God only, and there is "no demand to approximate" the judgments of God's witnesses

⁶⁵ "How I Changed My Mind," 120.

⁶⁶ See Reinhard Hütter's review of *Theories of Culture* (*Modern Theology* 15 [1999], 499–501) for further discussion of this problematic aspect of Tanner's proposal.

⁶⁷ Augustine – whom Tanner cites approvingly at the beginning of the chapter I am discussing – knew this very well. See *De doctrina Christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), *Pro*.

as to what constitutes good discipleship, that is not the way we develop an understanding of how to live. As Bourdieu reminds us, we are always already living in a way that is not solely the product of our free choice. That is, there *are* teachers, and we ought to think about what *does* constitute good teaching rather than to pretend that we are not in fact taught from birth upwards. Tanner's insistence that we are disciples of *God* undermines discipleship entirely. As I have indicated above, the idea that we are "disciples" only arrives with *Jesus*. We are disciples of God, yes, disciples of God, the Incarnate Word. It is the master whose example we follow who makes us his disciples. We may consider discipleship at least in part as the task of developing our capacity to reflect properly the God in whose image we are made (as Gregory of Nyssa insists), but as we do so we are always conscious that the perfection of that reflective activity has a face, a human form: Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

Second, Tanner's account of agency is problematic theologically because of sin. Although Tanner clearly believes in the power of sin to interfere with the pursuit of discipleship, the sin she seems most concerned about is that which has the potential to "disrupt the community of argument" by coercive or exclusionary exercise of power. She pays no attention to the "disruptive potential of sin" as it might impinge upon a person's ability to make good judgments about what constitutes faithful discipleship.⁶⁸ Sin does not only "disrupt the community of argument" by predisposing the members of the community *not* to give a respectful hearing to others around the table. The oppression of the weaker members of the community by the powerful is a *symptom* of this predisposition, which is not limited to the powerful. The theological analogue to Bourdieu's point about our being formed before we are conscious of the fact of our formation is that sin disrupts our very ability to perceive God and to heed the promptings of the Spirit. Tanner says that the problem to be avoided above all else is placing judgments based on the witness of others "on the same footing as the Word of God." Unfortunately, there is no immediate access to that Word. We hear the Word in the Bible, in preaching, and in conversation with

⁶⁸ *Theories of Culture*, 125–126.

Christians past and present, and we owe our ability or inability to hear, interpret, and obey the Word to the influences of myriad and often unrecognized others. Thus, we must take into account the way in which our sinfulness and that of others often helps us to form self-serving judgments about what constitutes Christian discipleship. It is not enough to say that sin does not completely block the grace of God – true as that may be. We must consider the possibility that there are good examples of what constitutes faithful Christian discipleship, examples which might help us to discern our own failings with respect to the pursuit of discipleship, and might also offer us grounds on which to argue for the propriety of some judgments about good discipleship and against others.

I have suggested that Tanner's own work shows the absolute indispensability of some process of formation in which a person meets the others at the table: her *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* makes that especially clear. There, Tanner makes choices about which voices to heed and how to put together the judgments of theologians throughout history (from Irenaeus to Barth) about the major tenets of Christian faith. Learning from the judgments of others is indispensable because in even Tanner's model they are the substance of the argument. Take, for example, her engagement with Gregory of Nyssa (to whom I will return in chapters 4 and 5). The way in which Tanner uses Gregory's theology in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* adds important detail to her account of Christian identity. Gregory's ideas are necessary for Tanner's understanding of Christian identity: the aspects of his theology she cites are the building blocks of traditional accounts of Christian faith. She cites Gregory in support of her assertion of the importance of "the essentially historical character of human life" for understanding Jesus' significance for us. But, for Gregory, it is impossible to communicate basic doctrine – of creation, salvation, Trinity – without also providing an account of the soul, of sin, and of Christian formation. The way in which she chooses her interlocutors and represents them in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* is determined by a complex set of priorities and prejudices,⁶⁹ which never appear

⁶⁹ I mean "prejudices" both in the everyday sense of the word and in Gadamer's sense of "prejudice."

on the surface. And although there may not be consensus on the relative merits of historical Christian witnesses, there is a wide agreement about some of the most important among them.⁷⁰ What requires further discussion is the means by which Christians come to be familiar (if they do) with those witnesses, and how the shape of a Christian life might be influenced by familiarity or lack of familiarity with those witnesses in the Bible and throughout history. In the final section of the chapter, I turn to Alasdair MacIntyre, whose own discussion of tradition helps us to see more clearly the shape of the hole in Tanner's account.

On Tradition and the Practice of Christian Doctrine: Tanner and MacIntyre

In this section I ask how, in Tanner's account of tradition, the individual standing in her or his place in Christian history is related to that history. Tanner insists that one cannot make judgments about what constitutes faithful Christian discipleship "in isolation from what Christians have done and said before and elsewhere."⁷¹ But what claim do those other Christians have on us? The voices of professional theologians, clergy, or "the fathers" have no *de jure* authority. The notion of a teaching office – particularly a Magisterium – is inimical to Tanner's approach to the work of construing Christian identity. It appears that the individual's debt to other Christians is discharged once she has listened respectfully to what they have to say. Nothing about the individual's place *vis-à-vis* Christian history *locates* her within that history. How is her story connected to the story of God's witnesses? I suggest here that an adequate account of tradition is necessary, and turn to the

⁷⁰ As I have suggested above, Tanner's theological project, especially in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, depends on a certain degree of consensus about the sources of and authorities for theological reflection. This set of sources, although it is by no means a formal canon, in turn depends upon the continuity of the church's tradition of recognizing the contributions of certain theologians.

⁷¹ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

work of Alasdair MacIntyre to show how an account of tradition helps.⁷²

As Tanner discusses the sense in which the continuity of Christian practice is a matter of “tradition,” she criticizes those who understand tradition as an intrinsic aspect of beliefs or practices. Rather, she suggests that the definition of those beliefs or practices is not final. The flexibility of interpretation “that enables the claims and ritual practices at issue to be of concern to large numbers of very differently situated people prompts an extended argument about how to interpret them in the course of a life lived in their light.”⁷³ For Tanner, the argument about the practices and beliefs that form Christian life is the source of continuity. And it is the argument itself that constitutes tradition – not the individual claims or practices within it.⁷⁴ Yet Tanner’s approach to tradition and practices does not make clear the relationship between the two. In her discussion of tradition, Tanner arrives at the notion of tradition as argument – a position that resembles MacIntyre’s.⁷⁵

MacIntyre defines a “living tradition” as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part

⁷² Doctrine features in the relationship between tradition and discipleship by connecting the “historically extended, socially embodied argument” (MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* [London: Duckworth, 1981], 222) to the practice of Christian faith. Doctrine is, in part, an articulation of what makes good discipleship; in its regulative function, doctrine tells us what the goods internal to the practice are, and orients us toward the virtues necessary for pursuing those goods. In the next chapter, we will see more clearly that part of the way that doctrine performs this function is through shaping our living and telling of the story of Jesus.

⁷³ *Theories of Culture*, 137.

⁷⁴ See “Tradition and Theological Judgment.”

⁷⁵ See, for example, *After Virtue*, 221–225. I find it extremely odd that Tanner spends several pages in *Theories of Culture*, as well as in her essay “Tradition and Theological Judgment,” discussing different conceptions of tradition as they are or might be employed in theological reflection without ever mentioning MacIntyre, whose work has been quite influential in the development of recent theological work on the nature of Christian tradition. Reading MacIntyre would have challenged Tanner to be more precise about what constitutes a practice, for example. She uses the language of practices throughout *Theories of Culture*, but never says precisely what she means by it. See, for example, chapter 6, “Commonalities in Christian Practice” (120–155).

about the goods which constitute that tradition.”⁷⁶ The definition of tradition as an argument is inseparable from its context in MacIntyre’s moral theory. In *After Virtue*, in which MacIntyre defines a tradition in this way, the discussion of tradition is necessitated by the account of practices which precedes it and is inseparable from the discussion of the virtues which follows it.⁷⁷ Such an understanding of tradition and our relationship to it suggests that tradition is neither “a store or deposit of treasured materials” nor the “logical explication” of an idea whose transmission allows for incremental change over time – views of which Tanner is critical in *Theories of Culture*. MacIntyre presents a more complex picture. Like Tanner, he rejects the ideological connotations of tradition, which he identifies as the notion that tradition is reason’s opposite, or that it is characterized by stability rather than conflict. Rather, he suggests,

all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition . . . Moreover, when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose.⁷⁸

MacIntyre thus sees tradition not as the opposite of reason, but as the context within which reason operates, and he sees traditions as dynamic, not static. He goes a step further than Tanner in his discussion of the argument that partially constitutes a vital tradition. For MacIntyre, the argument has a clear subject matter: he does not *end* with the notion of traditions as embodying “continuities of conflict,” but uses this notion to indicate the broader context of the practices and virtues by which individual lives are shaped.

Three features of MacIntyre’s account of tradition are important here. First, MacIntyre conceives of individuals as constituted in part by the traditions of which they are the bearers. Persons are bound to traditions even as they are bound to the others through whom

⁷⁶ *After Virtue*, 222.

⁷⁷ *After Virtue*, 181–225.

⁷⁸ *After Virtue*, 222.

their social roles are defined – by family, by citizenship, by occupation or profession. A person’s moral particularity derives in large part from the history of those associations, whether to family or nation-state. “What I am . . . is in key part what I inherit,” MacIntyre suggests, and that means – among other things – that “whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, [I am] one of the bearers of a tradition.”⁷⁹ MacIntyre’s account of the individual includes both the notion of a moral given (what is inherited) and ongoing accountability. Second, the relationship of the individual to tradition goes both ways. Not only is a person, like it or not, bound by tradition(s); individuals contribute to the flourishing or demise of the traditions of which they are bearers by the exercise or lack of exercise of the virtues. In fact, part of the purpose of the virtues, in MacIntyre’s view, is to sustain “those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.”⁸⁰ Third, traditions and the virtues which sustain them are inseparable from the practices within which the virtues are developed. MacIntyre defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁸¹

Practices link the virtues to traditions: “the virtues sustain the relationships required for practices” as well as sustaining the “larger social traditions” in which those practices are located.⁸²

MacIntyre thus develops in much more detail the concept of tradition as constituted by argument. Whereas for Tanner the idea of tradition focuses on the reception of cultural materials which the

⁷⁹ *After Virtue*, 221.

⁸⁰ *After Virtue*, 223.

⁸¹ *After Virtue*, 187.

⁸² *After Virtue*, 221.

individual arranges in conversation with other participants past and present, MacIntyre conceives of tradition as an inheritance, and of individuals as situated by those traditions of which they are bearers. This makes for some important differences in the development of the notion of tradition as argument. For MacIntyre, the idea that traditions “embody continuities of conflict,” which may on its face resemble what Tanner says about tradition, is not the end of the discussion but the beginning. Tanner uses the idea that traditions are constituted by continuity of conflict to argue for the freedom of the individual with respect to a tradition.⁸³ MacIntyre begins with the notion of tradition as argument partly in order to connect the individual with the tradition by way of practices and the associated virtues. Traditions *do* depend upon individuals, but not in the way Tanner claims. For MacIntyre,

an adequate sense of tradition [which is a virtue] manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.

This virtue is displayed “in the kind of capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.”⁸⁴

While this notion also may appear similar to Tanner’s understanding of a person working with cultural materials or following cultural rules, MacIntyre has a very clear idea of the way the skill implied in this “capacity for judgment” is developed: by participation in a

⁸³ The freedom Tanner’s position implies is not a complete freedom with regard to the tradition. She makes clear that conversation with tradition at some level is indispensable. What Tanner’s freedom amounts to is the ability to decide for oneself, for example, which practices are essential for developing the virtues necessary to participate in a tradition.

⁸⁴ *After Virtue*, 223.

practice.⁸⁵ The virtues offer a way for us to think about the nature of one's participation in the conversation about what constitutes Christian discipleship, without specifying in advance precisely which activities will or will not qualify. Moreover, the virtues also draw our attention back to the need for an account of formation. The person prepared to participate in the tradition-argument is one who has been formed by participation in practices in which the relevant virtues may be developed. MacIntyre notes that the virtues contribute to the ongoing argument by supporting their "negative precepts": rules.⁸⁶ Although Tanner does not say so explicitly, she also depends on a certain amount of rule-following. The "community of argument" only holds its shape if the participants in that argument are committed to its structure, which Tanner describes as one "in which no one's opinion is exempted from the possibility of salutary admonition and rebuke by one's fellows."⁸⁷

Thus, while Tanner's implicit idea of the forum for the community of argument as a roundtable⁸⁸ is appealing, it also presses the question of formation, because Tanner does not give any indication of the level of commitment to the task that is needed or the sorts of skills that are required for participation in such a conversation.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ MacIntyre does not offer here an explicit account of the reformation of desire as a part of the process. Although one of the hoped-for results of continued participation in a practice is that one come to see the goods internal to that practice as desirable in themselves, he does not explain the development of that sort of desire. What he does offer us, however, is a context in which these goods come to be regarded as desirable: in that cooperative activity he calls a practice. That is, in the ongoing participation with experienced practitioners, the desire for the goods internal to the practice may develop. While this desire may not develop as a result of the participation, without such participation it will certainly not develop.

⁸⁶ *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 139.

⁸⁷ *Theories of Culture*, 126.

⁸⁸ Tanner here seems to employ a standard feminist ecclesiological principle; see Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), especially 24–29.

⁸⁹ These need not be "academic" skills, although these are certainly the skills required for understanding Tanner's answer to the question what Christianity is all about in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*.

Without a theory of practices (as MacIntyre has), the argument (which constitutes tradition) is not necessarily fruitful.⁹⁰ MacIntyre accounts for the role of practices, goods, and virtues, all of which have to do with the formation of persons within a tradition and *for* a tradition. Yet, because God calls Christian tradition into being, the integrity and coherence of the tradition are simultaneously certain and inscrutable – so the account of formation implied in MacIntyre’s moral philosophy will not suffice. Neither MacIntyre nor Bourdieu can account adequately for the corruption of societies and traditions, whereas Christian doctrine names the corruptibility of individuals and institutions “sin” and offers a paradigm for resisting it on both levels. (See, for example, the exchanges between David and Nathan, and those between Israel and the prophets.) Thus even Tanner’s revised version of the cultural-linguistic model is ultimately inadequate as an account of how doctrine functions with relation to Christian identity; although cultures and languages do form us, they lack a teleological component. Christian doctrine (as we will see in chapter 5 especially) ought to mold us into the image of Christ. That it often fails to do so is not a sufficient counterargument: the point is that doctrine *ought* to have that effect; the cultural-linguistic model does not take this fully into account.⁹¹

Conclusion

I have shown that although Tanner is often rightly critical of post-liberal theology, in particular as it is represented by Lindbeck, her revisions of postliberal theological method fail to provide a way out of its modern difficulties in articulating a coherent account of the soul, sin, or Christian formation. These three areas for theological

⁹⁰ See MacIntyre’s discussion of the negotiation of conflict within a tradition in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 1–11 and 360–367. MacIntyre raises the question (for Tanner) as to how the problem of rival interpretations of Christian social practices (with which Tanner is particularly concerned) might be resolved.

⁹¹ MacIntyre’s concept of tradition comes closer, with discussion of the virtues; yet his account of tradition doesn’t necessarily require a full doctrine of sin, and he doesn’t include one.

reflection are important in part because they are fundamental to the patristic and medieval theologies to which Tanner appeals in support of her own systematic theology. The way in which Tanner's inattention to the richness of tradition and the claim a tradition has on its bearers comes more clearly into view in *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*. As I have already mentioned, in it Tanner presents "a brief systematic theology" that reads like a conversation with tradition.

Moreover, I have argued that Tanner fails to see the need for an account of Christian formation, even though her account of Christian identity seems to demand it, her use of Bourdieu suggests it, and Lindbeck's proposal pointed directly to the necessity of catechesis. Whereas Lindbeck observed the lack of such an account, Tanner neither mentions this weakness in her criticism of Lindbeck nor makes any attempt to remedy it. Yet her understanding of Christian practice requires discernment and skill equal to or greater than Lindbeck's. Lindbeck saw ancient catechesis as a good model for Christian formation because he believed that the facility with the grammar and vocabulary of Christian faith was a product of intensive instruction. It is not merely a matter of learning the story, but learning how to live in light of that story, coming to understand its significance for us and for the world. Tanner's own understanding of what the practice of Christianity involves requires an equally high degree of facility with the story, and she draws on many of the same premodern theological sources to which Lindbeck gestured in his praise of ancient catechesis. Making the kinds of judgments Tanner sees as indispensable for Christian faith depends on knowing one's place in the story and being able to discern the meaning of the narrative for our thinking and action.

While Tanner rightly draws our attention to the cultural embeddedness of Christian thought and practice, she fails to provide an account of the habits of attention necessary for participation in the "task" she identifies as the heart of Christian identity. Nor does she offer reflection on how such habits might be developed. In the next chapter, I turn to the theology of Rowan Williams. Although Williams does not explicitly offer an account of Christian formation, I suggest that his description of the habits of Christian life points us in the right direction.

Stories of Identity

Rowan Williams on Being a Christian

In “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” Rowan Williams dispenses with the contemporary notion of self as a by-product of modern epistemological objectivity. He wants to persuade us that “my obscurity to myself, yours to me, and mine to you are not puzzles, waiting for fruitful suspicion to uncover the real script . . . They are to do with the inescapability of *taking time*.”¹ Williams shows us that the obstacle to knowledge of ourselves and others is not “intellectual lack” but “metaphysical finitude.”² This epistemological boundary circumscribes all human self-knowledge. Therefore no practices of excavation can unearth the “real” self: neither autobiography nor confession will sidestep the taking of time. Furthermore, any *Christian* who wishes to explore her self-identity must begin from the premise that certainty about the coherence of that identity is “achieved solely in trust or hope rather than analysis.” Williams uses Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1944 poem “Who am I?” to show that the quest for essential selfhood is itself suspect. As Williams interprets it, the poem demonstrates that “how if at all [Bonhoeffer’s

¹ “The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer,” in *Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Richard H. Bell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 50, italics mine.

² “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 42.

exterior calm] should be harmonized with his inner fears is essentially an abstract problem posed in unnatural isolation”; he concludes that “the wholeness of Bonhoeffer’s selfhood lies in its belonging to God.”³ So Williams’ suspicion of Freud’s suspicion can only properly be read as a *theological* suspicion, one grounded in a certain understanding of our creatureliness and of divine grace.⁴

Given these two points of reference – our creatureliness (or “metaphysical finitude”), and infinite divine grace – it should come as no surprise that Williams gives an account of Christian identity that emphasizes the need to take time, and that we understand who we are as Christians only provisionally as we make sense of the evidence available to us. In this chapter I will show how Williams balances the idea that identity is always under construction with an account of habits of attention and engagement that make a narrative of identity possible despite the inherent ambiguity of that construction. As we will see, his account of Christian identity rests on the fulcrum of his theological anthropology, which in turn centers on an understanding of Christian discipleship formed in response to the dynamics of the incarnation.

In what follows, I will discuss both the promise and distinctiveness of Williams’ account of Christian identity, and show that his very compelling account is not without weaknesses. Following this description of Williams’ account, I compare it with those of Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Frantz Fanon. Not only does this comparison highlight the distinguishing features of Williams’ account, it also clarifies those areas where more precision and detail are needed. Next, I examine Williams’ account of appropriate engagement with Christian tradition. His model, which establishes the traditional shape of the doctrines of Christ and of the Trinity as the most persuasive articulation of the Christian story despite the complexity of their origins, shows the habits of taking time and

³ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 42.

⁴ As Benjamin Myers observes, “[Williams’] writing, from psychology and church history to poetry and literary criticism, is always gently, persistently *theological*” (*Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* [London: T&T Clark, 2012, x]). Myers has produced an elegantly written and enticing study of Williams’ theology; unfortunately, it appeared too late for me to give space to his insights in this chapter.

making sense at work in theological construction. I conclude the chapter by drawing out the theological principles central to Williams' methodology as they are employed in his essay "The Body's Grace."

The Habits of Christian Selfhood: Taking Time and Making Sense

Williams employs the metaphor of conversation to talk about how we learn about one another and the world in light of the ambiguity of our perceptions. Conversation is a metaphor for the process of engaging in the task of discerning meaning in ourselves and the world.⁵ Williams identifies a "conversational' dimension" in human doing and making. Two forms of activity are essential for such conversation: taking time and making sense. Human activity, especially the activity of making sense of the world by "imaginative 'reading' and reordering," is an ongoing search for and creation of meaning. Each time "sense" is made, further questions arise.⁶ Authentic communication or conversation also needs time, because there is no formula for interpretation of a self that solves the "puzzle" implied in much language about interiority or the "real" self.⁷ Taking time, as Williams employs the concept, is a form of

⁵ It is also a metaphor for the engagement with the past in which the theologian is necessarily involved, as we shall see later in this chapter. Below, I will discuss the two "partners" in the conversation that in a sense *is* Christianity: the past and the "outside." Williams moves gracefully between these in *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2007).

⁶ "The Nature of a Sacrament," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 198.

⁷ "The point at which suspicion itself is under criticism is when it comes itself to the point of discouraging the taking of time. The religious critique directs itself against the potentially tragic and inevitable self-and-other-diminishing fantasy of abstracting knowledge from attention and response, from a material history of action – from the world, in fact. But what sets it apart from pure humane pragmatism is that it proposes to us a self-description enabling us to set aside once and for all the illusion that our value or 'reality' depends upon the success with which we can activate a suprahistorical knowing subject in penetrating to the hidden structures beneath the world of time and flesh" ("The Suspicion of Suspicion," 51).

attention,⁸ an attitude of patient listening that is conducive to making sense.⁹

The themes of making sense and taking time are thus inseparable. In reading Williams one finds, however, that it is not so much the case that taking time is required for making sense. That is true, but the more important fruit of taking time – and also of making sense – is the discovery that making sense is not the same as knowing. What happens in the process of self-narration, to take one example, is that one discovers with increasing precision what cannot be known.¹⁰ As Williams explains: “Religious interiority . . . means the learning of patterns of behavior that reinforce the awareness of my finite and provisional status, my being in time.”¹¹ Finitude is the cornerstone of Williams’ account of self-identity as it is of his account of Christian identity. The limits on human life and human understanding form the conditions for our existence.

For Williams, literary tragedy captures the finitude and provisionality that characterize human life. He sees in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, for example, an invitation to consider the complexity and ambiguity involved in finding grace in a fallen world: the play asks what grace looks like. Shakespeare gives us an image of the fragility and yet the persistence of grace in a fallen world. Grace is present in the world, though threatened and fragile. And Shakespeare does not resolve the question of grace’s persistence and fragility – Williams

⁸ I owe the phrase “form of attention” here to Lewis Ayres, “On the Practice and Teaching of Christian Doctrine,” *Gregorianum* 80 (1999), 78. It should be noted that the distinction between “attention” and “activity” is not clear: taking time is at once a form of attention and activity.

⁹ Williams’ description of reading Gillian Rose illustrates the kind of attention making sense requires. Rose writes “in such a way that you have to work with her and almost ‘perform’ with her when you’re reading: you have to sense *with* her the pressures that shift her writing this way and that” (“Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams,” interview by Todd Breyfogle, *Cross Currents* 45 [1995], 296). Anyone who has spent time trying to digest Rose’s work will certainly appreciate Williams’ description.

¹⁰ This notion points ahead to Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of the absolute distinction and the role it plays in his epistemology: it creates the boundary between what may and may not be known.

¹¹ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 50. It is not entirely clear in what Williams says, however, how taking time helps us to avoid the pitfalls of confession.

interprets Shakespeare's parting message to the audience: "there you are. I'm not going to make it easy for you."¹² This is precisely how Williams himself views the search for grace. Tragedy reminds us that explanation fails us: making sense is the best we can hope for in this fallen world.¹³

Although Williams emphasizes the provisional nature of our making sense of the world, making sense *is* interpretation, and involves making judgments. Success consists not in "right" interpretation but in *received* interpretation. Understood in this way, the judgment that sense-making implies does not resemble a sentence handed down so much as a reading of a literary text or work of visual art offered in a community of common interest in the object at hand.¹⁴ With each telling of the story – whether a narrative of self or of church – an interpretation is being made; every performance of this kind is thus an instance of true, faithful discipleship (or not). I will discuss the process of making sense as a performance in greater detail below. Before doing so, however, it is important to look more closely at the way in which Christian self-identity emerges in Williams' theology.

Making Sense and the Development of Christian Identity

Williams' notion of finitude as the limitation on our self-knowledge and knowledge of others is deeply theological. Christian belief provides the foundation for Williams' understanding of being

¹² "Living the Questions: The Converging Worlds of Rowan Williams," interview by David Cunningham, *Christian Century* 119 (2002), 29. Williams explains that tragedy often presents a view of the world that is "deeply theological – and it demands of us a certain degree of 'venture, slowness and strain.'"

¹³ See "Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics," in *On Christian Theology*, 273.

¹⁴ In Williams' discussions of judgment, there is a sense in which the ambiguity of the world is like the ambiguity of a text or a work of art. See especially "The Judgement of the World," in *On Christian Theology*. "Judgment" should therefore be taken in *this* context to refer to the sort of judgment with which Kant is concerned in his third *Critique*. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), especially 3–8 and 44–90.

human: when he considers the nature and articulation or understanding of self-identity, his reflections are grounded in the concept of humanity as created in God's image. Moreover, the theological substructure of Rowan Williams' account of self-identity involves the premise that human beings are created in relationship with God and one another. For Williams, this means a particular way of being in the world, which is conducive to conversation on various levels.¹⁵ The indispensable feature of this way of being is an openness or attentiveness to God, such that "the creator can pour his life into the finite self and so find his image there."¹⁶

In Williams' view, growing in Christian faith is about learning to direct oneself toward God. The heart that is turned toward God reflects the divine love even as it participates in that love. Williams explains: "We do not begin from innate or intuitive ideas of the absolute or the transcendent; we are drawn into a transformed life, speech and activity, in which the inexhaustible resource of the God who draws us is gradually discovered."¹⁷ In the context of this discovery that the supply of love is endless and its source never exhausted, the life of the one being drawn in is transformed. The fruit of this movement into God is in transformed social relations. Thus Williams can say that the "most clear and enduring mark of Christian identity" is a love that does not seek its own. Moreover, this love is not merely a benevolent attitude but a position of complete availability to others, "an entirely costly *disponibilité*" that occupies the self completely. The "superficial interests of the ego" are displaced by love.¹⁸

The most important example of this "costly *disponibilité*" is Christ. As much as Christian living depends on being filled by God, active imitation takes the form of discipleship: "to be restored in the image of God is consistently to follow the pattern of God's life as revealed in Jesus."¹⁹ Insofar as one consciously attempts to display the image of God, one follows Christ. And Williams is emphatic that costly discipleship is necessary to being in the image of God.

¹⁵ See "Living the Questions," 29.

¹⁶ *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 131.

¹⁷ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 52.

¹⁸ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 14.

¹⁹ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 64, 128.

The desire to be in God's image without attaining Christ's image is a desire for immediacy, which wants everything without detour and without self-actualization, a narcissistic desire of the ego to settle down in God, immortal and almighty, that doesn't find it necessary "to let its life be crucified" and to experience the night of pain.²⁰

The shape of Christian life is thus determined by "its identifying narrative" of death and resurrection, or, "of reversal and renewal." The narrative that takes us from Good Friday to Easter is "that which is drawn upon to explain what the whole project [of Christianity] is all about" and therefore "the pattern . . . of loss and recovery" is impossible to avoid.²¹ The development of the Christian self, in light of this pattern, follows precisely the pattern of making sense Williams has described: each interpretation raises further questions, creating a constant cycle of making sense and confronting ambiguity that is parallel to the pattern of loss and recovery he describes here.

"Making sense" thus implies a certain loss of security. Understanding oneself as finite and incomplete means depending upon God for one's sense of wholeness. We must also accept our total incapacity to "finish" our individual selves: only God can do that. A second sense of loss is implied in the relinquishing of all expectation of "successful" performance – in the sense of "performance" of dream interpretation. The basis for identity can no longer be perfection in interpretation. Rather, "the person who faces and acknowledges inner contradiction, failure, the breakdown of performance and the emptiness of gratification, is the person who is capable of hearing and answering the invitation to loss and trust."²² This transformation comes at a high price, however: the acknowledgment Williams describes implies a radical revision of the self. I emphasize this because it is one of the most distinctive and important facets of Williams' account of Christian identity. The Christian life as Williams sees it is shaped by the twofold recognition that making sense means making judgments and that while these judgments are necessary, they are also provisional and risky.

²⁰ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 131; quoted in *The Wound of Knowledge*, 11.

²¹ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 83; see also 46.

²² "Resurrection and Peace," 269.

I will discuss the experience of loss in more detail below. For the moment it is important simply to note that, for Williams, loss is not a single event in the development of the Christian self, but a moment that is repeated (non-identically) throughout one's life. So also he makes it clear that the development of the Christian self is anything but linear. The pattern of "reversal and renewal" forms the plot of the Christian story reproduced in the development of individual lives of faith.²³ In his discussion of this pattern, Williams describes the realization or acceptance of the Christian belief that "now it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." A road-to-Damascus experience is not necessary to this transformation, but shifting the center of one's life and being from "self" to God is. Christian identity consists in a display of this dependence upon God.

But what does this display look like? It is, I suggest, a twofold performance. First, the performance of Christian identity is displayed in an act of narration: telling a story about the world and one's place in it that begins and ends with Christ as creator and redeemer and the one whose body Christians become as the Spirit binds us together by the mystery of the Eucharist.²⁴ As Williams explains,

our attempt to live eucharistically, to transform our world into a community of gift, is more than . . . the imitation of a remembered historical pattern of life: it is the uncovering of the eternal *sapientia* of God . . . the activity of gift and sharing . . . is the activity that makes sense of things, because this is the activity which shares in God's own significant being . . .²⁵

The source of all "sense" is God: to God belongs the ultimate power of signification. And the primary sense-making activity is the

²³ "Starting with the Incarnation," in *On Christian Theology*, 83.

²⁴ For Williams, the theological dimension of Christian life – for all Christians – thus looks more like de Certeau's *raconteur* than the *bricoleur* we find in Kathryn Tanner's *Theories of Culture*. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 80–82; and Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 166.

²⁵ *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 114.

Eucharist, in which the story is narrated again.²⁶ For Williams, Scripture and sacraments tell the story that shapes Christian self-understanding. The identities of individual and community meet here: the imagination of Christian community – and the idea of Christian identity – is in process, and each narration of its history simultaneously constructs it. Christian community is inseparable from the “self in construction . . . whose good is understood in terms of a universally shareable good, and the self is not known adequately without a grasp of the inseparability of its good from the good of all.”²⁷ To construct the self is to construct it as *part of* the community. What is involved in articulating this identity is making sense: it is both trying to understand and *creating* meaning in the process.

Second, the performance of Christian identity consists in a response to God.²⁸ The creation or production of meaning, in Williams’ perspective, is ultimately only possible through human participation in God. Eucharistic living consists in a creative performance that “is responsive rather than simply initiatory. Absolute creativity is *not* a part of the world; but it is possible to imagine a creativity of comparable generativity in its effect which nevertheless arises as response to, or reflection of, that prior ‘absolute’ creativity.”²⁹ Making sense is not an attempt to decode the world or ourselves. It is – as Williams explains – “essentially a rhetorical technique.”³⁰ The *context* for this sense-making performance is conversation with the secular and with the Christian past, as I will

²⁶ Here again, the repetition is non-identical; see also Talal Asad on the liturgy training the Christian self in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 153–159. I discuss Asad in more detail below.

²⁷ “Know Thyself: What Kind of an Injunction?” in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, ed. Michael McGhee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 222.

²⁸ I discuss this notion in conversation with Judith Butler’s description of performativity below. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London: Routledge, 1993), 224–226.

²⁹ “Trinity and Revelation,” in *On Christian Theology*, 140. This notion points ahead to John Milbank’s concept of “active reception” as the mode of Christian being, which I discuss in detail in chapter 3.

³⁰ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 39.

discuss in more detail below. The performance of Christian identity may be creative, improvisational, but the stage is set and the plot has been given. The “play” is unpredictable to a certain extent; it exists between the players, and there is a considerable amount of ambiguity (or freedom) in the performance. To a certain extent only, however, because there are boundaries to what constitutes an acceptable performance, a faithful rendering of the Christian narrative. One develops a sense of how to live that story in the ongoing reconstruction of self within the Eucharist-shaped life of Christian community.

Learning to take time and to make sense are inseparable from the growth in Christian discipleship Williams portrays as growing into the image of God in Christ.³¹ The marks of that growth are the habits of attention appropriate to making sense of ourselves, others, and the world around us. As I have suggested above, these habits include patient listening and provisional judgment in light of the ambiguity of our knowledge of ourselves and others. One displays these same habits of attention in relation to God, and for the same reason: because of our finitude, we ultimately find in the faces of others, as well as in the face of God, irreducible mystery. “Making sense” thus characterizes our attempts at comprehending divinity as well as humanity and the world we inhabit. I will return to the theme of performance below, following my discussion of Williams and Talal Asad.

The self-identity of a Christian, for Williams, consists in the display of certain attitudes toward self, God, and world (including fellow creatures) which are not innate nor the production of a general socialization process. The question then becomes, how are the habits appropriate for the development of Christian identity learned? In the next section, I argue that the development of Christian selfhood requires a transformation of desire. The identity of the Christian is rooted in the desire for God that orients the heart toward the divine source of the love one needs and the love

³¹ Growing in discipleship involves learning to think and practice in accordance with the beliefs about self, God, and world that form the Christian imagination. Practices and beliefs, I should add, are so closely connected that it is impossible to say where one stops and the other begins. I return to the topic of discipleship below in my discussion of the performative nature of Christian identity.

one gives.³² It is to the question of the reorientation of desire that I now turn.

Christian Subjectivity and the Desire for God: Williams and Frantz Fanon

Desire is the core, or, perhaps better, the engine, of Christian identity. In *The Wound of Knowledge* Williams traces what he sees as “the tradition that insists that the conversion of desire lies at the centre of Christian life.”³³ Williams’ description of desire implies, in Augustinian fashion, that it is a power of the soul directed toward and by objects of desire.³⁴ Williams discusses the soul most explicitly in *Lost Icons*, where he suggests that the soul is that aspect of self that reflects the image of God. The notion of soul Williams wishes to recover is an iconic notion of soul: the soul should point beyond itself to that which animates it, that which gives it life and light.³⁵ He uses erotic love to illustrate his concept of the self-as-soul:

when it is serious and time-taking, when it goes on generating ways of speaking, seems, like the analytical relationship, to move around the non-existent third term: I discover in erotic mutuality the self that is present neither to my own unmediated self-awareness or self-examination *nor* simply to the desiring other. The other apprehends me as not being there – *now*, definitively, finally – for them alone . . . if you treat the erotic relationship as a means for assuring

³² See also *The Wound of Knowledge*, 117: in the movement of love and desire, the realization that accompanies the development of love and becomes its source in some way is “the recognition that the self is not a centre of control.”

³³ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 130.

³⁴ See Williams’ “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*,” *Literature and Theology* 3 (1989), 138–150.

³⁵ See *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 184–186. Williams describes icons as depicting “bodily realities . . . as suffused with divine action.” And although his discussion emphasizes the effect of learning to look at icons properly is a reorientation of one’s own perspective, the sense of soul he evokes in the same chapter suggests that “soul” does the same work as religious icons. The connection between the two is signaled by Williams’ mention of the centrality (and instrumentality) of *imagination*.

relief of tension and a determinate set of satisfactions, what is lost . . . is that vision of the self as *not* there to be possessed, to be completed, or to serve another's completion; the vision of the self that is gratuitous or contingent in respect of any other's need, anyone else's agenda, and that therefore demands time, words and patience. In other words, what is lost is what I want to call the soul.³⁶

Williams is clear that he wants to bring back into conversation a notion of "soul" that comes ultimately from "Jewish and Christian traditions" which "speak of a personal agency without need or desire shaping finite and temporal agents, agents at whose centre is 'the image of God', the capacity for reflecting God's gratuitous making-possible of the life of what is other."³⁷ There is, however, an important problem with Williams' mention of soul in *Lost Icons*. Williams seeks to recover the language while hiding the dense theological context from which he draws it. That is, in trying to make soul language culturally accessible to a de-Christianized audience, he attempts to pry it free from the "Jewish and Christian traditions" that provide an account of the soul in relation to God.

At the same time, in the context of Williams' discussions of selves and souls we might expect an account of soul-obscuring sin, or of what accounts for the soul being "lost" in contemporary society. Yet Williams does not give much space to discussion of human sinfulness there. As his description of fallenness elsewhere includes a sense of the ontological and epistemological effects of sin,³⁸ the

³⁶ *Lost Icons*, 159–160.

³⁷ *Lost Icons*, 161. There is an interesting contrast here with John Milbank's account in "Sacred Triads: Augustine and the Indo-European Soul," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 451–474. In this essay, Milbank also attempts to recover a notion of soul. His argument offers little clear definition of soul, but rather focuses on arguing that, within Augustinian theology, the soul is known through the language of faith and through the interpretation of social reality. Thus, in contrast to Williams, Milbank sees the importance of a dense theological description of soul. Because he does not return to this subject extensively elsewhere and offers little clear description here, in chapter 3 I do not discuss further Milbank's attempt to appropriate soul language.

³⁸ See, for example, the essays in the first section of *On Christian Theology*.

paucity of discussion of the need for strategies for resisting sin seems incongruous. *Lost Icons* might not be the ideal place for such a discussion, but Williams seems hesitant to say directly that sin-infected habits run counter to the forms of attention prerequisite for taking time and making sense, or that sin – as a result – blocks conversation and impairs judgment. As I will show, consideration of these effects of sin is mandatory, because being conformed to the image of Christ means overcoming sinful habits, which obscure, violate, or subvert that image. I will argue that Williams' lack of detailed discussion of sin and the need to form Christians to resist it is problematic.

In what follows, I show that for Williams the crux of Christian identity is a particular structure of desire, in which the orientation of desiring is transferred from worldly aims and objects to God. Desire is inseparable from action, as Williams' emphasis on the integral role of converted behavior in the returning of self to God indicates. Specifically, the reorientation of desire changes the way we integrate our individual agendas with others'. It shows up, he suggests, as we pursue our projects (which instantiate our desires) "in symbiosis with others."³⁹ Ultimately one only *sees* the reorientation of desire in its pursuit of objects. The reshaping of desire is not merely an operation on the heart, whose effects are practically invisible, but a change that simultaneously involves the redirection of action.

As we will see, this change requires a radical revision of the self. For Williams, the resurrection is the "central symbol for the purification of desire and de-centring of the ego, because the necessary first moment in the resurrection event is one of absence and loss."

³⁹ For Williams, understanding the relationship between desire and practice in this way implies a rejection of what he sees as the postmodern absolutizing of difference. If difference is absolute, he argues, "otherness becomes un-thinkable; the laborious process of evolving a practice in which my desire, my project, redefines or rethinks itself in symbiosis with others, a practice in which the pressure of scarcity ceases to be simply an occasion of 'war', is avoided" ("Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose," *Modern Theology* 11 [1995]: 5). See also Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), in which the notion of "project" is developed along the lines of Williams' thought.

In this moment, one is “summoned to a revaluation and re-location of [oneself] and a reinterpretation of [one’s] desire.”⁴⁰ To show more starkly the violence of such a radical transformation, I employ Frantz Fanon’s account of the dismantling and reconstruction of the self. For Fanon, desiring catalyzes fragmentation of the self: “As soon as I desire, I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else.”⁴¹ The refusal of consideration amounts to a denial of subjectivity. Fanon describes the self shattered by non-recognition: “. . . I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put back together again by another self.”⁴²

Fanon adds to Williams’ account the centrality of desire to the construction of subjectivity. Williams implies that the self develops through the desire of the soul. Excepting the reference to soul, this is so also for Fanon: the eruption of desire signals the transformation of the colonized object into the intending subject. Objects do not desire; only subjects do. Although Fanon addresses a context in which the abjection of the self is produced by the construction of the colonized by the colonizer, comparing his account of the process to Williams’ highlights elements of the latter’s account. For Fanon, the relationship between self and (shattering) other, and the self’s fragmentation and reconstruction are located on a horizontal – if uneven – plane. For Williams, on the other hand, the catalyst for the fragmentation is a recognition of the transcendent, which revises the sense of self. The undoing and remaking of the self, in Williams’ perspective, occurs in a different dimension. Yet the process is remarkably similar in both cases.

⁴⁰ *Resurrection*, 85.

⁴¹ *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 218.

⁴² *Black Skin, White Masks*, 219. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *or. catech.* 8 (Richardson, 282–284). Gregory describes a similar process; the difference is that he understands the reconstruction to be (a) necessary to rid the person of the sin that had become attached to her nature and (b) completed by God, the creator of human nature. Like Fanon, however, Gregory sees the fragments as the same bits that made up the person before the shattering – minus the sin that made necessary the remaking of the self.

For the purpose of my argument, three things link Fanon's description of the process of deconstruction and reconstruction to Williams'. First, the fragmentation is complete. Our sense of what held the self together before is gone. Second, the fragments that are put back together again are the same pieces: fragmentation is not the end of the self. What has changed is not so much the "material" (or in this case the ideas, memories, and hopes as well as the body) but the principle of its unity. The two processes are distinguished by the agent of reconstruction. In the cases of Fanon's self, it is not immediately clear who puts the pieces back together, only that it is not the *original* self.⁴³ Williams makes clear that the reconstruction is primarily a work of God: humans are engaged in a constant attempt to reintegrate the pieces, but the restoration to wholeness happens only in God. For Williams, thus, it is not simply a matter of the "old" self being dismantled and a "new" self built (after the fashion of the Six Million Dollar Man). Rather, repeated attempts at making sense of the self involve one in an ongoing process of narration, which never fully captures the self in its complete newness. For Williams, the reconstructed Christian self depends upon God for the principle of its unity, therefore we would not expect the wholeness and newness of the self to be immediately accessible.⁴⁴

The third link between Williams' and Fanon's accounts of the emergence of subjectivity is the connection between desire and identity. Acknowledging one's desire (whether for God or for security in the world) involves making a claim to subjectivity: as we saw in Fanon, desiring is the privilege of the subject. The need to find a sense of security in the world is inseparable from developing self-identity. Our desires – in what we desire and how

⁴³ Later in the same chapter, following his discussion of the scientific process of proving the co-humanity of black and white, Fanon remarks: "I put all the pieces together" (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 119).

⁴⁴ The principle of the new self's unity is a point of frustration for Fanon throughout. Although he testifies to having put the pieces back together, there remains a sense of incompleteness in his reconstruction. In his discussion, it appears that the source of the problem is the "other" – represented by the white man. Fanon's freedom to reconstruct himself is limited by the other in relation to whom Fanon must always define himself. See *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109–119.

we desire – trace the outline of our identity. As the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the self in Williams shares many features with Fanon’s description of the shattering and reintegration of the self, so also we find a parallel between Williams’ notion of desire being tied to the quest for security and Fanon’s understanding of desire as the essence of subjectivity. Both point to desire as an essential – if not *the* essential – component of self-identity.

Williams starts from the premise that our desiring reflects a lack of security in ourselves and our place in the world. “The root fact that I am not ‘at home’ in myself and my world stirs me to desire. But if that desire is a wanting to be *in possession* of self and world, a wanting not to lose the ego’s imagined pivotal position, it can only intensify my sense of dis-ease. I have to learn another kind of desire.”⁴⁵ Here Williams hints at sin as an ontological condition. That is, the reason we begin from the sense of not being “at home” is the fallenness of the world. Overcoming the “sense of dis-ease” which results can take two forms, Williams suggests. One option is to secure oneself in the world by self-possession or self-sufficiency. This takes the form of control: desire becomes – is reduced to? – desire for control. The other option is to find a form of security in acknowledging dependence on God. Williams understands the inclination to control as desire gone wrong.⁴⁶

Following Augustine and many modern and postmodern thinkers, Williams suggests that desiring follows a learned pattern of interpretation. In Williams’ account, desire is inseparable from

⁴⁵ *Resurrection*, 85. Also, compare Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 218: “As soon as I desire, I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else.”

⁴⁶ He compares this general desire to sexual desire in “The Body’s Grace,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling (Boston: Cowley, 1996), 58–68, showing how the mechanism of desire-to-control works. Sexuality goes wrong when one partner controls the other: right sexual relationship involves risk, involves waiting on the desire of the other. So also this other kind of desire that Williams places in opposition to the desire to control involves risk and waiting. This is so at the most basic level because as one learns to desire God, the primary object of desire in this scheme, one also learns that we can never control God.

judgment.⁴⁷ Talking about judgment and desire is difficult, however, since Williams most often uses desire without reference to the object(s) of desire. While on the one hand this is something of a problem, on the other hand it may be understandable: the conversion of desire involves the end of desiring *objects*. It is important to consider desire in this way in a Christian context because desire is so easily overlooked or misunderstood in accounts of Christian thought and practice. Not only is desire socially constructed and subject to judgment, it is also an element of the “natural” response. That is, desiring God in the ideal state of Christian being is no longer a conscious process. It is not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing – because the right hand is doing something so familiar that it is not noticeable.⁴⁸ Thus we find his clearest indication of the character of desire in “The Body’s Grace.” There the way of desiring is made clear: the objects of desire are not seen as objects. Desiring involves one in relationship rather than giving one control.⁴⁹ Thus

⁴⁷ In *The Critique of Judgment*, though Kant insists that only reason judges the power of desire *a priori*, he almost admits to the subconscious activity of discernment when he describes disgust. There is a sort of ugliness that is totally incompatible with aesthetic liking, which arouses disgust, and “in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is what we are forcefully resisting.” What he describes as a struggle happens instantaneously and often unconsciously. But Kant does not give any indication that these sorts of reactions are socially constructed. William Connolly, however, sees the same reaction as issuing from what he calls the “visceral register,” which is formed by our experience. See *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 24–29.

⁴⁸ Williams describes this attention to others in “Living the Questions,” 28–29.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting here that at the most basic level, all desire reflects desire for identity. Homi Bhabha captures this in his description of the desire of the title character of *Beloved*: Beloved says “I want you to touch me on my inside part and call me by my name.” Bhabha interprets this, not surprisingly, as “Beloved’s naming of her desire for identity” (*The Location of Culture* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 22–25). In this request, this “asking to be considered,” there is a play of inside and outside that has to do with the memory of slavery. The realization, I think, has to do with the integration/making real of the ghost in order to hold together the fragments – fragments of the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone. What Bhabha fails to note is the time it takes for Beloved to be known, and the necessity of the participation of the other in her realization. Sexual intimacy as a metaphor for the realization of identity reminds us that identity is always dependent upon recognition, and that recognition takes time.

the judgment involved in desiring is a form of perception in which we are able to see others as ends in themselves.⁵⁰ Desiring God is very much like desiring another human being in that it involves an opening up, a receptivity. Williams seems to imply that desire is at its purest when it is characterized by receptivity. The second feature of desire follows from this attitude of receptivity: desire involves risk. The “asking to be considered” implied in desiring, as we find in Fanon, makes a claim on the other and opens the self to rejection. He reports that his “will to find a meaning in things” and his “desire to attain to the source of the world” were his undoing:

I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects . . . Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others . . . Their attention was a liberation . . . by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there . . . I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put back together again by another self.⁵¹

Fanon’s description captures what I think is the essence of Williams’ concept of the risk involved in desiring: desiring is the condition of possibility for the bursting apart that Fanon describes. Williams gestures toward the possibility of this sort of loss of self when he refers to resurrection as the “central symbol for the purification of desire and de-centring of the ego, because the necessary first moment in the resurrection event is one of absence and loss . . . I am . . . summoned to a revaluation and re-location of myself, and a reinterpretation of my desire.”⁵² Desire without control puts one at the mercy of the one desired, in a sense, rather than insisting on its own satisfaction.⁵³

⁵⁰ This is, of course, a very Kantian way of putting it. It is no less true: Williams insists upon seeing people in this way. For Williams, the idea probably derives from his reading of von Balthasar rather than Kant. See, for example, “Balthasar and Rahner,” in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 21–22.

⁵¹ *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

⁵² *Resurrection*, 85.

⁵³ See “The Body’s Grace,” 60–61.

The conversion of desire from the inclination to control to the attitude of receptivity that characterizes transformed desire involves the development of the same habits of attention that make conversation fruitful: the willingness to take time and to forgo explanation. To talk about the transformation of desire is thus to talk about the transformation of habits that give shape to everyday life. The formation of desire is one aspect of the development of our identity. Moreover, the orientation toward particular objects as desirable is a form of judgment that cannot remain simply personal. However subconsciously it takes place, discernment precedes desire.⁵⁴ So transforming desire involves cultivating a vision of the world that orients desire toward its proper object: God. Yet Williams does not give an account of the way desire might be refocused, nor of the potential obstacles to that transformation. He does suggest that certain activities lend themselves to taking time, but without making an explicit link.⁵⁵ In fact, the connection between desires and habits or character⁵⁶ is not especially well developed even among those theorists who have made the idea of *habitus* commonplace in contemporary theology.⁵⁷ Still, I suggest that seeing Williams' account of Christian identity as functionally a *habitus* will help us to perceive more precisely what is lacking in his account.

On Christian *Habitus*: Williams and Talal Asad

Although the work of Pierre Bourdieu is the source of the concept of *habitus* for many Christian theologians, the usefulness of his model for describing Christian identity is limited.⁵⁸ Bourdieu describes *habitus* as “practice-generating principles” or “the permanent dispositions

⁵⁴ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 70–79 and 253–275.

⁵⁵ See, for example, “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” pp. 48–51.

⁵⁶ See Ian Burkitt, “Technologies of the Self: *Habitus* and Capacities,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 32 (2002), 219–237.

⁵⁷ I am thinking here especially of Alasdair MacIntyre and Pierre Bourdieu, who quite differently, but insufficiently, account for the development of desires appropriate to social habits and practices.

⁵⁸ See chapter 1.

that are constitutive of realized morality.”⁵⁹ These are both helpful concepts; the difficulty is that his most detailed description of the production of the *habitus* argues that *habitus* is closely related to social and economic conditions and reproduced through existing social structures.⁶⁰ An alternative to Bourdieu’s use of the term that better fits Williams’ account of Christian identity is that of Talal Asad. Asad draws the core of his account of *habitus* from Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body.”⁶¹ The clearest explanation of what *habitus* involves in Asad is that it consists in “historically constituted practical knowledge, which articulates an individual’s learned capacities.”⁶² Because Asad’s discussion draws on similar frameworks of Christian thought and practice – especially medieval monastic community life – as Williams’ account of Christian identity, his understanding of habituation is more helpful for drawing out the kind of connection that obtains between habit and desire, and between desire and identity.

Asad raises the question: “For traditional Christians, sexual desire (*cupiditas*) should be replaced by *caritas* (love of God) – but how was this to be accomplished?” He answers the question with reference to medieval monastic practice. In this context, Asad suggests, the abbot’s instruction as

ritual discourse played a complex role in the *self*-restructuring of contradictory religious subjectivities. The primary object of that transformation was the Christian virtue of willing obedience, a process that did not “reduce people’s perception of available choices” (Paine) but ideally reorganized the basis on which choices were to be made.⁶³

⁵⁹ *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 12.

⁶⁰ *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, with Jean-Claude Passeron, trans. Richard Nice (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990), 31–36.

⁶¹ Mauss discusses practice in terms of *habitus*, and connects it to identity formation. Mauss’s development of the concept differs from Bourdieu’s in that it focuses more on what we might think of as “character.” Asad reworks Mauss’s original concept when he applies it to medieval monasticism. See *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 97–123.

⁶² *Genealogies of Religion*, 76.

⁶³ *Genealogies of Religion*, 135. See also *Why I am not a Secularist*, 19–36. The perception of choice is limited both by the organization of society and by the shape of an individual’s visceral register.

So, the core of “obedience” is the reorganized subjectivity: at the center of this willing obedience is transformed desire. For it is the desire for God – love of God, *caritas*, which points in this same direction – that makes the obedience *willing* rather than grudging. Monastic life was ordered to the production of subjectivities such as these, structured by desire for God.

Asad turns to a discussion of Bernard of Clairvaux to demonstrate the link between habit and desire:

Bernard is not manipulating desires (in the sense that his monks do not know what is happening to them) but instead is erecting a new moral space for the operation of a distinctive motivation. In order to do this, he develops a discursive practice – ritual dialogue – for facilitating and regulating a new way of living. The sermon that gives authoritative exegesis of biblical texts provides a new vocabulary by which the monks themselves can redescribe, and therefore in effect construct, their memories in relation to the demands of a new way of life. This redescription of memories is a long and complex process. In it, (1) the authoritative preacher and the monk addressed, (2) the monk interacting with fellow monks, (3) the confessor and the monk in confession, and (4) the remembering religious self and the secular self remembered, all contribute in the production of a moral description by which the monk’s desires and feelings are reconstructed.⁶⁴

I have quoted this passage in full because it illustrates nicely what Asad sees as the complexity and the order of the upbuilding of a specifically Christian character. Asad also views this construction as founded on a reorganization of the monk’s desires. It is the formation of a habitus in this sense that I think most clearly approximates the account of Christian identity that Williams proposes. In Williams’ account Christian tradition and the narrative of Christ provide the “moral space” and “discursive practice” as the context for reconstructing oneself. The relationship between memory and identity is a central feature of Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of Christian formation, and I will return to it in chapter 5. For Williams and

⁶⁴ *Genealogies of Religion*, 143–144. I will discuss the role of memory in the (re) construction of Christian identity in detail in chapter 5.

for Gregory, imagination works with memory to construct and reconstruct narratives of the self.

Central to the development of Christian subjectivity is the desire for transformation. What makes the subjectivity distinctively Christian is the orientation of that desire. For presumably (although Asad does not see it this way) the goal of the process of transformation into which the monk entered as he entered the monastery was (is!) conformity to the image of Christ. It is clear from Asad's account, as well as in Williams', that the founding desire, the desire that initiates the transformation by placing the subject in a new discursive context, requires developing. And, it should be added, the motivation for the initial turn toward God need not be pure: as Augustine suggests, the reason for one's decision to enter the church is of very little consequence, because the church is the place where desire is converted.⁶⁵ The "willing obedience" that is the primary Christian virtue in Asad's estimation is the emulation of the kenotic career of Christ. Such obedience reflects a purified desire, the fruit of monastic discipline. Seen from this perspective, the desire that must ground the development of Christian character is the basic desire to be formed in the image of Christ. Then the desire for God that develops is a participatory desire: properly oriented Christian desire unites the believer *to* Christ, and so doing involves her in the love of God. In Christ, the believers come to participate in the love and desire *of* God *for* God.

Williams accepts the basic diagnosis of Talal Asad and other theorists that the unity of the self is a modern construct,⁶⁶ and that the essence of being human in the postmodern world is disjunction. Nor does Williams try to rehabilitate the modern self by constructing a notion of chastened autonomy. Rather, Williams shifts the whole problem onto his own territory – theology – and proposes the principle of the self's unity – *any* self's unity – as residing not within the individual but in God. What I am, essentially, is beyond my grasp, even as the forces that influence me are often outside the field of my vision. For Williams, as for Asad, I am neither my

⁶⁵ See Catherine Chin, "Telling Boring Stories: Time, Narrative and Pedagogy in *De catechizandis rudibus*," *Augustinian Studies* 37/1 (2006): 43–62.

⁶⁶ See "Know Thyself."

own creator nor the sole author of my acts. The space in which choices are made is always limited, and yet the choices are no less real, even if the agent doing the choosing is not the Kantian individual, autonomous and transcendently free. Williams places the heteronomous self in an orienting relationship – this is the discursive space of Asad – and provides a principle for making choices. Desire orients the self, and while it does not exactly provide a principle of unity, it provides a trajectory for the reintegration of the self.

As Asad has shown, the construction of such a radically different self-perception requires discipline, and includes the reconstruction of memory and desire.⁶⁷ But how is such transformation possible without monastic training? Williams' account of Christian identity raises the question, but answers it insufficiently. Next, I consider in more detail the specific dimensions of Christian *habitus*. In order to understand the way *habitus* functions in Williams' account of Christian identity, we need to consider the performative nature of Christian life as Williams presents it. Specifically, the process of sense-making is, I have suggested, a performance akin to the performance of dream interpretation in psychoanalysis. In order to see the distinctive features of Williams' account of how Christian life is displayed, I bring his work into conversation with Judith Butler's work on identity and performativity.

“Making Sense” and Christian Self-Identity: Williams and Judith Butler

Williams sees the psychoanalytic process as transforming desire in such a way that the analysand's everyday life is changed. The “sense” that is made in therapy is of and for the person's experience in and of the world beyond the analyst's office. For Williams, liturgy makes sense of the world and creates new possibilities for being in the world in the way dream interpretation does in the context of analysis. Yet the performance of Christian identity with

⁶⁷ The connection between memory and desire suggested here receives more detailed attention in my discussion of Gregory of Nyssa in chapter 5.

which I am concerned here is not primarily the making sense that happens in the context of liturgy. Rather, I am interested in the making sense in and of the world that liturgy makes possible. By liturgy, I refer to the context in which Christians hear the word proclaimed and remember and receive Christ in the Eucharist. Taken together, the Scripture and the celebration of the Eucharist present an interpretation of the world's meaning, a narrative that sets everything that is in its proper orientation toward God as its source and destiny. We are, moreover, invited to find our place within the drama. Making sense as Williams describes it is predicated on a specifically Christian form of self-understanding, which is communicated to us through participation in the liturgy. The heart of this understanding is, for Williams, "grasping one's own contingency."⁶⁸ The performance of Christian identity thus involves relinquishing certain ideals of selfhood: to see oneself as contingent and dependent (upon God) is to reject a view of agency as autonomous self-sufficiency.

Although Judith Butler may seem at first an unlikely conversation partner, her account of subjectivity plays well against Williams' account of Christian identity. Butler's account of gender as performance illustrates some of the dimensions of Christian identity performance. There are two key differences, however, that I need to acknowledge straightaway. First, Butler criticizes the cultural forces that shape and reproduce us as inherently oppressive, whereas I will be arguing that the liturgy forms us positively for living the Christian narrative faithfully in the world. Second, the cultural forces that reproduce gender operate universally, not just in one area of a person's life. One can avoid liturgy, but one cannot step outside the discursive formation that shapes us as female or male. I have already suggested that Scripture and sacraments encourage a certain sort of self-understanding, and that self-understanding is, in a very significant sense, what funds our perceptions of and actions in the world. In what follows, I describe the narrative and performative dimensions of that self-understanding.

Williams works within the bounds of a tradition in which what constitutes appropriate Christian action is often ambiguous. It

⁶⁸ "Know Thyself," 219.

depends upon an interpretation of the situation and very often we cannot foresee the outcome of a particular action. The performativity of Christian identity is in this way similar to the performativity Judith Butler proposes. Comparing Williams' understanding of Christian sense-making with Butler's description of successful (gender) performance allows us to view the process of making sense from a different angle.⁶⁹ She writes:

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that "success" is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. What this means, then, is that a performative "works" to the extent that *it draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.

This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said.⁷⁰

Williams' account of Christian identity shares two elements of Butler's account of performativity as portrayed above. First, the provisionality of a performative is based on its location in a community. Insofar as gender performance represents an interpretation, its "success" depends on its reception. This is especially clear in Butler's final point: the author of a performance⁷¹ is not its owner. Whether purposeful or unintentional, our actions are only ours in a limited sense and we have little or no control over their

⁶⁹ Making sense is like gender performance as Butler describes it because it is an interpretation of prevailing social and cultural conditions and appropriate action in those conditions. The performative only succeeds if it is received. So also, for Williams, the success of an interpretation depends on its reception.

⁷⁰ *Bodies That Matter*, 226–227 (italics in original).

⁷¹ See Butler's description of a performative. *Bodies That Matter*, 13.

effects.⁷² Second, the reception of a performative depends upon its place in the history of the set of practices within which it is situated: is *this* interpretation recognizable as continuous with *that* history?

Williams and Butler both see the subject as implicated in a set of relations whose history is determinative for her actions and which also conditions the reception or reading of those actions. As Williams explains, the Christian self is already situated by belonging to a community of faith and being in relation to a self-emptying God. In that light,

the goal of our decision-making is to show what God's selfless attention might mean in prosaic matters of everyday life – but also to show God's glory . . . What am I to do? I am to act in such a way that my action becomes something given into the life of the community and in such a way that what results is glory – the radiating, the visibility, of God's beauty in the world. The self that I am, the self that I have been made to be, is the self engaged by God in love and now in process of recreation through the community of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷³

The meaning of any Christian action depends upon its place in the community of faith past and present. Such action, like Butler's notion of a performative, "echoes prior actions." That is, it repeats past performance, but not identically: yet it is "recognizable as an action that in some way or other manifests the character of the God who has called the community."⁷⁴ Williams describes Christian action as "something given into the life of the community." A gift succeeds when it is accepted – like the interpretation of the dream succeeds when the analyst recognizes its plausibility, and accepts

⁷² In a fallen world, grace does not mean triumph, and we are not certain how everything will turn out – including what effect our actions will have. See also John Milbank, "A Christological Poetics," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 126–127.

⁷³ "Making Moral Decisions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

⁷⁴ "Making Moral Decisions," 8. Williams cites Milbank in his discussion of the sense in which the action is offered to the community as a gift.

it. Making sense involves the same exchange. Like gender performance, Christian performance is only *provisionally* successful because of its historicity. This is so in two senses. First, the success of an interpretation depends upon its relation to previous interpretations. Second, an interpretation is located in time: its reception by one audience does not guarantee its reception by every audience.

As a *habitus* Christian performance matches actions to self-perception, often subconsciously. Because there are no guarantees for Christian moral action, there is a self-scrutinizing element in all such performance: for Williams, self-knowledge funds all our ethical decision-making and moral action.⁷⁵ Self-knowledge includes grasping oneself as a member of a community with a history, and seeing oneself as bound by a commitment to the ideals (not the rules!) of that community. The question “What should I do?” is always partly the question “Who am I?” And Christian self-scrutiny is not just a matter of individual navel-gazing: the self is inseparable from the body of Christ.⁷⁶

The concept of self-scrutiny draws our attention to the fragility and contingency of all our performances, and reminds us of the danger of self-satisfaction. Although Butler sees self-scrutiny as essential to the development of performative practices, she insists that although “identity terms” are unavoidable,

these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production . . . What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to *take the time* to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism’s most treasured contemporary premises.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ See “Making Moral Decisions,” 6–7; “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 48–51; and “Know Thyself,” 219.

⁷⁶ Describing self-understanding in this way points us back to MacIntyre’s description of the relationship between the individual and tradition: Williams would agree that we are in some way constituted by what we inherit. See pp. 46–47 above.

⁷⁷ *Bodies That Matter*, 227 (my italics).

Butler puts the necessity of self-scrutiny together with a theme I have identified in Williams' theology: taking time. The self-criticism that Butler sees as indispensable for political action takes time. And although Williams does not discuss it as directly as Butler, Christian identity must be self-critical for the same reason: the potential for exclusion. Some perceptions and actions cultivated by a particular sense of Christian identity create the conditions for the alienation or obscuring of members or would-be members of the Christian community. While no method will eradicate the risk of exclusion, awareness of and attention to the "exclusionary force" of Christian beliefs and practices must be a part of any account of Christian identity. The self-critical aspect of performance is linked to the need for taking time, as a part of the process of making sense and so being able to act intelligibly.⁷⁸

Williams' example of the performativity of dream interpretation reminds us that each performance *is* an interpretation. Expressions of Christian identity must demonstrate continuity with the Christian past and distinctiveness with respect to the "secular." Note, however, that "the Christian past" and "the secular" are themselves interpreted realities; the development of Christian subjectivity consists in part in the imaginative construction of history and the non-Christian world.

I have argued so far that Williams' account of Christian identity draws traditional theological themes – such as the centrality of the image of God in anthropology and of Christ as the model for Christian life – together with a sensitivity to certain postmodern philosophical themes and concepts. The result is a complex account of Christian identity in which the sense of what Christianity is all about is inseparable from its relationship to its past and to the "other(s)" to which it is present. "Conversation" is a metaphor for the imagined relationship with the secular and with the Christian past that is essential to Williams' concept of Christian identity. In what follows I consider each of these "conversations" in more detail and draw from them certain principles for engaging tradition and culture.

⁷⁸ Kathryn Tanner is keenly aware of this risk, though she does not present it in precisely the same way. See pp. 42–43 above.

Stories of the Past

Williams offers a rich discussion of the construction of Christian narratives throughout history. In what follows, I explore the dimension of Christian identity that is the result of engaging these narratives and their construction. I thus shift my attention from the concept of identity to the concept of tradition – but always with a view to how construals of “tradition” imply particular notions of “identity.” The way in which Williams establishes a sense of continuity with previous generations of Christians is a part of his account of Christian identity.

I take it as given that Williams is saying something indispensable to his account of Christian identity in his discussions of Arius, Augustine, or John Newman. His style of reading Christian history that emerges as a result also gives us clues to the character Williams believes our conversations with the past should have. The questions Williams raises about the self and its mysteriousness apply also to history. Williams is therefore suspicious of any philosophy of history that identifies history’s beginning, middle, and end.⁷⁹ The object of my discussion is to draw out principles that may guide especially non-historians in the retrieval of late ancient and medieval Christian sources, so that we can become better readers.⁸⁰ By

⁷⁹ Williams cites Hegel as the primary example of this approach, and resists telling the story in this way because it “always leads to the ignoring or misreading of the concrete phenomena of the past by forcing them into a pattern of development” (“The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 45; and see below, in discussion of Newman: Williams shows that the reading of self and reading the past are connected). For further discussion of the problems with a Hegelian philosophy of history from a theological perspective, see Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), especially 27–32. Interestingly, Lowe’s criticisms of what he calls “the idealist diamond” bear a certain resemblance to Williams’ refusal of the closure implied by Hegelian metaphysics and philosophy of history. But in the end Williams sees more to retrieve in Hegel’s philosophy, whereas Lowe prefers a Kantian model that has no time for a teleology of sublation.

⁸⁰ I do not discuss all of Williams’ historical work in order to tease out these principles. After all, one might well wonder what the difference might be between a “historical” and a “constructive” work in the context of Williams’ corpus. The

better readers, however, I do not mean that we will become able through some magical formula to discover the “true” meaning of texts and events in Christian history: the foregoing discussion should have already made clear that this is not what Williams has in mind.

Telling stories of the past is never about foreclosure. There is no story of the past that prevents further interpretations from being offered – though not every interpretation will be received. Like the interpretation of dreams, reading history proceeds best by keeping its own provisionality clearly in view. The first step in making sense of stories of the past, as I will discuss in more detail below, is what Williams refers to as “making strange.” Realizing the provisionality of our interpretations involves a realization that the sources themselves *ought* to appear strange to us, ought to be perceived as documents and artifacts that do not belong in our time and place: they do not belong to us. Williams offers a paradigmatic example for the construction of Christian tradition. He begins from the premise that every judgment of what counts as “traditional” *construes* that source as such, and shows how the sources can challenge us.

The contemporary exercise of making sense is always constituted mainly as the construction of narratives, an enterprise that centers on engagement with Scripture and tradition. And yet, Williams understands these sources of Christian tradition as underdetermined. That is, there is no single meaning waiting to be uncovered in any part of Scripture or tradition.⁸¹ Scripture and tradition are not inherently ambiguous, but their *meaning*, from a human perspective, is inexhaustible. Our approach to tradition and Scripture should resemble our approach to selves in the sense of provisionality we apply to our judgment, and our cognizance of the ambiguity inherent in

point I wish to make is that Williams’ approach to history shapes and informs his constructive method.

⁸¹ On underdetermined interpretation, see Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 32–61. See also Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 303–355; and Eugene Rogers, “How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), 64–81.

our *understanding*.⁸² However difficult it may be to interpret, the Christian past is indispensable for current practice: the way in which the story is told is essential to the development of the sense of Christian identity. In what follows I will show how Williams deals with the ambiguity of the sources of Christian faith and practice in his constructive work.⁸³

The first and foundational practice of Christianity is the practice of Scripture: reading or hearing the Bible in order to shape the imagination.⁸⁴ The development of a Scripture-shaped imagination

⁸² See, for example, “Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in *On Christian Theology*, 188 and 195–196, in which Williams suggests that the gospels are “ideologically underdetermined.” While certain concerns or interests can be identified, these concerns shape rather than determine the production of the text. Also see Williams’ discussion of the gospels in *Resurrection*. He suggests that in the New Testament we find “a bewilderingly large number of sharply diverse – and sometimes mutually suspicious or hostile – communities.” In spite of this diversity, though, Williams is convinced that “the patterns of interpretation [of the resurrection] do overlap; that belief in the risen-ness of Jesus (as reflected in the literary deposits of these communities) did not mean *radically* different things to different Christian groups” (2). Cf. *Genealogies of Religion*, 35.

⁸³ It should be noted that for the most part the theological methodology Williams develops is just that: theological methodology. The approach to Scripture and tradition that he articulates does not apply to every Christian’s practice. That he is primarily suggesting ways of moving ahead for theologians is clear at various points. For example, in “The Unity of Christian Truth” he writes, “the search for a *theological* unity in what we say involves a high degree of sustained conversation with the history of Christian ethics and spirituality (in its full historical complexity and ambiguity) – with the history of how the vocation of human beings is imagined by Christians” (“The Judgement of the World,” 24). This fits together with his idea that theology is a way of speaking, a way that makes sense of the world rather than explaining it.

⁸⁴ See “Theological Integrity,” “The Unity of Christian Truth,” “The Judgement of the World,” and “The Discipline of Scripture,” in *On Christian Theology*, 3–59; and also “Living the Questions,” 28–29, where Williams suggests “reading the Bible together” as an essential practice for getting beyond the labels “liberal” and “conservative” in discussing hotly debated topics. For related discussion, which has influenced my reading of Williams here, see Nicholas Lash, “Performing the Scriptures,” in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 37–46; and Graham Ward, “Narrative and Ethics: The Structures of Believing and Practices of Hope,” *Literature and Theology* 20 (2006), 438–461.

takes time; Williams describes the process as one of discovering the “interiority” of Scripture, whose complexity demands our full attention. The meaning of Scripture “is not a point of hidden clarity and security but a complex of interwoven processes: a production of meaning in the only mode available for material and temporal creatures.”⁸⁵ As with the self, we encounter Scripture at points in our own histories and its history and in between those points neither we nor the Scripture stand still. This will become clearer as we examine some of Williams’ own biblical interpretation in more detail. For Williams, Scripture is *generative*: Jesus is the inauguration and source of the new life that characterizes Christian being, which Scripture makes available to us.⁸⁶ Christian identity is linked to revelation not merely as the display of the interpretation of Scripture but as the way of living in the community called into being by the Word made flesh. The Scripture itself, on this view, shapes the way one’s imagination construes the meaning of the text.

Williams turns to Gregory of Nyssa to show how a scripturally formed imagination reads the Bible. Gregory’s exegesis of Moses seeing the “back parts of God” provides a clear example of the way in which the reading of one biblical text shapes the reading of another. Gregory interprets the rock in the Exodus narrative as Christ, which is not surprising: what is fascinating about Gregory’s reading is the *reason* for Moses’ perspective. Moses sees the back parts of God because he is *following*. Williams points to the resemblance to Mark 10:32: “That and kindred texts must surely have formed part of the complex resources and influences behind this [exegesis] of Gregory’s.”⁸⁷ Williams sees the governing sense as that which concerns the story of salvation in which Christ is the hero.⁸⁸ Thus the construal of the Exodus narrative is shaped by and inseparable from Mark’s Gospel.

Gregory of Nyssa provides Williams with an exegesis that challenges George Lindbeck’s account of the scripturally formed imagination. Whereas he sees in Lindbeck’s proposal a too-rigid framework for

⁸⁵ “The Discipline of Scripture,” 55.

⁸⁶ See “Trinity and Revelation,” 134.

⁸⁷ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 63.

⁸⁸ See “The Discipline of Scripture,” 55–59.

interpreting the world through the text, Williams argues that the scripturally formed imagination provides a set of resources for reading Bible and world.⁸⁹ This set of resources allows for the kind of intratextual reading Gregory offers and also allows for a more fluid interaction between the Bible and the contemporary context. It *does* create a new frame of reference for perceiving the world, but not in the way Lindbeck imagines. The reshaping of the imagination by Scripture instantiates the new discursive practice and provides the new moral space of which Talal Asad speaks with reference to the medieval monastic context.

The imagination shaped by Scripture is not merely filled with images, nor reorganized into a new framework, but has a new interior landscape in which a range of judgments can be made. And the imagination shaped by Scripture is not cast in stone: constant reshaping and renewing keep the imagination alive, and so also our perspective on Scripture itself develops. Williams refers to the way in which our reading of the Genesis account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac has been influenced by – for example – Wilfrid Owen’s poem about it: “he refused to hear the angel / and slew his son / and all the seed of Europe one by one.” Williams observes that what the poem calls to our attention is that “not sacrificing Isaac is a necessary humiliation.”⁹⁰ The act of obedience at the moment in which Isaac is to be killed is an obedience equal to that displayed in preparing to sacrifice him. Yet this insight as it impresses itself on Williams comes not from Christian exegesis but from a “secular” poem. So Williams understands our reading of the biblical text to be shaped by the surrounding culture and the readings of the Bible it generates.

Perhaps even more complex than reading the Bible is reading Christian tradition. Again, Williams suggests a parallel between the obscurity encountered in human relationships (as we have discussed above) and the interpretative undecidability that obtains in situations

⁸⁹ This is the crux of Williams’ criticism of George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*: see “The Judgement of the World,” 29–31.

⁹⁰ “The Judgement of the World,” 30–31; Williams also mentions Kierkegaard’s reading of the same narrative as an example of the way in which our reading of it has been influenced by its uses in other contexts.

in which doctrines are produced.⁹¹ Patterns of attention to tradition form one's engagement with Christian history. Yet the act of imagining the narrative continuity of Christianity is itself a function of the *habitus* that generates practices. The *habitus* is partially constituted by "principles of vision and division."⁹² That is, the *habitus* involves not only the development of practices, but the cultivation of attitudes and perceptions commensurate with those practices.⁹³ To take a belief or practice as "traditional" involves a judgment and a narration – a judgment that is also a judgment of faith that such narration is possible.⁹⁴ There is a clear parallel between doctrine and relationships displayed here. In both cases there is an unavoidable element of ambiguity, and yet it is essential in human relationships to construct narratives of the self and its development. So also, although Williams does not say so explicitly, a narrative of doctrine is also necessary in spite of the ambiguity or obscurity which shapes and limits all our readings of doctrine. That is, studying Christian tradition, especially insofar as that involves studying doctrine, involves one in an attempt to narrate its progress.⁹⁵ This does not mean that every individual Christian should be able to provide a comprehensive account of the development of doctrine. Rather, it takes for granted that Christians perceive their faith and practice as in some way continuous with that of the earliest

⁹¹ See "The Suspicion of Suspicion," 50.

⁹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

⁹³ I want to emphasize that the attitudes and perceptions do not simply generate the practices, but that the two aspects of *habitus* develop together and reinforce one another. Perceptions and attitudes cannot be isolated from practices.

⁹⁴ See "Doctrinal Criticism: Some Questions," in Sarah Coakley and David Pailin, eds., *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honor of Maurice Wiles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 239–264.

⁹⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 384–429. John Milbank also implies this necessity in the final chapter of *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 380–434. It is worth noting that both Ayres and Milbank were taught by Williams. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (Northfield: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

church.⁹⁶ In some cases, this may involve being able to give a more complex account of the way in which some practices differ from the biblical accounts.

Williams rejects the particular habit of regarding the Christian past as a neat narrative of “orthodoxy” against “heresy.” In itself, this is hardly worth noting. But the reasons he gives for this position are significant. The notion that “orthodoxy” consists in a set of formulae, which function as a standard for evaluation, leads to two mistakes. First, the idea of a standard suggests a certain ease of application: whether something fits or not should be obvious. Second, it leads to the mistake of understanding our study of the Christian past as the search for “a deeper and determinative truth” we will recognize instantly. Williams’ approach to Arius and Arianism (both in his *Arius* and his lengthy introduction to Newman’s *The Arians*) is instructive.

Williams reads the “Arian” controversy against a background of pre-Nicene conflict. His answer to the question, “Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?”⁹⁷ is carefully nuanced. In reply Williams suggests that prior to Nicaea, what constituted “orthodoxy” was a set of commitments to the story of Jesus, not adherence to an official formula.⁹⁸ Rather than being an intentional perversion of orthodox trinitarian doctrine, the challenge presented

⁹⁶ Obviously, there is a very broad spectrum of perception involved here, and a correspondingly broad range of abilities in articulating that perception. I am convinced that grasping the church as the body of Christ, and finding our appropriate place within it involves taking part in the engagement with Scripture and tradition necessary for constructing narratives of continuity, insofar as that is within our capability. It does not mean that Christian identity should not be predicated of any who cannot perceive or articulate that continuity, or indeed even to participate physically, cognitively, or verbally in the faith and practice of the church. See my essay “Irresponsible Love: Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity and the Church” (*Modern Theology* 25 [July 2009], 491–501).

⁹⁷ “Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–23.

⁹⁸ So the answer is yes, insofar as orthodoxy can be defined as commitment to the story of Jesus. But the story must include Jesus in cosmic perspective as well as being in communion with bishops of apostolic succession who share the basic story.

by Arius' theology contributed to the development of what came to be considered (at Nicaea and Constantinople) orthodoxy.⁹⁹ Williams explains that "the fourth century crisis . . . is in large part, a debate about the kinds of continuity possible and necessary in the Church's language."¹⁰⁰ The fourth-century trinitarian controversies asked not only what counted as "Christian" but also how such judgments were to be made. The church's answer emerged only through long debate and further development of doctrine.

I suggest that Williams' way of seeing doctrinal development in the fourth century has clear implications for *constructive* theological method. The questions raised in the debates of that period in church history concerned the difficulty of developing new arguments – of innovation in theological language – "while still professing to make no changes in the deposit of tradition."¹⁰¹ By the "deposit of tradition" Williams means an understanding of belief that goes beyond the language of worship. There are better and worse ways of interpreting or describing the unique content of the Christian message, and continuity with tradition depends upon these interpretations and descriptions as much as on the repetition of traditional language. Thus Williams describes Athanasius' task as

to show how the break in continuity generally felt to be involved in the creedal *homoousios* is a necessary moment in the deeper understanding and securing of tradition; more yet, it is to persuade Christians that strict adherence to archaic and 'neutral' terms alone is in fact a potential betrayal of the historic faith.¹⁰²

Athanasius' task may be understood as the defense of theology itself: there is work to be done, work that moves beyond repetition to new articulations and further elaborations, and ultimately involves

⁹⁹ In fact asking "whether there was an identifiable 'orthodoxy', a prevailing sense of the norms of Christian identity, prior to AD 300" raises a whole series of questions about the definition of a religion. "Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?" 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 234.

¹⁰¹ *Arius*, 235.

¹⁰² *Arius*, 235.

the theologian in construction.¹⁰³ The necessity of construction becomes evident in the fourth century, and, importantly, it is the heart of the challenge raised by the “Arian” controversy. In these comments Williams intends to address all theologians for whom continuity with tradition is important. The narrative of the church (as bearer of tradition) parallels the narrative of the self. For Williams, “every telling of myself is a retelling, and the act of telling changes what can be told next time, because it is, precisely, an *act* with consequences like other acts, in the world and speech of others;”¹⁰⁴ so also the telling of the church’s history shapes the church itself. As I will suggest below, the best approach is one that acknowledges the complexity of the Christian past and the telling of the church’s story throughout history.

Williams’ introduction to John Henry Newman’s *The Arians of the Fourth Century* sheds further light on the way in which he believes we ought to treat historical sources in the construction of theological proposals. Williams writes approvingly of Newman’s sense that “saying the same thing *now* as was said *then* may involve you in saying something apparently novel.”¹⁰⁵ In fact it is Newman’s treatment of questions involving language for God that Williams appreciates most. For example, in “The Ecclesiastical Doctrine of the Trinity,” Newman discusses the significance of the fact that trinitarian language changes over the course of the earliest centuries

¹⁰³ Cf. Milbank on the speculative moment represented in the formulation of doctrine, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.

¹⁰⁴ *Lost Icons*, 144.

¹⁰⁵ “Introduction” to *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, by John Henry Newman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), xxi. This notion is consistent with Williams’ remarks elsewhere, which indicate that theology does new things with language. In his discussions of Balthasar, for example, Williams observes that the form is as important as the content. “Language . . . is the means of opening the human subject to ‘being’, it is the sacrament, we might say, of the totality to which we belong” (“Balthasar and Rahner,” 29). In particular, Balthasar’s use of analogy demonstrates the importance of language to theology. Balthasar sees in the proper use of analogy the otherness of God represented, if not exactly representable, as God is actively present in finite reality (“Afterword: Making Differences,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner et al. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999], 175).

of Christianity.¹⁰⁶ The variety and sheer number of metaphors used in the early centuries in addition to the names Father and Son complement and subvert¹⁰⁷ one another, so that the chance of “taking any one of them literally or in isolation” is reduced. According to Williams, Newman interprets the early multiplication of metaphors as maintaining “orthodoxy by a constant process of self-correction, endlessly mobile, circling reference of metaphor to metaphor, one balancing another.”¹⁰⁸ For Williams, Newman’s comparison of pre-Nicene and post-Nicene language shows a vision of orthodoxy as

never, before or after Nicaea, just a matter of getting one set of formulae right. And [in the Appendices] we can see further illustration of Newman’s concern to understand patristic language in its widest possible linguistic context. We cannot simply assume that we know what any one set of words means in isolation, let alone concluding from our analysis that such and such a writer is ‘really’ heretical, or that Arius’s theology was shared by this or that pre-Nicene divine. It is an unexpected echo of Wittgenstein and kindred philosophers of language: to find meaning, look for use, use in the global context of a system of speech.¹⁰⁹

Newman’s attention to language fosters a sense of the pre-Nicene awareness of the real mysteriousness of God, and the consequent difficulty of speech about God. In this context Williams sees the

¹⁰⁶ Williams praises the section of Newman’s book as “a serious attempt to give intellectual coherence to the trinitarian faith he is defending” (“Introduction,” *The Arians*, xli).

¹⁰⁷ While Williams does not describe the proliferation of metaphors as subversive, I believe that what he says suggests a subversive element. Where metaphors are in some way contradictory (as Julian of Norwich’s references to Jesus’ breasts clash with her continued use of the masculine pronoun), their limitations become evident.

¹⁰⁸ “Introduction,” *The Arians*, xli.

¹⁰⁹ “Introduction,” *The Arians*, xlii. For discussion of the grammar of divinity – which Williams describes here as “a system of speech” – in fourth-century trinitarian theology, see *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 14–15. Ayres defines grammar differently, as “a set of rules or principles intrinsic to theological discourse, whether or not they are formally articulated,” but its operation is similar.

fruit of this careful treading on complex and ambiguous ground as “a fertile, imaginative affair . . . disciplined by the priorities manifest in the language of the Bible.” In this same vein, Newman eschews the questions about the “orthodoxy” of pre-Nicene language. In so doing, Williams observes, “Newman was able to make a substantive point about how theological language works, a point still well worth pondering.”¹¹⁰ Thus Williams judges Newman’s *Arians* successful “in establishing a new set of possibilities from doctrinal history, in that it gives a real *theological* valuation to the processes of intellectual history and does not attempt to deny that the accurate perception of Christian truth is shaped by conflict.”¹¹¹

And yet Newman comes in for sharp critique in other respects. The story his book tells of the fourth-century trinitarian controversies is a distorted one. The historical account fails because Newman presses the evidence into a typological frame.¹¹² Newman’s preconceptions about the forces in play in the fourth century and his own objectives in writing the book (originally to remind Anglican bishops of the significance of the Thirty-Nine Articles) shape his attention to the historical material with which he was working. In Williams’ criticism of Newman, we catch a glimpse of what might be considered the first step in the process of “making sense”: making strange. Because Newman finds what he sees in the fourth century familiar, he misinterprets the details. Williams reminds us to be suspicious of what appears familiar. When we assume that the meaning of Christian texts from late antiquity is obvious, we are very likely being deceived. Studying the past is in this respect like learning a second (or third) language: the words most likely to trip us up are false cognates. For Williams, conversing with the Christian past involves finding surprising incongruities and “unexpected convergences.”¹¹³ Thus the first lesson we should learn from Williams’ approach to the fourth century is that the strangeness of what we encounter in conversation with the past is not always evident. So,

¹¹⁰ “Introduction,” *The Arians*, xlii–xliv.

¹¹¹ “Introduction,” *The Arians*, xxxv.

¹¹² That is, “a very rigid structure has been allowed to dictate Newman’s narrative and analysis” (“Introduction,” *The Arians*, xl).

¹¹³ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 45.

he suggests, we ought to begin by drawing out the complexity and ambiguity of “what the Gospel says in Scripture and tradition.”¹¹⁴

The second lesson we should learn is that the way we interpret the Christian past has direct bearing on our understanding of Christian identity.¹¹⁵ Telling one’s story shapes as much as it articulates one’s sense of self; it also sets a backdrop against which choices appear and are evaluated. Likewise the story of the church provides a context for deciding how to proceed. Told and retold as our individual stories are, the history of the church tells a community’s story. Williams here links his conception of narrative personal identity to his notion of a communal or theological identity through the interchangeability of the language he uses to describe these two types of identity. Storytelling is essential to the identity of a community or a tradition as it is to an individual.¹¹⁶ If being Christian is construed as embracing “orthodoxy” and rejecting “heresy,” then Christian theology will be driven by the need to show how contemporary faith and practice conform to standards of orthodoxy. Instead, Williams argues, we ought to see that offering a narrative

¹¹⁴ *Arius*, 236. See also *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 384–429, for discussion of the way in which misinterpretation of the fourth-century controversies has misdirected trinitarian theology in the twentieth century.

¹¹⁵ In “Does it Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?” Williams rejects both Bauer’s and Chadwick’s models of doctrinal development, preferring a “making sense” approach to the question about the development of doctrine. Against both models Williams brings Jonathan Z. Smith’s criticism of the notion of a single center – a “logic” – of a religious tradition. Williams’ essay raises a series of questions about the definition of Christian identity in terms of continuity with the past, specifically with the earliest forms of Christian thought and life. The question he pursues elsewhere – regarding pre-Nicene orthodoxy – “raises issues concerning methodological foundations in the study of religions overall – an area which theologians are liable to neglect: how, if at all, is one to identify the ‘center’ of *any* religious tradition? At what point and why do we start speaking about ‘a’ religion, an interconnected pattern of symbolic resources with some kind of coherence? Or is the whole notion of looking for the essence of a particular religion, or the essence of what makes this or that tradition a *religion*, a mistake?”(2–3).

¹¹⁶ This is practically a commonplace, but I would be remiss not to mention Stanley Hauerwas’ reflections on *Watership Down* here. See “A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*,” in *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 9–35.

of the development of Christian tradition involves discerning complex boundaries between positions whose differences are often obscure.

And yet the judgments about what counts as Christian are not optional, but a matter of course in church and academy. Such judgments have always been made and continue to be made, by laypeople as well as clergy and professional theologians. From Nicaea onwards, Williams suggests, “continuity was something that had to be re-imagined and recreated at each point of crisis.”¹¹⁷ Against this background Williams sees faithfulness to tradition as a matter of critical attention rather than unreflective obedience. One who faithfully attends to the events, figures, and texts of Christian history must bear in mind the complexity of context and the interpretative undecidability that always accompanies the process of articulating Christian belief. She must always bear in mind the judgments of narrative that are necessarily made in every reading. “Orthodoxy,” he explains, “continues to be *made*.”¹¹⁸ That is, every articulation of doctrine represents a decision, and understanding the outcome of the decision is not possible without acknowledging that it was not a foregone conclusion. In the case of Arius’ theology, Williams argues that the controversies it provoked were themselves the context in which the pro-Nicene position emerged.¹¹⁹

Telling a story of the Christian past should, thus, involve attention to the complexity of that past and an awareness that offering a narrative involves making judgments. Moreover, every appeal to tradition involves a narration of the very history to which appeal is being made. So we see that, for Williams, the life of the Christian community, and indeed of the tradition itself, parallels the

¹¹⁷ *Arius*, 237.

¹¹⁸ Williams explains that “what the articulation of doctrinal truth concretely *is* can be traced only through the detailed re-working and reimagining of its formative conflicts” (*Arius*, 25). For an astute application of the insight that orthodoxy is always in the making, see David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), viii.

¹¹⁹ *Arius*, 25 (see also 233–245). On this point, see also: *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 85–104; and Michel Barnes, “The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon,” in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London: Routledge, 1998), 47–67.

Christian self in the ambiguity and provisionality of its interpretation. In spite of the ambiguity involved for both self and tradition, however, articulating a narrative is a necessary part of the process of construction of the very tradition it attempts to narrate. All attempts at narration must also bear in mind their inherent *provisionality*: like the self, the tradition achieves wholeness only in God. Conversation with the past is not the only avenue for developing the story, however. As much as Christian identity concerns continuity with the past, it also involves distinction in the present. It is to these marks I now turn.

Reading the Present: The Conversation with the Secular¹²⁰

For Williams, the construction of Christian distinctiveness involves a complex interchange between the “Christian” and the “secular.” Christian identity is thus defined with respect to the secular as much as it is defined with respect to the Christian past. Williams’ understanding of the relationship between Christian and secular, as I have suggested, does not regard the secular as simply anti-Christian.¹²¹ Instead, the “secular” becomes not merely a conversation partner, but plays an indispensable role in the construction of Christian identity.

¹²⁰ There are three key partners in this conversation as Williams pursues it: Gillian Rose (reading Hegel), postmodern philosophy (especially postmodern readings of Hegel), and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Each of them provides something of the method/content of the conversation with the secular.

¹²¹ Here I should note the cultural context is different: Britain is a more secularized society than the United States. Also, the definition of Christian identity with respect to the “secular” is more precise than the “world,” because the means by which Christianity is distinguished from a culture that is “secular” is not the same as the means by which Christianity is distinguished from other religions. Here my concern is not with the question of Christian self-definition with respect to Judaism, Islam, or any other major religion of the world, but with a culture that is increasingly tolerant of all religious traditions and beholden to none. In fact, it might very well be the case that Islam and Christianity relate similarly to the secular, in spite of a relationship between the two religious traditions that tends toward the hostile.

As with the self, Williams regards what is “other” in relationship to Christian community or tradition as in some way constitutive of Christian identity.¹²² Williams suggests that Jesus (as the completely absent, risen Lord) “compels us to a self-forgetful ‘attention’ to all strangers and dialogue partners.” To allow for the strangeness of the other without rejecting him or her is, for Williams, “part of our encounter with the risen Lord.”¹²³ Relationship to the world is essential to the practice of Christianity itself, and to grasping (insofar as we are able) the identity and unity of Christian truth. Reading Luther, Williams observes that “Christianity . . . is not a moral code, but the gift to humanity of a wholly transformed life.”¹²⁴ Such, Williams suggests, is the Christian’s part in the conversation: the display of a new way of life.¹²⁵

While self-(re)description is not the heart of the transformed life, telling the story of that transformation can often be a part of the process. Moreover, the journey of transformation changes the angle of vision on one’s memories and present experience, such that reinterpretation is inevitable. In fact, Williams observes that one makes these kinds of judgments as a matter of course. In doing so, however, one must acknowledge “the risky and ‘violent’ nature of the judgements s/he cannot but make, staking a position that necessarily involves claiming something over against an other, while remembering that the other still imperiously requires to be understood, to be *thought*.”¹²⁶ The risk involved in judgment

¹²² As the self also is constituted partly by the “other.” Here Williams overlaps with Kathryn Tanner, as this idea is integral to the argument of *Theories of Culture*. See chapter 1.

¹²³ *Resurrection*, 90. See also “The Judgement of the World,” where Williams describes the way in which the “conversation” with the world happens, where and how this engagement takes place, and the uncertainty of the result.

¹²⁴ *The Wound of Knowledge*, 158.

¹²⁵ See “The Unity of Christian Truth”: “The vision of unity [of Christian discourse] . . . is more likely to emerge by way of newly critical and constructive reading of Scripture . . . And it is also more likely to emerge by way of the demanding and sometimes alarming conversations that must be pursued in our society about what human beings and societies may hope for . . .” (28).

¹²⁶ “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 13.

shapes Christian thought's engagement with the secular world, and gives it its provisional character. The discomfort provisionality involves often takes the form of speechlessness: the Christian faced with a moment in which judgment appears necessary may find that she does not know what to say. In such situations, the desire to control appears as the need for confident knowledge, or a solution to a problem. But Williams insists that the key to appropriate engagement is knowing how and "when to be silent, when to wait."¹²⁷

Williams' discussion of engagement points to the connection between personal identity and the identity of one's community or tradition: such communication requires mutual intelligibility. Yet all such engagement happens in the precarious place "between the ineffability of the (quasi-)sacred and the reflexivity of something that can be conscripted onto the projects of the interpreter."¹²⁸ Every attempt at interpretation is vulnerable to misunderstanding and misuse: the projects – which are, as I suggested above, at one with the *desire* – of the interpreter can inhibit the kind of patient listening Williams sees as necessary for conversation. The risk involved is common to any effort at communication. On Williams' view, the means for resolving breakdowns in communication is often a "critique of both prior standpoints."¹²⁹ If an interpretation (judgment, ethical stance) is unintelligible, that is, examining the assumptions of speaker and hearer is frequently necessary. Williams' description of the resolution of problems in communication points toward what has elsewhere been termed "charitable reading."¹³⁰ A real conversation with the secular requires listening – and not just a tolerant waiting-to-speak, but a form of listening that includes the willingness to have one's

¹²⁷ "The Judgement of the World," 39.

¹²⁸ "Between Politics and Metaphysics," 7.

¹²⁹ Cf. Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*. Although the view of standpoint Ward assumes there echoes Williams' use, Ward does not mention Williams.

¹³⁰ *Engaging Scripture*, 86–96. See also Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 183–199.

assumptions threatened.¹³¹ I say “threatened” because one’s assumptions or beliefs are not simply overcome by a new perspective, such as that of modern, rationalist philosophy or historical-critical method. Charitable listening involves receptivity and risk, not capitulation.

That Williams finds some of the most fruitful ground for conversation in literary tragedy is thus not surprising. Given his understanding of loss as central to the transformation of desire at the heart of the Christian life, we would expect Williams to see in the tragic an invitation to conversation.¹³² Tragedy is an important resource for conversation with the secular world because in the display of the tragic in literary form the world acknowledges the inescapability of suffering in human life. Quoting playwright Harold Barker, Williams describes the value of tragedy in a situation of “false and would-be painless consciousness”: “the complexity of tragedy becomes a source of resistance.”¹³³ Tragedy provides an alternative to the too-easy comfort of the romantic comedy, reminding us that, in a fallen world, stories do not always have happy endings. The complexity and insecurity of human lives is reflected in tragedy,

¹³¹ This is Williams’ reading of Derrida reading Hegel. Mistaking the sacred for the void, or vice versa, is a dangerous business because of the depoliticization of aesthetics that it makes possible. Yet there is something to be learned here: the moment of negation is a necessary one as well; “as it appears in the cross, [it] is the destruction of human valuation, and so the collapse of communicative practices itself” (“Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” in *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. Phillipa Berry and Andrew Werrick (London: Routledge, 1992), 78. The problem with the negative as it is played out in readers of Hegel like Derrida is that to stop at that moment is to stop at the crucifixion. As Williams points out, the moment of negation cannot be the final moment if the process of human conversation is to continue. Thinking through the negative is necessary to the continuation of communication. Just because we cannot grasp the resolution does not mean that there is no resolution; just because we cannot see the sacred because of or beyond the void does not mean it does not exist. Moreover, it does not mean we ought not *try* to think it (78–79).

¹³² Williams sees in literature generally an opportunity for conversation with the world. He finds in T. S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*, for example, “a very deep valuation of the self in time, an incarnational picture, with all the ambivalence that incarnation entails” (“Living the Questions,” 29). This is a recurring theme in Williams’ theology, and shapes his approach to theological questions.

¹³³ “Trinity and Ontology,” in *On Christian Theology*, 165–166.

and we are pointed in the direction of a need for redemption. Life itself is a drama in which God plays the hero: the stories of our lives are not ultimately ours to tell.¹³⁴ And in the final redemption the hero of the story transfigures but does not erase the past with all its loose ends of pain and disappointment.¹³⁵

Williams' view of the dramatic as an invaluable resource for theology finds its paradigmatic example in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. For Williams, Balthasar is exemplary because of "the way that form and content go together in [his] theology."¹³⁶ Drama is the appropriate form for exploring the question of how God will gather God's free creatures into *divine* freedom. How can God take in all the consequences of creaturely freedom and still remain God? "The resolution," Williams suggests, "can only be in terms of drama, dialogue, enacted in the singularities and risks of our own history, speaking of us to a God who is dialogue in [God's] very being."¹³⁷ How the dramatic and the emphasis on human freedom fit together is worth exploring, because some of the most penetrating insights that form Williams' theological style come from his reading of these themes in Balthasar. The drama plays out in such a way that the only way to get into the story is to give one's full attention to the particulars – the "singularities" that make up the plot with all its twists and turns.

For Balthasar, "Christ remains a question to all human answers, and to all attempts at metaphysical or theological closure."¹³⁸ That is, there is no possibility of penetrating the "surface" of history: the character of the story overall and its end is known only in faith.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ See, for example, "Beginning with the Incarnation," in *On Christian Theology*, 89: our "dramatic" is "caught up in the paschal parable." For Williams, this is the basis of dogma; *this* is what it means to begin with the incarnation.

¹³⁵ Williams observes that "grace will remake, but will not undo" (*Resurrection*, 89).

¹³⁶ "Time and Transformation," 296.

¹³⁷ "Balthasar and Rahner," 32.

¹³⁸ "Balthasar and Rahner," 34.

¹³⁹ We belong in the drama first as spectators of the Son and the Spirit; when we act, we act in them, having been drawn into the drama by them. The nuance of Balthasar's account of participation is a topic to which I will again make reference in chapter 3.

Because the transfiguration of history has not yet happened, we must meet God in the particulars of the world as it is. Balthasar sees clearly that there are no limits to human freedom, and also sees the complexity that involves for living as Christians in the world.¹⁴⁰ Thus he

is never a conventional apologist; he is more interested in uncovering the kind of analogy or juxtaposition of Christian and non-Christian world that can fuse both in a transfiguring perception – a perception of the God who is able to be present, to be real, in all those places where he seems most signally absent. Such is the God who is with us as Jesus, crucified and descending into Hell.¹⁴¹

Like the self and the past, the “world” is ambiguous. The way forward, then, is one that accepts the riskiness of all human judgments of the world.

The concept that characterizes human being in the world most accurately for Balthasar, on Williams’ reading, is *contingency*. The non-necessity of human beings is the flip side of freedom. Yet the contingency of human beings also invests the drama unfolding in the life of the world with a new kind of significance, in the form of a new way of thinking about being. Williams reads Balthasar as indicating that “‘being’ is apprehended primarily in the endless variety of particular forms, and it is only by attending to the fact of this *variety* that being may be comprehended as gratuitously creative – and thus as concrete fullness.”¹⁴² Thus Williams understands the proper form of Christian attention to the world to be one of humility and patience. In the face of such complexity, “the concrete plurality of human life, from conception to death, demands an unqualified, attentive and hopeful contemplation and a response of nurture and love.”¹⁴³ Christian practice is identified by the marks of this contemplation, of taking time and making sense.

For Williams, as we have seen, Christian identity is always an interpretation, one that takes the form of “ritually offered and

¹⁴⁰ “Balthasar and Rahner,” 33.

¹⁴¹ Foreword to *The Mysteries of March: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Incarnation and Easter*, by John Saward (London: Collins, 1990), ix.

¹⁴² “Balthasar and Rahner,” 20.

¹⁴³ “Afterword: Making Differences,” 179.

accepted transformations of narrative material.”¹⁴⁴ This interpretation is a performance in the sense that analysis is performance; it is inherently provisional; it depends at times on “ignoring difference and uncontrollable converse”;¹⁴⁵ it is always *ad hoc*; and it emerges in conversation. That we are *together* engaged in conversation with the secular and conversation with the past means we cannot ever possess the criterion for judging the “truth,” or for distinguishing “truth” from “error” once-and-for-all. No formula for interpretation can guarantee its accuracy.¹⁴⁶ As a result, Williams recommends an attitude of listening and waiting as the prerequisite for a process of careful discernment and provisional judgments. “Making sense” delivers an interpretation, which is offered and accepted (or not) and does not necessarily preclude further interpretations. Making sense and taking time are thus also facets of his theological method. He explains that “theology . . . is language used by a specific group of people to make sense of their world; not so much to explain it as to find words that will hold or reflect what is in the environment is sensed to be solid, authoritative and creative of where we stand.”¹⁴⁷

I have shown that Williams’ themes of taking time and making sense point to an account of Christian identity that is complex and fluid, developed in constant conversation with the Christian past and with the plural contexts in which Christians find themselves. At various points in the discussion I have further suggested that these themes point to skills or habits of living that are conducive to the sorts of conversations Williams sees as central to the development of Christian selfhood. At the same time, I have pointed to gaps in Williams’ account with respect to the ways in which such habits might be developed, and the persistence of sin as an obstacle to developing these habits.¹⁴⁸ In the final section of the chapter, I

¹⁴⁴ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 39.

¹⁴⁵ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 40.

¹⁴⁶ “The Suspicion of Suspicion,” 39–40.

¹⁴⁷ “Time and Transformation,” 296. I return to the ways in which these themes shape Williams’ theological method below.

¹⁴⁸ I consider these habits and the deleterious effects of sin in more detail in “‘Taking time’ and ‘Making Sense’: Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, forthcoming.

examine one text in which Williams himself displays the habits proper to Christian identity as he has described it.

Lessons from the Archbishop

In his essay “The Body’s Grace,” Williams engages the tradition and the secular world in an effort to describe, in the face of a challenge to Christian identity, how we might move forward faithfully.¹⁴⁹ The ambiguity of the self and of our reading of Scripture and tradition means, for Williams, that all our narratives are constructed without guarantees: neither our selves nor Christian tradition are complete or transparent to us. As such, the basic shape of the Christian life as it is displayed is an outline only, rather than a final and complete form. Christians individually and corporately trace in speech and action the figure of Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord whom we follow: “Freedom in the Spirit is uncircumscribed; and yet it always has the shape of Jesus the Son.”¹⁵⁰ I suggest that we can take from Williams certain principles for constructive theology in conscious continuity with tradition. At the same time, I will show that the difficulties with his account, many of which I have mentioned at various points earlier in the chapter, persist.

I have identified two principles central to Williams’ mode of conversation with the Christian past and the secular world. The first is the principle of ambiguity. As I have suggested above, there is an irreducible ambiguity in all our conversations, whether with texts or persons. The second, not surprisingly, is the principle of provisionality. The interpretations we give at any moment are never

¹⁴⁹ It should be noted that although the essay dates from 1989, it continues to be read and discussed, and so contributes to current discussion of sexual ethics and the Anglican position on homosexual relationships. The Wikipedia entry for Rowan Williams leads with the essay, and it has been mentioned, reproduced, and cited continuously over the past 23 years. For two recent examples, see <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/08/24/3301238.htm> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/mar/16/rowan-williams-church-england-archbishop>.

¹⁵⁰ “Word and Spirit,” in *On Christian Theology*, 126. See also “Beginning with the Incarnation,” in *On Christian Theology*, 83.

final: we acknowledge our finitude and that the final judgment belongs to the one who is the author and perfecter of our faith. That does not mean that our judgments are indefensible. Just the opposite is true: provisional judgments are made on the basis of careful reflection and on the clearest possible discernment.

Williams employs both of these principles in "The Body's Grace," in which he offers a reading of and response to the difficult questions raised in the Anglican Church regarding homosexuality. Williams takes the uproar about same-sex unions as a pointer to a certain ambiguity, discomfort, or hesitation about non-procreative sex. "If we can set the movement of sexual desire within this larger purpose, we can perhaps more easily accommodate the embarrassment and insecurity of desire: it's all for a good cause, and a good cause that can be visibly and plainly evaluated in its usefulness and success."¹⁵¹ In "The Body's Grace" Williams explores the significance of human sexuality as an arena in which we may discover "that God desires us *as if we were God*." We may know that God loves us, but to discover that God desires us, Williams reasons, is to experience that love in a new way. What is required for this ideal transaction to take place is, not surprisingly, taking time. Sexual intimacy offers perhaps the signal example of an arena in which there is no substitute for taking time. Taking time is necessary for the discovery of joy and the development "of a pattern of living in which that joy is accessible": vulnerability over time provides the opportunity to "discover the body's grace" and to recognize together that we who are involved in sexual relationships "are not simply passive instruments to each other."¹⁵²

As I suggested earlier, the perfection of desire comes when the desired appears to us as a subject in his or her own right, on whose desire we in turn wait. Distorted sexuality perfectly parallels the course of misdirected desire. The endeavor to control the object of one's desire, to secure one's fulfillment without dependence "is the effort to bring my happiness under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person's perception." Misdirected desire turns us away from the goal of desiring. It closes us to the

¹⁵¹ "The Body's Grace," 66.

¹⁵² "The Body's Grace," 63.

possibility of being recreated by the reception of and participation in God that is the goal of our being. Building a theology of sexuality that takes seriously the importance of sexual desire in human life *takes time* as well. Williams reflects that it is time to do precisely this, to give time to the deep consideration of a theology and ethics of sexual desire and delight that attends to the full range of metaphors and narrative in the Bible, and avoids the pitfalls of depending on two or three “proof” texts. A theology of the body’s grace takes time in being developed and elaborated; and such a theology ought not to remain on the margins but is tied to the central tenets of our faith – God, Christology, creation, and redemption.¹⁵³

For Williams, sexuality can, if the risk involved is accepted, serve as “the entry into a collaborative way of making sense of our whole material selves.”¹⁵⁴ This is, of course, a difficult and complex encounter, as making sense is more generally in Williams’ theology. It makes one vulnerable to the pain of rejection or of having a negative perception of oneself offered back. Sexual distortion, as an example of distortion more generally in human life, “is a paradigm of how not to make sense in its retreat from the uncomfortable knowledge that I cannot make sense of myself without others, cannot love myself without being the object of love or enjoy myself without being the cause of joy.”¹⁵⁵ What is true in the realm of biblical or traditional texts, or in the engagement with the world as one tries to make sense is also true in the arena of sexuality: set standards are of limited usefulness. Williams suggests that standards (even a permissive rule like “what gives pleasure and does no damage”) do not help us to uncover the meaning of sexuality. All such methods of determining appropriate sexual practice by regulation seek to eliminate risk. That risk is the reality that in honest sexual encounters comes “the dangerous acknowledgement that my joy depends on someone else’s, as theirs does on mine.”¹⁵⁶

Here again we see the themes of Williams’ account of self-identity and of Christian identity come to the surface. To think

¹⁵³ “The Body’s Grace,” 68.

¹⁵⁴ “The Body’s Grace,” 62.

¹⁵⁵ “The Body’s Grace,” 64.

¹⁵⁶ “The Body’s Grace,” 62.

about sexuality, to consider fully its implications, forces us to recognize that the boundaries between “inner” and “outer” are constructed. We grasp our identity only in relationship: “we belong with and to each other, not to our ‘private’ selves.”¹⁵⁷ Thus also Christian identity is not constructed solely on the basis of what is “inside”: the contemporary definition of Christian faith belongs in conversation with the Christian past, and with the secular world that constantly challenges it. Williams displays Christian identity on three levels in his discussion of sexuality. As a theologian, as Archbishop, and as an individual Christian, Williams demonstrates the way in which provisionality and ambiguity shape one’s approach to questions about the nature of faithful discipleship. He advises and also exemplifies the kind of patient humility that funds the work of taking time and making sense. As a theologian he is careful in his construction of Christian continuity and distinctiveness in the midst of a debate in which for many the very heart of what Christian practice involves is at stake. Williams brings the principles of ambiguity and provisionality into his discussion of sexuality, and so also the need for taking time and making sense, showing that the characteristics appropriate for interpersonal relationships resemble the most fruitful engagement with one’s own tradition, its history, and competing traditions. Christianity, for Williams, is a way of living that follows the example of Christ in humility, in expectation of grace and redemption, and can only be practiced in community. What makes for good Christian practice in churches makes for good theological method and vice versa.

“The Body’s Grace” is important here not as much for what it says, but for its display of Williams’ approach to the questions involved. The themes of his theological method are all here – taking time, making sense, the importance of dialogue and of resisting the foreclosure of that dialogue by preformed judgments, and the centrality of desire. So also in Williams’ constructive work we find the willingness to take time and to refuse explanation in favor of conversation and making sense.

Still, there are questions about the construction of this form of identity. Williams’ account lacks a full account of the dimension of self that he himself refers to as “soul.” While it seems clear that

¹⁵⁷ “The Body’s Grace,” 64.

Williams is in favor of a recovery of the soul, it is not so clear how that might happen or what it might entail. At the same time, a thorough treatment of the persistent obstacle to such a recovery is lacking: Williams gives insufficient attention to sin. Finally, while the account of Christian identity that Williams presents throughout his work is appealing, there is much left unsaid about the development of Christians whose sense of identity matches that which Williams displays. Williams' account of Christian identity leaves space for an account of Christian formation that would include the development of a sense of soul and of habits of living that counter the effects of sin. In the next chapter, I look to the theology of John Milbank, who shares some of Williams' basic theological instincts, and also help us to see more clearly what more is needed in order to complete an account of Christian formation that takes seriously the two conversation partners Williams identifies. In the final chapters of the book I draw my three modern interlocutors into conversation with Gregory of Nyssa to suggest ways in which the gaps I have identified might begin to be filled.

“It is no longer I who live” Receiving the Identity of Christ

In “The Force of Identity” John Milbank writes that “in receiving we actively *become* what we receive: the triune God.”¹ Whereas for Kathryn Tanner the continuity of Christian discipleship is found in the ongoing conversation about what true discipleship entails, and for Rowan Williams it is found in conversation with the past and continual recourse to the gospel as it comes to us in Scripture and tradition, John Milbank combines these two with greater attention to the God-giveness of Christian identity. The continuity of Christian identity *is* in disciples of Jesus making disciples and at the same time it is in the identity of the Spirit making all those disciples into the body of Christ. Christians’ identity cannot be understood, for Milbank, apart from the ontological. That does not mean, however, that he ignores the process of “disciples making disciples.” The distinctive flavor of Milbank’s account of Christian identity arises from the synthesis of his readings of Scripture and historical theology with his sources in philosophy and cultural theory.

In his appeal to cultural theory, Milbank assumes the notion central to Tanner’s account of Christian identity and implicit in that

¹ *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 204.

of Rowan Williams, that Christian practices or experiences cannot be considered in isolation. Individual beliefs, practices, or experiences only have Christian meaning in relation to the whole “cultural practice.” But Milbank draws a different conclusion regarding the theological enterprise in light of this notion: “theology has to reconceive itself as . . . the explication of a socio-linguistic practice or as the constant re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed.” Like Tanner, Milbank draws on postmodern cultural theorists and indeed suggests that the object is to construct a properly postmodern theology – an aim he sees Lindbeck (in particular) as having failed to achieve. He explains that

a postmodern theology has to understand that both the objects of Christian faith – insofar as they are imaged, and articulated – and the modes of Christian experience, are derived from a particular cultural practice which projects objects and positions subjects in a conjoint operation, relating the one set to the others.²

Milbank aims to cast off the residue of modern philosophy and cultural theory that clings to Lindbeck’s account of Christian identity (and those like it). Like Kathryn Tanner, Milbank employs postmodern culture theory in his constructive theology. But his integration of those insights into his work is less sanguine and more nuanced than Tanner’s.³ Milbank sketches a theology that he sees as cut loose from the modern assumptions that have plagued theology since Kant. Milbank’s refusal of Kantian epistemology shapes his theological method, for instance in his articulation of an ontology. If there is a downside to Milbank’s rejection of Kant, it is that whereas Kant’s epistemology involved some very definite limitations on the possibilities for knowledge of God (that is: there is no such possibility) it sometimes seems as if Milbank grants human beings too-easy knowledge of God. Milbank’s understanding of

² *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 380.

³ See, for example, *Theology and Social Theory*, 302–321 and “The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 84–120.

Christian life is at once thoroughly postmodern – in Milbank's sense of the term – and naïve about the possibilities for Christian practice this side of heaven. This aspect of Milbank's theological epistemology in particular marks his departure from that of Rowan Williams.

In the first two chapters I examined two approaches to the question of what constitutes Christian identity. I argued that Kathryn Tanner and Rowan Williams have suggested compelling answers to that question. Their accounts of Christian identity are flexible enough to cover a variety of Christian traditions of faith and practice, both throughout history and around the world. Both focus on the imitation of Christ, or the way of discipleship, as the heart of Christian faith and practice: Christian identity is a journey rather than a destination. I criticized their accounts, however, for lacking critical reflection on the nature of formation for that journey and on that journey. Discussion of formation would complete their accounts of Christian identity by making more concrete the goal toward which disciples press, as well as discussing the key obstacle they encounter along the way, sin.

In this chapter I examine Milbank's constructive theology, and ask whether he addresses more fully the problems I have identified so far. I consider three themes in his theology, which together constitute his account of Christian life: the ontology of peace, participation, and active reception. I will show that although Milbank does not provide an account of formation, his complex account of the nature of Christian life hints at what an account of formation might require. Milbank draws on Gregory of Nyssa to develop his account of Christian life, which synthesizes postmodern philosophy and cultural theory with the themes of Gregory's theology.⁴ Milbank's account of Christian life gestures toward the necessity of formation Gregory's theology assumes, in accordance with the late ancient and medieval supposition that formation is essential for anyone embarking on a Christian way of life. But Milbank stops

⁴ One example of the inner workings of Milbank's account of Christian life is the use he makes of *habitus*, which he uses as a Thomistic term rather than Bourdieu's term. See "A Christological Poetics," in *The Word Made Strange*, 124.

short of the realization that an account of Christian formation must also accompany his own account of Christian life.⁵

What Makes Theology Postmodern?

Milbank describes the work of the would-be postmodern theologian as consisting in a series of discrete but interrelated tasks. First, the theologian must “sketch out a ‘counter-history’ of ecclesial origination, which tells the story of all history from the point of view of this emergence.” Milbank imagines a narrative with a much wider scope than the biblical narrative; I discuss this aspect of the theological task at length below. Second, the theologian “must describe the ‘counter-ethics,’ or the different practice, which emerges.” That is, some account of distinctively Christian practice must be given. Third, the theologian must “articulate a counter-ontology.” I will discuss Milbank’s version of a counter-ontology in detail below. Fourth, the theologian must “engage in ‘ecclesial self-critique,’ that is, reflect on the ‘fate of the counter-kingdom’ or on how, for the most part, the Church failed to bring about salvation.”⁶

⁵ Milbank’s account of agency, which is implied in his account of active reception, is quite different from Tanner’s – and yet not unproblematic. It is more nuanced, more consistent with Christian tradition, and probably *more* problematic than Tanner’s. Milbank’s difficulty is not so much that he depends too much on human agency – he certainly does not! Rather, the difficulty is that although he has developed a really interesting, provocative, and doctrinally sound account of what human beings do in being Christians (i.e., depend on the Spirit to do through them), he has not given us much to go on when it comes to figuring out how they do it. That is, to say that Christians’ agency – creative power is perhaps a better term for this concept in Milbank’s theology – derives from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and from (simultaneously) their participation in the divine life is to give a very good answer to what performing Christianity *is*. But it is to make *more* difficult any account of how they do it. The mechanics of participation and inspiration are beyond our ken – like the mechanics of the incarnation or the three-in-oneness of the trinity. How do we learn to be inspired? It is not something that we can practice so much as something we have to learn to be open to – and that is the sort of thing learned best through repeated and imitative behavior.

⁶ *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

Milbank offers George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* as an example of how not to do "counter-history." He seems to echo Tanner's criticism of Lindbeck, judging as mistaken the notion that "apparent divergences among Christians can often be exposed as mere over-estimations of the importance of conceptual articulation in different cultural settings."⁷ Milbank argues that the narrative and the conceptual articulation of the rules are not so easily distinguished; the articulation of the assumptions of the narrative as "rules" involves the use of whatever conceptual resources are available at the time and is thus bound to the language and concepts of the historical and cultural period in which it is formulated. The formulation itself becomes "an inescapable part of the Christian inheritance," and cannot simply be jettisoned as so much superfluous cargo.⁸ While Tanner argues that Lindbeck mistakenly assumes that changes in belief and practice are a result of "outside" influence, she does not seem to regard the doctrines themselves as indispensable. For Milbank, the history of the church's belief and practice tells a story of God and creation, which the theologian undertakes to discover and to articulate. Doctrines are the inevitable cultural product of this process.

Second, Milbank criticizes Lindbeck for having "artificially isolated the Christian narrative from its historical genesis."⁹ Although Tanner and Milbank both criticize Lindbeck's ahistoricism, Milbank takes the criticism a step further. Whereas Tanner's strongest criticism of postliberalism according to Lindbeck is her attack on modern culture theory as the basis for Lindbeck's account of Christianity, Milbank criticizes Lindbeck's understanding of enculturation. For Milbank, history is essential: the only "content" of Christian faith is the inheritance of culturally instantiated narrative and speculation. Milbank suggests that Lindbeck's portrayal of the narrative as a paradigm allows it to be seen, falsely, "as over and done with, and easy to interpret." From Milbank's perspective, the narrative that Lindbeck presents as paradigmatic and final is in fact the *beginning* of a narrative.¹⁰ Although salvation is accomplished in

⁷ *Theology and Social Theory*, 386.

⁸ *Theology and Social Theory*, 385.

⁹ *Theology and Social Theory*, 386.

¹⁰ "The Name of Jesus," in *The Word Made Strange*, 150.

Christ's death and resurrection, salvation history continues through the church, the body of Christ, in the power of the Spirit. The significance of the various aspects of the story, and indeed the understanding of salvation, come to light in the history of the church. For this reason, the "historical genesis" of the narrative, the original story of Jesus, cannot be separated from the intervening years of Christian thought and practice. As Milbank explains, "we do not relate to the story of Christ by schematically applying its categories to the empirical content of whatever we encounter. Instead, we interpret this narrative in a response which inserts us in a narrative relation to the original story."¹¹ Milbank understands this interpretation as an *imaginative* work. In order to respond appropriately, we must see the narrative as in some sense our story. Thus the narrative comes to include the intervening years and the people and events that connect us to the "original" story.

Finally, in Milbank's understanding of the relationship between doctrine and narrative, propositions are inescapable – but for a different reason than Lindbeck might give. Milbank argues that the propositional element arises out of a sense of ambiguity rather than clarity about the implications of the narrative:¹²

since doctrine arises out of interpretative undecidability, doctrinal issues cannot be settled simply by recourse to a more exact reading of preceding practices and narratives . . . doctrine represents a kind of "speculative moment" that cannot be reduced to the heuristic protection of narrative (in the sense of merely safeguarding what is properly implicit in the narrative).¹³

The narrative does not contain ideas that must simply be elaborated on the basis of the text; it invites speculation. Thus, although he can agree with Lindbeck's vision of narrative as "that alone which can 'identify' God for us," Milbank sees narrative as more complex than Lindbeck, and its meaning as far from obvious.

¹¹ *Theology and Social Theory*, 387.

¹² Tanner's position on tradition and doctrine implies that she would more readily institutionalize the ambiguity or undecidability Milbank identifies as the context for the emergence of doctrine than allow the uncertainty to be "resolved" by doctrine.

¹³ *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.

Not only is Milbank critical of Lindbeck's proposal, like Tanner and Williams, he is critical of the most basic assumptions of post-liberal theology.¹⁴ One example of the distinctiveness of Milbank's critique is the difference between his view and Tanner's view of Lindbeck's ahistoricism, to which I have referred above. Tanner and Milbank draw attention to different aspects of Lindbeck's proposal. For Tanner, the crux of the problem is that doctrines cannot be protected from outside influence; thus the suggestion that doctrines somehow continue unchanged over time is simply mistaken. Milbank, on the other hand, sees Lindbeck's ahistoricism as more profound. For Milbank, it is not just that doctrines are safeguarded from "extraneous accretions" over the course of history: the idea that the narrative itself is sufficient to produce those doctrines reflects a mistake about doctrine *and* about narrative.¹⁵

As we have seen, Milbank suggests that Lindbeck's treatment of the narrative as a paradigm is mistaken because the narrative is not a completed history. The narrative-as-paradigm view also mistakenly assumes a narrative that is the basis for speculation. Rather than being a story whose *implications* are the matter of speculation, the narrative itself – even in the New Testament – involves a number of speculative moments. Moreover, the "propositional" element that appears to emerge as the fruit of speculation

¹⁴ See, for example, Milbank's criticisms of Bruce Marshall, for example in *Truth in Aquinas*, with Catherine Pickstock (London: Routledge, 2001). Though Marshall develops certain postliberal ideas, giving them more content and precision, some of the basic instincts are yet present, and these Milbank rejects.

¹⁵ Like Tanner, Milbank assumes that constructive theology should be in continuity with Christian tradition (however that may be construed). There are two difficulties, however, with appeals to late ancient and medieval sources. First, one must decide which sources to engage. Second, and more importantly, one must face the ambiguity that is perhaps the only constant in reading such sources. Thus there is a sense in which – and I cannot plead immunity from it – the way modern theologians interpret and apply the insights of late ancient and medieval counterparts tells us more about ourselves than about those we read. Reading "traditional" Christian sources involves a number of *implicit* presuppositions, and the level of engagement with those sources is hard to gauge. There is no key to establishing the traditional status of a text, or to finding its "meaning." To appeal to historical Christian sources, therefore, is to wade into some very murky water indeed.

is always already present in the reading of the narrative. Thus Milbank insists that

while every dimension of religious practice, including the articulation of a theology, is fundamentally ‘performative’, it is also the case that no performance could be staged without the assumption (itself projected by a performance) of a historical and mythical scene within which the performance is set. A ‘propositional’ level, grounded not on intellectual ‘vision’, but in creative imagination, is therefore implicit even within a religious practice confined to worship and the recitation of stories.¹⁶

The narrative, Milbank insists, is never without its setting; therefore the narrative always involves speculation.¹⁷

One of the central features that distinguishes Milbank’s theology from Tanner’s is the character and importance of his ecclesiology. For Tanner, it appears almost as though Christians could get along without the church. But Milbank sees the construction of an account of the church and the church’s role as the site of the ongoing work of Christ as the primary occupation of the theologian.¹⁸ In order to engage in this work, the theologian needs skills in discernment, so she can trace the connections between the story of the church and Christian beliefs about the work of God in the world. The church occupies this indispensable place in Milbank’s theology because it *is* the body of Christ. Reflection on Christian identity cannot be severed from reflection on the church, because Christians “put on Christ” by being incorporated into Christ’s body. Milbank’s understanding of the performance of Christian identity as living out of the reality that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2: 20) rests on the substructure of his theology, to which I now turn.

¹⁶ *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.

¹⁷ The speculative moments in the New Testament are represented in statements about the cosmic significance of Christ, such as the prologue to John’s Gospel or Colossians 1.

¹⁸ To be fair, Milbank does not communicate this very successfully. See, for example, the introduction to *The Word Made Strange*, in which Milbank laments the theologian’s feeling “almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on his own head” (1).

Milbank's Account of Christian Life: The Ontology of Peace and Active Reception

I have divided my discussion of Milbank's account of active reception into three parts. First, I consider the ontology of peace, which encompasses Milbank's doctrine of God and his cosmology. Second, I examine his notion of participation, which is also the foundation of his account of Christian life. These two discussions form the basis for the third section, my description of the heart of Milbank's account of Christian living: active reception. For Milbank, living Christianly means living by participation in God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. One concept that links ontology, participation, and active reception in Milbank's theology is *poesis*. I touch on *poesis* in the first two sections and describe it in more detail in the context of active reception.

The ontology of peace

Although the ontological peace at the heart of Milbank's theology is the substructure that supports and gives shapes to the rest, it is not visible except *through* the ethics (especially) which hang on it.¹⁹ Once perceived, however, through the ethics that begin with Jesus, the counter-ontology becomes the lens through which we perceive the world, and according to which we tell the counter-history and perform the counter-ethics. In its light also the failures of the church in pursuit of the counter-kingdom appear. As we develop the capacity to imagine the world as it is from God and in God and returning to God, we discover the primary mode of Christian action: forgiveness. For Milbank, forgiveness instantiates ontological peace.²⁰ Thus even in *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank

¹⁹ In his articulation of a postmodern theology in *Theology and Social Theory* this counter-ontology is preceded by both the counter-history and the counter-ethics. Likewise, in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), Milbank begins from the fallen world, from the violence of the world in which we live, not from the ontological priority of peace.

²⁰ See *Being Reconciled*, 57.

points toward the link between “ontology and pardon” that is the focus of *Being Reconciled*.

The ontology of peace shapes our imagination of reality: how we perceive the everyday is inseparable from the way we imagine the foundation and *telos* of the world. Thus the “readings” of our world that we offer in all our speaking and acting cannot be isolated from the ontological priority we assume – peace or violence. This implies, first, that the formation of our imagination (especially our memory) and of our practice must go together.²¹ Second, the reality that we imagine (and we imagine it because we cannot know it, yet this does not mean it is false) is also the reality of which we are part. Perceiving the ontological priority of peace also involves us in the project of reimagining our own place in the universe and also developing appropriate responses within it. Obviously this is not a linear, two-step process: practices shape habits of perception. Third, the concrete link between what we imagine and our participation in it is *poesis*. *Poesis* is the work of (re)narrating and constructing the counter-history and in so doing performing the counter-ethics and thereby instantiating the counter-ontology. It is not simply that each performance is an interpretation but that the habituated thought and action comprising ordinary life also constitutes an interpretation of ultimate reality. The work of storytelling, on this view of *poesis*, is the work of conforming our lives to the image of God. This is what it means for Milbank to say (as we will discuss at more length below) that the central work of Christian living is “the whole practical and ‘poetical’ activity of constructing the narrative” and living accordingly, following Christ’s example. Our efforts to live out the narrative we know through Scripture and tradition constitute an interpretation of the relation of creation to Creator.

The heart of Milbank’s counter-ethics is forgiveness, which is the earthly mirror of the divine creation *ex nihilo*. To forgive is to counter evil in a way that covers the lack it represents. For Milbank,

²¹ But the relationship between imagination and practice is complex. Although “decision will . . . always emerge from the sedimentation of character” (*Theology and Social Theory*, 413), *goodness* is not guaranteed by a properly formed character. Developed habits of perception and the concrete practices correspond (at least in an Aristotelian sense) to virtue, but God makes action-according-to-virtue *good*.

"forgiveness alone, a gratuitous self-offering beyond the demands of the law, reflects virtue . . . because virtue itself as charity is originally the gratuitous, creative positing of difference, and the offering to others of a space of freedom, which is existence."²² So it is that "a vision of ontological peaceableness" traces all our giving and for-giving to "a prior gift from an eternal source." It is manifestly impossible to imitate the creation from nothing of God, except by participation in that divine power. Participation thus finds its expression in the act of forgiveness, which is the perfection, it seems, of Charity.

Milbank's "vision of ontological peaceableness," grounds his particular view of participation, showcased in his appraisal of liberal moral theory and its corresponding ontology.²³ In "Can Morality Be Christian?" Milbank argues that the requirements of Kant's ethics point in the opposite direction from a truly Christian ethics. The centrality of duty in Kant's ethics makes virtue dependent on the existence of vice.²⁴ Virtue thus cooperates with rather than resists evil. Such an ontology cannot but represent evil as having a place alongside the good from the very beginning. So Milbank argues that the ontological foundation for modern morality is agonistic.

If there is to be such a thing as *Christian* virtue, Milbank argues that it must operate on the assumption of God's infinite grace. Instead of presupposing privation, scarcity, and the necessity of sacrifice as the context for moral practice, Christian practice operates on the assumption of plenitude. A Christian ethics must begin from

²² *Theology and Social Theory*, 416.

²³ *The Word Made Strange*, 219–232. Of course, Milbank's first discussion of this counter-ontology is in *Theology and Social Theory*, 422–432. Especially in "Can Morality Be Christian?" Milbank offers further reflection on and development of the ideas he presented in *Theology and Social Theory*. Set directly against the ontology Milbank sets out to overthrow, the ontology of peace becomes more concrete and (somewhat) easier to grasp.

²⁴ See also "A Critique of the Theology of Right," in *The Word Made Strange*, 12–13: "The noumenal 'genuineness' of the ethical is construable . . . in terms of *virtue* only in so far as human beings are engaged in a struggle with an originally perverse will which subordinates our noumenal to our phenomenal nature . . . it is not the case for Kant that human virtue serves to instantiate an unknown plenitude of good belonging to the *telos*."

the idea that “to act morally is to act out of God’s original intention of plenitude.”²⁵ A starting point in the world of limited goods always and only produces – on Milbank’s view – responses of self-sacrifice and fear. Scarcity produces attitudes and actions opposed to those demanded by the counter-ethics of Christian virtue: where evil has substance, good is always limited, and scarcity is a real threat. Reaction to evil asks for the extension of self to cover or counter wrongdoing; death itself – with which such attitudes comply – serves as the ultimate threat, and makes self-sacrifice possible.²⁶ So Milbank writes: “because life is in short supply, because it might run out on us sooner or later, we must invest, we must insure.”²⁷ As long as death marks the end of life, this is bound to be standard practice.

Against this vision of the world, Milbank sets an antidote: “Christians worship the one true God who originates all finite reality in an act of peaceful donation, willing a new fellowship with himself and amongst the beings he has created.”²⁸ Quoting Luther, he writes, “faith is the master workman and the motivating force behind the good work of generosity.” Milbank adds: “generosity . . . acts out of the assumption of plenitude, our confidence in God’s power.”²⁹ As we will see below, in examining Milbank’s account of active reception as the mode of Christian participation in the divine life, the foundation of plenitude is essential. The counter-ontology Milbank presents is inseparable from the counter-ethics it grounds.

The problem with an ethics that depends upon conflict for the exercise of virtue, from Milbank’s Christian perspective, is that it assumes a world without resurrection. The resurrection is essential for Milbank because it alone can reverse death. The centrality of the notion of self-sacrifice in ethics reflects an absence of hope in the resurrection: without resurrection, the ultimate self-giving is a giving unto death. Like forgiveness, resurrection counters evil by

²⁵ “Can Morality Be Christian?” 229.

²⁶ See also “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” *First Things* (March 1999), 33–38.

²⁷ “Can Morality Be Christian?” 224–225.

²⁸ *Theology and Social Theory*, 391.

²⁹ “Can Morality Be Christian?” 225.

filling the lack it represents. Resurrection echoes the divine creation *ex nihilo*: as God created everything from nothing, so also God restores life lost. The promise of resurrection provides the basis for all human giving, because it offers the hope that even the ultimate "gift" one might give – the gift that corresponds to the "greatest love" we find in John's Gospel – life itself, is given by God and will be restored by God.

For Milbank, the ontological framework upon which the Christian life hangs in its entirety is an uninterrupted giving. God as the source of all things is gift and giving and also giving-back, and it is into this eternal exchange that Christians are welcomed as members of Christ's body. Only in this context, in which the Christian acts as part of Christ's body and out of the plenitude that is God's creative power, is morality properly Christian. "Virtue . . . as, especially, charity, is not merely perfection in us but a constant spilling over into the strengthening of others, after the pattern of the divine creative perfection itself."³⁰ Milbank further characterizes the central distinction of his theology and ethics conceived according to a trinitarian logic. Christian performance is a gift that comes from the infinite stores of divine love. Thus the principle of plenitude is the heart not only of Milbank's ontology of peace, but of his theology in general: God is eternal, infinite, and omnipresent. Everything that exists, exists in and through God. To say this, however, is to move into a discussion of Milbank's account of participation.

Participation

For Milbank, Christian existence is participation in the divine life. The goal of Christian life this side of the eschaton is to be and to know ourselves in God. It should be noted at the outset that in crafting his account of participation, Milbank draws on Plato and Aquinas. Although Plato and Aquinas occupy a more prominent place in his theology now than they did in *Theology and Social Theory*,

³⁰ "A Critique of the Theology of Right," 5.

there is continuity in the basic themes of Milbank's theology. I will show this continuity by juxtaposing an early essay³¹ with later writings in which he discusses participation more clearly. I suggest that Milbank's early thinking on the topic (as it is represented in *Theology and Social Theory* and some of the essays in *The Word Made Strange*) is consistent with that found in his later works. Most especially among his more recent works, Milbank's *Being Reconciled* shows the integral role of participation in his understanding of Christianity in general. I begin from Milbank's account of participation in "A Critique of the Theology of Right."

Milbank's account of the analogy of being gives us a way into his understanding of participation. For Milbank,

the site of theology is at one with a specifically Christian metaphysics (a 'metaphysics of faith', one might say, or 'theological ontology') . . . In this conception the *sensus eminentior* is given not just through the dynamic of individual *praxis*, but through the whole practical and 'poetical' activity of constructing the narrative, projecting forwards the divine horizon, and living out this plot – always supposing that it has been formed in a finally exemplary way by Jesus Christ. Ecclesiological mediation might then finally allow the *analogia entis* and the *analogia Christi* to come together.³²

In this dense paragraph Milbank hints at the connection between the doctrine of *analogia entis* and the practice of the Christian life as participation in God. As we shall see, the activity Milbank here describes as "poetical" is made possible by the divine creative power acting in all such *poesis*. For Milbank, the *analogia entis*, as it is found first in Plato and then in Aquinas (especially as interpreted by Erich Przywara), serves as the foundation for all our knowledge of God

³¹ "A Critique of the Theology of Right" was originally published as "'Between purgation and illumination': A Critique of the Theology of Right," in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon*, ed. Kenneth Surin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161–196.

³² "A Critique of the Theology of Right," 29.

and our very being as humans created in God's image.³³ The key to understanding what Milbank believes the *analogia entis* offers us is his use of the term *sensus eminentior*. *Sensus eminentior* is a mode of knowing that gives humans whatever knowledge we may obtain of the Creator. It asserts that we know God by sharing in God's perfections. Those perfections – such as goodness, justice, or wisdom – are also present in creation, which is our first source of knowledge of them. We understand them to be said of God in a more perfect way, which exceeds our comprehension.³⁴

The *analogia entis* primarily enables us to predicate certain qualities of God. Secondly the *analogia entis* enables us to see that we cannot grasp the extent to which God's existence as those qualities transcends their created instantiations. What we know of goodness on earth, for example, lets us know that God is good, but does not enable us to say *how* God's goodness exceeds ours. Milbank's final move here, the mention of the *analogia Christi*, serves to connect ontology with Christology. It is through our likeness to Christ, effected by our participation in Christ through his body the church, that we come to understand how creation leads us to knowledge of God. The *analogia entis*, thus, is never without the *analogia Christi*.

Our participation in God is, moreover, the source of the "practical and 'poetical' activity of constructing the narrative." Participation is the means by which we know God, and it enables us to do the work of telling the story. Milbank explains: "in this reconception of analogy . . . 'Analogy of being' becomes 'analogy of creation' because our imitative power is a participation in the divine originative-expressive capacity."³⁵ The fruit of our participation in God is *poesis*. Milbank suggests that

³³ See P. Erich Przywara, S.J., *Polarity: A German Catholic's Interpretation of Religion*, trans. A. C. Bouquet, D.D. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), especially 29–36, and John R. Betz, "After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis*," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, OP (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 35–87.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas *ST I*, q.4, a.2.

³⁵ "A Critique of the Theology of Right," 29.

poesis may be the key to a retrieval of the *sensus eminentior* and to a post-modern theology. *Poesis* . . . is an integral aspect of Christian practice and redemption. Its work is the ceaseless re-narrating and ‘explaining’ of human history under the sign of the cross. To act at all is to re-narrate, and to act in the Church is to take this re-narration not as transparent and complete within the supposed ‘bounds’ of our finitude (the Kantian modern), nor as yet ecstatically indeterminate (the sceptical post-modern), but rather as an utterly concrete allegorical outline, which remains, precisely by that token, all the more a mere sign of that mystery into which it must still enter in order to define itself.³⁶

Milbank draws together the separate tasks of the postmodern theologian here under a single heading. In *poesis* the individual (whether or not she is a theologian) necessarily attempts to narrate the counter-history and in so doing performs the counter-ethics and instantiates the counter-ontology. In a later essay, Milbank draws on the work of Johann Hamann to spell out more clearly the concept of *poesis*, observing that Hamann “always links the ‘depth’ in things with the depth in the human subject which images the creative power of God.”³⁷ For Milbank, it seems, the term *poesis* invokes this depth; *poesis* names the activity which characterizes being in the image of God. The creativity of human beings not only “images” the creative power of God, but human creation draws on God’s creative power as its source. To put it another way, Milbank sees human participation in God as at once the imitation and the reception of God’s redeeming work.

I want to call attention to three points in this account of participation. First we must note that, for Milbank, the *sensus eminentior* gives positive content to the doctrine of *analogia entis*. The *sensus eminentior* teaches us to understand analogy properly, by reminding us of the mysterious transcendence of God, who is the source of all our appro-

³⁶ “A Critique of the Theology of Right,” 31–32. We should note here that Milbank is emphasizing one of the tasks of a postmodern theology as outlined above. It is clear here and throughout *Theology and Social Theory* that Milbank’s main use of the term “postmodern” is to refer to theology (especially) that gets beyond the problems of modernity, particularly those problems he associates with Kant’s theology.

³⁷ “Knowledge,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 27.

appropriate predications. Second, Milbank links the possibility of such knowledge to participation in the Logos, through whom the creation and redemption of the world takes place. Third, the importance of the church here cannot be overestimated. Milbank sees theology as having to account for the ways the church has failed to achieve the "redemptive re-narration or recapitulation [that] may open up a new space for future practice and a more socially embodied *poesis*."³⁸ This stringent accountability only makes sense in the context of Milbank's vision of the church. In "the ceaseless re-narrating and 'explaining' of human history under the sign of the cross," human beings participate in and imitate the creative power of God's Word.³⁹

What distinguishes action "in the church" is the status of the church as the body of Christ: Milbank implies that the site of *poesis* is the church. Apart from participation in the body of Christ, Christian action is impossible. Crucially, for Milbank, the defining mark of Christianness is *being in Christ*. The good work is only something that can be done in unity, as one body: it is *Christ's* work that alone is good. Every good action of an individual Christian is only good insofar as it is done as a part of Christ's work.⁴⁰ Who we are as Christians depends, for Milbank, on the metaphor ontological

³⁸ This is similar to the task of setting forth a "counter-history," which Milbank assigns to the theologian in *Theology and Social Theory* (383).

³⁹ For Milbank, unlike postliberal theologians in the spirit of George Lindbeck, the "narrative" that Christians relate is the story of the *church*, not simply the story of Jesus. Milbank's story is the story of Christ in the world, not only in the person of Jesus, but in the body of Christ – the church. See, for example, "The Name of Jesus," in *The Word Made Strange*, 150: "The gospels can be read, not as the story of Jesus, but as the story of the (re)foundation of a new city, a new kind of community, Israel-become-the-Church." Thus the gospel narratives are the beginning of a story which is continuing to unfold.

⁴⁰ *Poesis* is not action without risk. Milbank explains: "intersubjectivity . . . intervenes to make things far more complex: for our receptivity to divine prompting is always performed by our cultural inheritance . . . such that here again, we always in *every* act take responsibility for what we are also *not* responsible and have not instigated . . . to act is to act on others, and so always from the outset of the act, the act is *as much* that which is received by others as that which is intended by us . . . To be open to the reception of grace in a preparedness to act is, therefore, to be open to the risk that another may immediately ruin the gracious character of our 'poetic' performance" ("A Christological Poetics," 126–127); and see p. 126 below.

reality of the body of Christ: we are “participators through the Sacraments and membership of the body of Christ in the divine humanity.”⁴¹ Because the deeds of the whole body are interwoven, each act in itself is incomplete.⁴² Therefore no one can tell until the eschaton whether deeds were “wrought in God.”⁴³

Milbank’s account of participation forces us to ask who *we* are, as the participants in the divine life. In particular, it raises the question about the relationship between human agency and the divine power on which *poesis* depends. Milbank portrays Christians as acting upon the world while God acts upon and through them. But what is the human faculty that makes possible the kind of participation that Milbank describes? In Milbank’s ancient and medieval sources we find that discussions of participation usually include some account of the soul. But Milbank’s discussions of soul do not include the technical precision that we identify with accounts like those of Plato and Aquinas, or even that of Gregory of Nyssa, whom Milbank follows most nearly in describing his own understanding of the soul.⁴⁴ The precision Milbank’s sources offer is important, because a more precise account of the soul lays the foundation for a clearer articulation of the forces that either promote or inhibit participation. In chapter 4 I offer an *apologia* for soul, drawing on the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. I argue that at least at a functional level, an account of the soul helps to bring together some necessary elements in the discussion of Christian life.

⁴¹ *Being Reconciled*, 62.

⁴² This idea in Milbank parallels the incompleteness of the self in Rowan Williams’ theology. As we saw in chapter 1, Williams sees the individual self as only complete in God. Thus the complete picture is only seen in eternity. For Milbank, individual Christian actions are similar, in that their true character cannot be known except in eternity. The parallel reflects continuity between Williams’ thought and Milbank’s, and shows their difference from Tanner in another light.

⁴³ See John 3:21. It is worth noting that the first person whose deeds are brought “to the light” following this statement is the woman at the well. She finds herself in the presence of that light; we must wait for the eschaton for the fullness of redemption.

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa’s account of the soul is intricate, but not marked by technical precision! See J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: A Study of Theological Anthropology in Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003). I will examine Milbank’s discussions of soul in more detail below.

Active reception

I turn now to Milbank's idea of active reception.⁴⁵ This concept builds on Milbank's account of participation, which is grounded in the doctrine of God as creator, in whom and by whose indwelling power all creation exists.⁴⁶ Milbank links the ontology of peace to the participatory nature of Christian life lived in response to and hope in God. He explains that:

God alone is good, alone true, alone being, and as there is nothing extra alongside God, the best we can do is *wait* to discover our identity which is 'hidden with Christ in God'. But this waiting is also a journey: since, after the fall, we no longer persist in our identity in God, we must set off on an eschatological pilgrimage in which we hope to see God's restoration in person of the human form. After the fall, there is nothing we can do or know for ourselves that is either good or true, beyond this journeying in expectancy. However, though we cannot guarantee either our intentions or observations, it is enough to discern and desire in trust and hope that we will then participate in some fragmentary way in the divine design.⁴⁷

This passage provides several clues to the interlocking parts of Milbank's theological substructure. The three elements of his theology I will discuss in this section are inextricably intertwined, each necessary for the other two. All three appear together in the above passage. First, we see the ontology of peace in its place as the logical foundation: "God is alone good, alone true, alone

⁴⁵ Milbank draws his account of this mode of activity from the theology of Gregory of Nyssa ("The Force of Identity," in *The Word Made Strange*, 195). Active reception is a concept Milbank develops only after *Theology and Social Theory*; he begins to discuss it in the essays collected in *The Word Made Strange*.

⁴⁶ Active reception appears to include sanctification and justification, making Christology, soteriology, and pneumatology are implicit in Milbank's understanding of active reception. Thus it should not surprise us to find "The Force of Identity," in which Milbank most clearly presents active reception, under the heading "Pneuma": Milbank's account of active reception is in essence an account of the life lived by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁷ "Knowledge," 28.

being, and . . . there is nothing extra alongside God.” Second, from the fullness of God’s presence throughout creation, it follows that we *are* only in God. Our true identity, for Milbank, consists in the perfection of our participation in God: who we are is “hidden with Christ in God.” It is clear that our existence is from God and in God, whether or not we realize it. To grasp the complete truth about who we are, we must find ourselves in Christ who restores all humanity to real, true being in God. And yet, third, our participation in God has been disrupted by sin, so the participation for which we are created does not flow effortlessly. Rather than being our natural mode of existence, participation in God becomes something we pursue. The concept of active reception also takes up the themes of waiting and discovery as central to Christian life.⁴⁸

Milbank’s notion of active reception is most clearly developed in an essay on Gregory of Nyssa, in which Milbank defines active reception most succinctly as that action “whereby in receiving we actively *become* what we receive: the triune God.”⁴⁹ Through active reception, Christians participate in the eternal, generous exchange that characterizes the Trinity: trinitarian gift-giving provides the shape and the structure of Christian practice.⁵⁰ Of course, the idea that Christians freely give what we have freely received is nothing new. In fact, Milbank’s account of Christian life might be read as an extended interpretation of Paul’s oft-quoted statement, “It is no

⁴⁸ The journey here, although it seems almost to be a journey *to* God, is really a journey *in* God: it is a journey in God in the same way as it is a journey in trust or faith. See also *Being Reconciled*, ix–xiii. Here we see that Milbank’s notion of active reception has resonances with the themes of Rowan Williams’ theology. For both Williams and Milbank, we can be known fully only as we are known in God. The journey to which Milbank refers parallels Williams’ vision of Christian life as living toward God patiently and attentively.

⁴⁹ “The Force of Identity,” 204. Milbank here takes Gregory’s theology of participation – *theosis* – a step further than Gregory would have. Although for Gregory our participation in the Word does indeed unite us with God, the infinite distance between humanity and divinity is not thereby diminished. In fact one of the fascinating points in Gregory’s understanding of participation is that humanity remains human even in its participation in the divine life.

⁵⁰ For Milbank, Christian identity is always a performative identity: every good act is a performance inspired by God.

longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”⁵¹ Only the one who receives from God can give love and goodness to others, since love and goodness must come from God.

The life of active reception is thus characterized by the non-identical repetition⁵² of the gracious gift of God. While all creation exists in God, *Christian* participation in God’s life (as active reception) consists in giving as much as receiving. Not only does active reception involve the participation for which human beings are created, that participation is itself the realization of the only possible *good* human life. Drawing on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, Milbank explains the impossibility of goodness apart from God:⁵³

there is for Aquinas no grounding of the good in a given, self-transcending rational nature. Instead, to define humanity as located in the increasing imitation of divine goodness and of divine being, is to have a wholly theological anthropology; it is to say that human beings are only properly known within our imitation of God.⁵⁴

If human being is defined thus, as participation in God’s being, then the proper end of humanity is found in God. Milbank’s understanding of participation involves a redefinition of all human activity. For example, what might appear as passive experience can be activity, insofar as the perceptions and thought accompanying that experience are active. On this view of activity, the divine image itself is an activity rather than a quality of human life. Milbank’s concept of active reception parallels Gregory of Nyssa’s idea that the *imago dei* is a form of activity: it might be inferred that, for Milbank,

⁵¹ The whole of Galatians 2:20 reads: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me.”

⁵² For discussion of non-identical repetition, see “Pleonasm, Speech and Writing,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 70, and “The Name of Jesus,” 150–153; and Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: The Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 261–273.

⁵³ Milbank here seems to have reconsidered his critique of Aquinas in *Theology and Social Theory*, 406–415.

⁵⁴ “A Critique of the Theology of Right,” 15.

active reception is that form of life in which we may reflect God as God's image ought to do. Orienting oneself toward God is the only possible means of living a Christian life; "if we attend to God, he will graciously provide us, out of ourselves, with appropriate good performances." Milbank likens Christian practice to artistic creation: a Christian, "since [s/]he *is* an artist, is as much at the mercy of 'the muse' (or the Holy Spirit) as the artist."⁵⁵

Active reception also involves the individual in a corporate subjectivity that provides the context for all her actions. Milbank does not see the freedom of the individual actor as sufficient to allow for either the perception or the execution of a good act. Milbank explains that

our receptivity to divine prompting is always performed by our cultural inheritance . . . such that here again, we always in *every* act take responsibility for what we are also *not* responsible and have not instigated . . . to act is to act on others, and so always from the outset of the act, the act is *as much* that which is received by others as that which is intended by us . . . To be open to the reception of grace in a preparedness to act is, therefore, to be open to the risk that another may immediately ruin the gracious character of our 'poetic' performance.⁵⁶

Milbank understands the series of actions that follow as

still . . . but a single action, such that all the actors taken collectively in their diachronic series constitute humanity as at last free and responsible. If *they* (through all history) we may believe, are open to receive by grace the work of humanity, then here is only trust, and *no* risk of sinful distortion, since here at last the only other co-partner in responsibility is God. Yet this means: only humans together and through all history are the one *free* human subject, free to receive their own work.⁵⁷

Appropriate action thus cannot be prescribed by standards of moral, ethical, or spiritual practice. The goodness of an action is creative

⁵⁵ "A Christological Poetics," 126.

⁵⁶ "A Christological Poetics," 126.

⁵⁷ "A Christological Poetics," 127.

rather than reactive, and cannot be measured against any rule. "Poetic" performance is, however, *responsive*. Milbank argues that doing good "can only be our free, gratuitous response to God's free, gratuitous gift of more abundant life, including that cultural life that emanates from us, beyond our control, *as ourselves*."⁵⁸ The good we do is not *ours*; rather, it always comes from beyond us. In Milbank's notion of active reception, therefore, there is no self-denial involved in doing good.

On this reading Christian life aims at constant attention to the gift of God, and Christian identity is demonstrated in the non-identical repetition of that gift. Milbank insists that Christian action cannot be confused with a self-sacrificing view of moral action: self-sacrifice can never counter the privative nature of sin and evil. Only a creative act will do.⁵⁹ Because the good is entirely beyond the grasp of the individual, it cannot but be received. I will return to the issue of the mode of attention required – the "active" aspect of reception – below.

⁵⁸ "A Christological Poetics," 134. Milbank insists that God brings out of *us* these good performances.

⁵⁹ As Milbank explains in *Theology and Social Theory*, there are Christian principles. The difference between such principles as Christianity implies and the Kantian principles he rejects is the role of consensus. "As an infinite serial emanation, charity does not lay down a fixed hierarchy, and every 'position' it establishes is of equal importance, and of equal necessity to all the other positions, even if there remain inequalities of ability and necessary inequalities of function . . . Thus, although this was not all at once seen as a positive feature, Christianity from the start considered that it could be adequately repeated in very diverse cultural settings, involving very different sets of cultural roles." Thus the agent Milbank imagines is not the universal subject inspired by duty, but the individual in her cultural location, *as individual*. Milbank further qualifies the location of the *Christian* individual, however. "Although 'the goal beyond the goal' (the non-*telos*) of charity, is the creation of difference, and in consequence, liberty and equality, it aims also in this creation to reproduce itself as love and friendship. It follows that charity has to be a *tradition*, that new moves must locate themselves in the tradition, be accepted within the tradition, even though such a tradition must also be radically open-ended. Christianity is therefore (in aspiration and faintly traceable actuality) something like the 'peaceful transmission of difference', or 'differences in a continuous harmony'" (*Theology and Social Theory*, 415–416).

I want to draw attention to three features of the “good action” involved in active reception. First, it is important to note the distinction Milbank is drawing here between Augustine and Plato⁶⁰ about what is involved in enacting the good. For Plato (on Milbank’s reading), “inward self-government” means autonomy, which frees the individual from the external government of the earthly city. The fruit of this freedom is a detachment, which in turn shapes the relationship between the properly self-governing individual and the city. The self-governing individual alone is fit to rule, because only autonomy enables the indifference necessary for objective leadership. Augustine agrees that the “true state of inward self-government” is desirable. For Christians, however, this state of being does not lead to indifference. The soul’s self-government consists, for Augustine, in attention to God, and draws “one further *into* relationship with the saints in heaven and on earth.”⁶¹ The individual is only properly Christian as she is in relationship with God and the saints. Milbank thus reconceives the *nature* of self-government: “it is the whole desiring person who sins or does right, and the measure of right desire is not the rule of reason over body, but the external relation of person to person in the community of peace, under God.”⁶² In other words, rightly ordered desire is not discerned primarily by introspection, but by examining one’s relationships with others. Desire for God manifests itself in love of neighbor.

⁶⁰ Milbank adds (and Aristotle), but the discussion that follows mentions only Plato. See *Theology and Social Theory*, 404.

⁶¹ Milbank’s argument runs thus: “for Augustine . . . the achievement of a true state of inward self-government does not convey one ecstatically outside the sphere of community, making one essentially ‘indifferent’ to it, but on the contrary, propels one further *into* relationships both with God and the saints in heaven and on earth. The man truly in charge of his soul may indeed be finally indifferent to the fate of the *civitas terrena*, and thereby fit to rule it . . . , but he is not similarly indifferent to the fate of the celestial city on pilgrimage, insofar as the true ‘rule’ of charity is being enacted, and not simply a *usus* being made of earthly things” (*Theology and Social Theory*, 404).

⁶² *Theology and Social Theory*, 415. I am not certain that I want to grant Milbank his caricature of Plato’s account of reason’s government of the human being, but disputing it here does not help my argument, so I do not take it up.

The second and third features of "good action" (as the outcome of active reception) to which I wish to call attention both follow from this account of the soul's self-regulation. The second point to note is that active reception is not primarily a matter of individual relationship to God. It is much more a way of being that presumes community, that is, a way of being *toward* God *with* others in the world. It follows that the individual cannot be the sole judge of her poetic performances. Her poetic performances, moreover, only achieve goodness as enacted as a part of the whole performance of the church in its role as Christ's body in the world and throughout history. Milbank describes this way of being:

The life of the saints is inherently social, because it is the opposite of a life of sin, which is the life of self-love . . . True society implies absolute consensus, agreement in desire, and entire harmony amongst its members, and this is exactly (as Augustine reiterates again and again) what the Church provides, and that in which salvation, the restoration of being, consists.⁶³

The judgment of the communion of saints is, however, difficult to ascertain. In actual communities in concrete historical circumstances, the life of would-be saints is not always characterized by the harmony described here, which accounts in part for the difficulty in discernment.

This brings me to the final observation to be made about active reception and good action: Milbank seems to take insufficient account of sin. Sin disrupts both the reception of divine grace *and* the "handing-on" of divine gifts. Milbank leaves open the question *how* an individual might evaluate any proposed action. The only measure of the goodness of an action is that it increases love of God and neighbor, and so contributes to the harmonious social life of the saints. It is not the case, however, that Milbank needs to offer an abstract standard for judging action: it is that he offers no account of how the posture he believes is the vehicle for inspired action may be cultivated. While he may not be able to specify in advance exactly where the Spirit's inspiration will lead, there are surely habits of listening that might improve one's ear. The role of

⁶³ *Theology and Social Theory*, 402.

the community in the process of discernment, moreover, is not clear.⁶⁴ As I have indicated, Milbank insists that the acts of individuals *together* constitute the work of Christ's body. He thereby implies a role for the community in the process of discernment, but does not offer any reflection on the nature of that role or of the process that might be involved. While it seems obvious that the individual cannot be the sole judge of her acts, it is not clear how the discernment of the community and the discernment of the individual cooperate in the process of active reception.

I have suggested that although Milbank acknowledges the problem of sin, he does not offer sustained discussion of active reception as it counters sin in Christian life. His account of active reception implies that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit ought naturally to produce Christian action. Yet the image of such a free-flowing grace seems curiously at odds with New Testament and late-antique descriptions of the constant struggle against sin.⁶⁵ I suggest in what follows that Milbank ought to attend more carefully to the problem of sin. I do not argue that Milbank is *wrong*, but that he is not right *enough*; that is, he gives no account of the formation that might produce individuals attentive to God and thus open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The attentiveness Milbank describes is well attested in his ancient sources, especially Gregory of Nyssa, but he seems to have overlooked Gregory's rich account of the difficult process of developing that attention. Practicing discernment is fundamental to the access to God by the "pure inward turn," at the heart of Christian performance (and to salvation, though that is not my interest here). The difficulty is that this access, which enables right performance and thus also the strength to withstand temptation, is itself obscured by the ontological condition of sinfulness.

⁶⁴ See, for example, "A Critique of the Theology of Right," 29: "Language is also 'like God', and our linguistic expression mirrors the divine creative act which is immanently contained in the *Ars Patris* that is the *Logos* . . . Teleological constraint is here mediated through our sense of the 'rightness' of our emergent linguistic product." Now, one might generously interpret this "sense of rightness" as a reference to a kind of common sense. But while it is certainly the case that the sense Milbank refers to is a type of *sensus communis*, adjudication remains primarily a function of the individual mind.

⁶⁵ For New Testament examples, see note 80 below. In chapter 4 I will discuss the struggle against sin as Gregory depicts it.

Active Reception and the Problem of Sin: Milbank’s Reading of Gregory of Nyssa

As I have noted, Milbank’s primary interlocutor in the construction of his account of active reception is Gregory of Nyssa. Milbank develops the connection between active reception and redemption in his reading of Gregory. While Milbank does not use “redemption” terminology, the suggestion that Christian life consists in active reception implies that active reception is *also* the form of the redeemed life. *Redemption* thus distinguishes *Christian* participation from the participation in God that sustains all creation. Active reception, in Milbank’s theology, names a life lived in and toward the final redemption that already is in Christ, into whom we are baptized. For Gregory also, participation in God is necessary for all life – and yet his doctrine of *theosis* describes a very particular form of participation that is dependent upon the restoration of humanity to its original, free-from-sin state. It is Milbank’s engagement with this specific notion in Gregory’s theology that provides the basis for understanding active reception as the opposite of sin, to which I now turn.

Sin and salvation

Milbank shares Gregory’s view of evil as privation – common in late antique theology.⁶⁶ Sinfulness, on this view, consists in human

⁶⁶ In Milbank’s theology it appears that this view of evil derives from Augustine, but it is just as much the case in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa, on whom Milbank draws in “The Force of Identity,” in *The Word Made Strange*. In fact much of Milbank’s anthropology in the essay comes directly from Gregory of Nyssa, and in some places he seems simply to be paraphrasing Gregory. Milbank uses the language of passions and impulses, which he adopts from Gregory. Milbank’s attempt to rehabilitate a kind of late ancient approach to the passions draws directly on Gregory’s own discussions. In particular, Milbank seems to want to retain “desire” as a neutral concept. For a parallel discussion of passion language, see David Hunter, “The Language of Desire: Clement of Alexandria’s Transformation of Ascetic Discourse,” *Semeia* 57 (1992), 95–109. Hunter’s aim in the essay is to distinguish between different terms for “desire” and to suggest that, for Clement, desire could serve good purposes.

beings' failure to will and to do the good. Milbank interprets this view as understanding sin as "the state in which the rational soul is *dominated* by . . . impulses."⁶⁷ These impulses only lead to sin insofar as they induce passivity by overcoming the rational soul. Following Gregory of Nyssa, Milbank regards these "impulses" as capable of leading to spiritual growth if properly managed. Milbank explains that

[s]uffering, passive desire and self-preservation in the face of the enemy will pass away; since (even if 'neutral') they are merely the outworking of sin, the realization that we have been damaged, impaired in our being, which is to say, precisely, *been rendered passive* . . . However, an *eros proper to the soul* remains, and is never surpassed, just as the self-directing will, drive, and self-preservation in the Good also remain.

The former, in particular, is fundamentally *receptive* and yet it remains, and has ceased to be regarded by Gregory as a passion. Neither *eros* nor will are for him any longer *subordinate* to reason – like Platonic baser aspects, or Aristotelian lower faculties – nor are they parts or even faculties of the soul. They are one with reason, but reason is somehow *also* will and *also* eros.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "The Force of Identity," 203.

⁶⁸ "The Force of Identity," 203. It should be noted that Milbank's terminology here is a bit confusing. The use of "eros" and "will" to designate the emotional faculties of the soul (as it seems Milbank is doing here) does not translate Gregory's vocabulary. Whether Milbank intends to render Gregory's words *epithumia* and *thumis* with eros and will, respectively, is not clear, and the result is somewhat deceptive. For Gregory, participation in God is a participation in the operation of divine love (as we will see in the next chapter) and there is never an end to love, so the unity of reason with eros is not remarkable. And as far as will is concerned, Gregory takes for granted that the Persons of the Trinity each have a will, so the will itself does not necessarily imply human subjectivity or emotion. This rendering of Gregory's vocabulary is one example of the inattention to detail in Milbank's reading of Gregory's theology.

As Milbank explains it here, the key effect of fallenness is susceptibility to the passions.⁶⁹ In Gregory's anthropology the natural orientation of human desire is toward God, but original sin has corrupted the compass that would so direct our desire.⁷⁰ Desire itself is thus not necessarily sinful, and may be reoriented. Milbank is optimistic about the possibility of reorientation of desire but, as we will see, less clear about the way in which desires might be transformed. For Gregory of Nyssa, death provides the opportunity for the complete restoration of the human being to her uninterruptedly God-directed state. Milbank follows Gregory, yet grants some access to this way of life even this side of heaven.⁷¹

For the moment, I have set aside the question how desire can be redirected. Instead, I want to examine Milbank's description of the overcoming of sin that enables active reception in its purest form. The antidote to our being subject to the passions is specifically the activity of participation in the life of God. This participation, in turn, is what saves. Using Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Milbank describes salvation in further detail: for Gregory (with whom Milbank appears to agree strongly), salvation "means that (in the Spirit) we also, as receiving the life of all three divine persons, can glorify Father, Son and Spirit."⁷² Salvation comes through intimate participation in the life of the Trinity,

⁶⁹ Milbank is keen to rehabilitate the concept of *apatheia* in his reading of Gregory, thus he targets "the passions" as inimical to *active* reception. To add a discussion of the passions at this point would interrupt the flow of the argument: "passions" here stands in for habits of desiring that turn us away from God. For an excellent introductory presentation of the concept of the passions, see Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 57–77. For more detailed, technical discussion see, for example, Richard Sorabji, *Emotions and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷⁰ For Gregory, this compass is free will: true freedom is in desiring God as we ought. Original sin occurred through deception, and the fruit of that deception is a continuing corruption of the will. Inhibited by the inappropriate desire which attached to freedom in the fall from grace, the will no longer has the perfect freedom necessary for uninterrupted desire for God. The disorientation of desire is a symptom of the corruption of our free will – not the other way round.

⁷¹ See Milbank, "The Force of Identity," 202–203.

⁷² "The Force of Identity," 202–203.

through which we receive ourselves completely and give ourselves wholly as we join in the exchange of divine gifts – in this case, the exchange of glory among the divine persons. Active reception is thus the antithesis of a sinful condition whose primary symptom is passivity. The transformed Christian life consists in the God-given performances of the soul that has received, and is constantly receiving, new life from God. The way this works for Milbank, however, points to the central difficulty with his account.

Milbank contra Gregory on the Christian Life

The difficulty with Milbank's account of active reception is that it does not treat the problem of sin and the need for formation. This difficulty comes clearly into focus as I examine Milbank's description of active reception against the background of Gregory of Nyssa's account of Christian life.⁷³ Like Gregory, Milbank sees the source of Christian action as God, not self. Only through the imitation of the divine creative power, made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, can a human being live a Christian life.⁷⁴ At the same time, Milbank acknowledges the infinite distance between humanity and God, in keeping with Gregory's clear principle of the absolute

⁷³ I draw attention to the *functional* aspect of Milbank's individualism here because Milbank points to the impossibility of Christianity as a solo enterprise. The Christian is not without the church, since a key aspect of the participation in God intrinsic to Christianity is being in the body of Christ. Being in the body of Christ requires, for Milbank, participation in the sacraments of the church (most especially Eucharist), which eliminates entirely the possibility of being a Christian solo. Ultimately, as I have suggested above, the church does play a role in the "judgment" that appears to be the province of the individual. Yet it is not clear how the judgment of the church would impinge on an individual. Is it that acting in the power of the Spirit is not something that can be done by the individual in the first place? If so, and if that is what Milbank means, then I agree – but it is not clear from what Milbank has written that that is what he *does* mean.

⁷⁴ See "A Critique of the Theology of Right," in which Milbank engages Kant directly: there he contrasts his account of theology with a post-Kantian acceptance of certain limits and categories that constrain theological discourse. In his revolt against Kant and his followers, Milbank turns to Aquinas to revive a discourse of participated perfections.

distinction between Creator and creation.⁷⁵ The transcendence of God actually makes possible the interiority so important for Milbank:

Government is now by the external, transcendent other, and is no longer in principle a matter of self-government of the cosmos over itself which is microcosmically reflected in the individual soul composed of heterogeneous and hierarchically ordered aspects. Now an access to the transcendent is indeed possible by a pure inward turn, precisely because the inner light is *wholly* from outside, and abides entirely *in* its ecstatic return to the external source.⁷⁶

Seen in this way, the reign of God within appears transcendent, yet humanly accessible. Thus Milbank represents the transcendent source of human moral agency as directly accessible – yet its accessibility is an illusion. The implication is that attention to God indwelling enables individuals to overcome sin. But, unlike Gregory, he never gives “attention to God” further explanation or description that might provide some content to the concept.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Milbank seems to grasp, though he does not put it in quite this way, that the gap between creator and creation prevents knowledge, but allows participation. He hints at the infinite distance in describing the effect of the unknowability of God as seen in the creation: “There can be no grasp of essences, since the essence of the world is a mirroring of divine incomprehensibility . . . the *logos* about the world is bigger than the world itself, because it accounts for it as derived from a transcendent elsewhere and therefore as unfathomable even down to its smallest details” (“The Force of Identity,” 201). Creation reflects its infinite distance from the creator – as well as its epistemological consequences. What Milbank does *not* here add, and I think thus misses a very important point in Gregory’s theology, is that the very same incomprehensibility that prevents grasping essences in the world also prevents our grasping the mode of our participation in God. Thus the “pure inward turn” yields very little real access to the transcendent. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Ref. and or. catech.*

⁷⁶ “The Force of Identity,” 207.

⁷⁷ Milbank’s understanding of the inspiration that produces such good acts is oddly parallel to Kant’s notion of the inspired nature of the right action. To discover Kant’s version one need look no further than his praise of duty as “Sublime and mighty name that . . . rejects all kinship with the inclinations, descent from which is the indispensable condition of that worth which human beings alone can give themselves” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 73). While Kant certainly envisioned a different order of inspiration than what Milbank has in mind, duty motivates proper action for Kant like the Holy Spirit motivates the Christian for Milbank.

In contrast to Milbank, Gregory insists that one must learn to attend to God. Growth in Christian life consists in an ever-increasing awareness of God's presence with, in, and through one, which simultaneously makes possible resistance to sin. Being better able to resist sin through the Holy Spirit's indwelling in turn improves attention to God.⁷⁸ It is worth noting here the way in which this pattern is similar to the pattern of loss and recovery that characterize Christian life for Williams. The theme of tragedy in Williams' theology implies that one suffers concrete loss, which may take the form of bereavement or failure. Williams' understanding of redemption is captured in his remark that "grace will remake, but [will] not undo."⁷⁹ This theme signals a key difference between the two. Milbank's theology lacks the attention to the persistence of finitude – and therefore failure to act consistently according to the inspiration of the Spirit – that characterizes Williams' reflections on the shape of Christian life.⁸⁰ For Milbank the loss seems more abstract; it seems to take the form of realization of sin's distortion and experiencing the lack associated with passivity. Recovery is possible only through a new awareness of the constant presence of the divine life within, which empowers one to receive it and to offer it back to God through worship and love of neighbor. While for both Williams and Milbank the fullness of our redeemed existence is only available

⁷⁸ See Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* and Ronald Heine *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship Between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975) for an in-depth account of just this process.

⁷⁹ *Resurrection*, 89.

⁸⁰ See also Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 17–20. Farley describes the situation of human life in a way that parallels this theme in Williams' theology: "human desire has a tragic character. It is not only that it occurs in a fracture between desire and desired which is never closed but that the situation of human desiring is the organic and historical situation of physical, social and personal peril . . . Human beings strive in the face of an unknown future, in the mode of constant uncertainty, in the midst of things constantly going wrong" (19). Williams' insistence on the ambiguity and provisionality of theological speech in particular is borne out of precisely this sort of uncertainty. His persistence in hoping and waiting for grace is the mode of faith appropriate to the situation, which is a mode of faith quite different from what one finds in Milbank.

to us in the final resurrection, Milbank seems more optimistic about the extent to which Christians can live a redeemed life this side of heaven.⁸¹

It seems reasonable to say that the individual depends upon God for the performance of a good act. But Milbank's account of this dependence implies that the actor has unimpeded access to the source of all goodness by the "pure inward turn." Such access seems to contradict the notion that the Christian is "*at the mercy* of the muse (the Holy Spirit)."⁸² This too-easy access, I have suggested, also implies a weak account of human sinfulness and fails to take account of the biblical witness to the constant struggle against ongoing corruption.⁸³ Milbank describes a state of relationship between the individual and God that looks more like an eschatological picture of humanity restored than a still-fallen Christian struggling to overcome sinfulness, living between the "already" of the crucifixion and resurrection and the "not-yet" of the final restoration. Without including a robust doctrine of continuing human corruption, Milbank cannot give a complete account of Christian performance. While it may be the case that ideally the access to God is as straightforward as Milbank implies, the ideal only corresponds with the actual in Eden or the eschaton.

While Milbank admits in "A Christological Poetics" that a consequence of original sin is that "*all* reception is distorted," he adds that the understanding granted by the poetic encounter with God

⁸¹ Williams himself challenges Milbank's view, suggesting that Milbank paints a picture of the "already" of redemption that leaves us "with little account of how it is learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked" ("Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision," in *New Blackfriars* [1992], 321). While Williams demonstrates awareness of the difficulty of living according to the ontology of peace, he nevertheless scarcely attends to the process of formation of the Christian imagination in which the habits intrinsic to the living of such a life might be cultivated.

⁸² "A Christological Poetics," 126, my italics. This idea persists in Milbank's account despite his attention to the distorting effects of sin, which I discussed earlier in the chapter.

⁸³ To name just a few: Ps. 32; Rom. 7:14–25; 1 Cor. 3:1–3; Eph. 6:10–18. The last is especially telling against Milbank's notion of the "pure inward turn" as the source of divine (self-) government: the sword of the Spirit and the helmet of peace both function against the (self-) deceiving lies of the evil one.

“allows us to see that the *only* sin is original sin.” That is, every sin is just another iteration of the inability “to form any reliable figurative conception of the order pertaining between God and man” whose result is the lack of “a context for acceptable action.”⁸⁴ He allows for the depth and extent of the distortion sin occasions, yet does not detail the ongoing effects of fallenness. His account of sin is quite extensive, and yet within it the ongoing effect of fallenness proves elusive. The light of purely external government of the self is complemented by the image of Jesus, who provides the sufficient and entire context for acceptable action. The way in which the distortion of all reception affects the reception of divine life in which we find Jesus as our context is simply not discussed.

In order to remedy this lack, we must consider the need for the development of the attentiveness to God that characterizes active reception. Milbank hints at the need to cultivate attention to God in his description of Christian life. Participation in God is the only means of progress toward perfection, because humanity is made perfect only in God. We acknowledge our finitude “by regarding our lives as nothing but an interpretation of Christ as presented to us in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments.”⁸⁵ Specifically, our lives interpret Christ’s death and resurrection, which are the source of our constantly renewed mode of life. The hallmark of Christians’ imitation of Christ is forgiveness; for Milbank, Jesus’ atoning death marks the beginning of forgiveness as a political practice. We experience God’s forgiveness through Christ as a set of newly formed conditions in which we, as wrongdoers, find it possible to do right. When we forgive others, we participate in the renewal that Christ’s death and resurrection effect.⁸⁶ Receiving our being from God thus appears as a concrete social practice, the practice of forgiveness, and the condition of possibility for practicing forgiveness, according to Milbank, is (to repeat the point made earlier) attending carefully to “Christ as presented to us in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments.” It follows that the possibility of direct access to God within is

⁸⁴ “A Christological Poetics,” 132.

⁸⁵ “A Christological Poetics,” 139. Milbank does not say clearly, however, how the Scriptures and the sacraments help.

⁸⁶ “The Name of Jesus,” in *The Word Made Strange*, 161.

dependent upon – though Milbank does not spell this out clearly – attention to the Scripture and participation in the Eucharist.

Milbank’s use of his ancient sources to make this link is worth teasing out. Reading and/or hearing Scripture helps Christians to develop habits of self-discipline that facilitate attention to God. In attending to the testimony about Jesus, and in learning to love properly, one can indeed grow in knowledge of God and awareness of the divine presence.⁸⁷ Milbank is more optimistic, it seems, about the possibility of loving God and neighbor than Gregory of Nyssa. While for Gregory the life of participation that eventuates in transformed social practices, which Milbank describes, “remains in the eschaton,” there is a foreshadowing of it “in the temporal here and now, in an *external* monastic social practice, in which for private possession is substituted an endless handing-on of glory.”⁸⁸ Here is the source for the externality of transcendent government: Milbank runs from the externality of monastic practice to the “external,

⁸⁷ Another central figure in Milbank’s theology is Augustine. Augustine teaches us (*De trinitate*, Bk. VIII) that the kind of access required for the good performances Milbank suggests is impossible, not simply because we do not know God as we ought, but because we cannot examine ourselves with full vision. Augustine took much more seriously the problem Milbank hints at: that in original sin, “all reception is distorted” – including the “active reception” by which we participate in the divine life. For Augustine, as for Milbank, God’s presence is constant, but in Augustine’s theology, the corruption of human nature means that though we can glimpse “that God is truth,” we are unable to translate that glimpse into action (*De trinitate*, VIII, 2, 3). That is, we can perceive, however dimly or briefly, certain things about God, but cannot attend to those things such that our actions are shaped accordingly. The only possible way to grow in knowledge of God is to attend carefully to Jesus, who teaches humility and love. Augustine reasons that “He does not say Learn of me, because I raise those who have been dead four days; but He says, ‘Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart’” (*De trinitate*, VIII, 7, 11). For my interpretation of Book VIII, I am indebted to Lewis Ayres, “It’s not for Eating – It’s for Looking Through: Memory, Understanding and Will in Augustine’s *De trinitate*,” in *The Mystery of the Trinity in the Fathers of the Church*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

⁸⁸ “The Force of Identity,” 206. Given Milbank’s discussion of the church in *Theology and Social Theory* (see especially 417–423), one wonders how similar to monastic practice the church can be. The reference to monastic life offers a rare, concrete image of Christian community in Milbank’s theology.

transcendent other . . . [accessible] by a pure inward turn.” In this movement Milbank misses out a step crucial for Gregory of Nyssa: the context of daily interaction with the neighbors to be loved (in the case of monasticism, one’s fellow monks), recitations of Scripture in the daily office, and regular participation in the Eucharistic liturgy – all of which contribute indispensably to the formation of a Christian imagination truly able to attend to the presence of God in whom one lives and moves and has one’s being. Scripture is crucial, as the hearing and study of it reshape the Christian imagination and redirect attention to God as revealed in Christ.⁸⁹ Christian life as participation in God, as active reception of creative and loving being from God that produces our every good act, requires transformation of our corrupted nature by the Scripture, Eucharist, and living in Christian community. Milbank is exactly right to point to the constant presence of God as the source of our every good act. But active reception cannot happen without the training of our souls, and Milbank’s monastic sources suggest that there is far more to the receptivity he describes than a “pure inward turn.” It is worth returning briefly to Milbank’s ecclesiology here. There is definitely a place for the community in Milbank’s account of Christian life. This is especially apparent early on, as in the final chapter of *Theology and Social Theory*. If this connection were more fully articulated, it might mitigate the functional individualism of Milbank’s account.

Conclusion: Turning to Gregory of Nyssa

I have shown that Milbank’s engagement with his ancient sources does not pay close enough attention to the challenges to Christian life they assume. His clearest account of active reception is developed through his reading of Gregory of Nyssa, and yet we will see

⁸⁹ Augustine’s theology is unquestionably influencing Milbank’s reading of Gregory of Nyssa here. In *Theology and Social Theory* Milbank indicates clearly that the mark of redemption is right relationships with other Christians. The revelation of sinfulness in this context is in the constant inability to love the neighbor, the love of whom is the primary vehicle, on Augustine’s reading, for our growth in knowledge of God – and so also for any good performance we can make.

that Gregory (in a way that follows a well-established and central tradition in early Christianity) assumes that sin clouds our perception and reflection of God; its effects are both noetic and ontological. Milbank argues for the pervasiveness of sin in human life, without taking fully into account Gregory's insistence that sin interrupts our reception of divine grace, on which his model of Christian life depends. In this context an account of Christian life as active reception that fails to describe the ways in which the discernment of appropriate activity and belief is constantly challenged by the effects of sin lacks a central and necessary feature.

In what follows I draw together, briefly, the features of the three accounts of Christian identity I have discussed so far. Milbank, Tanner, and Williams share certain notions of the shape of Christian life. I suggested in the introduction that these three accounts of Christian identity share five features: fluidity, continuity, performance, imagination, and ambiguity. I have indicated points of convergence and overlapping among the three accounts.

There are, however, significant differences among them, especially between Milbank and Tanner. Although they share a strong sense of the social and political implications of Christian faith, they would disagree profoundly about what politics or social action is thereby implied. Also, the fluidity and performativity of their accounts reflect different logical foundations and reveal distinct concerns. An important way in which these differences are revealed is in Milbank and Tanner's respective ecclesiologies.⁹⁰ For Tanner,

⁹⁰ Tanner has no ontological place for the church: being Christian is in doing Christianly. Although she would probably insist that the Christian action any of us are able to do is the result of grace, she would probably not connect that grace to the mystical body of Christ, the church. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salis* is not a phrase one would expect to find in her theology, precisely because such a doctrine would, in her view, limit the freedom of God. Milbank, on the other hand, is much more likely to view the church as the mediator of divine grace, though how he would fill out this notion is not perfectly clear. Milbank does not give an explicit account of the relationship between ontology and ecclesiology, although he might have done in "Ecclesiology: The Last of the Last," in *Being Reconciled*; or in "The Name of Jesus," in *The Word Made Strange*. It may be worth noting that Milbank's account of Christian community in many ways finds its archetype in the vision of nineteenth-century Christian socialism. See *Theology and Social Theory*, 197–203.

Christians work together to discern and pursue true discipleship, using the life of Jesus as the primary guide. Commitment to the ongoing argument about what constitutes the nature of that discipleship is perhaps the only definite mark of Christian faith. One's relationship to other Christians across time and space appears voluntary: the testimony of others ought to be heard respectfully, but its authority is always only decided on an *ad hoc* basis. For Milbank, on the other hand, the emphasis on participation in the divine life as the key mark of Christian faith means that the church is also necessary for Christian faith. Participation in Christ's body, the church, as evidenced above all by sharing the Eucharist, marks the Christian life. Discipleship cannot be abstracted from the sacramental dimension of Christian life: the truth of one's identity as a follower of Jesus rests in the non-identical repetition of Christ's own life "as presented to us in the Scriptures and the Sacraments." True discipleship, in spite of Milbank's functional individualism, is always a matter of *imitatio Christi* in which the image of Christ we are to imitate is mediated to us by Christ's body, the church.

For all three, Christian discipleship requires a form of discernment. Tanner's Christian must be able to see what practices "go" with the rest of the practices that make up a person's understanding of discipleship. Milbank's Christian must be able to detect the movement of the Holy Spirit within, and so practice his or her faith as a participation in the creative life of God. "Must" is a strong word and does not seem to leave much room for the failures which are inevitable this side of heaven. To say "must" marks these activities or responsibilities as the *goal* of Christian practice in a way that Tanner and Milbank only imply. To make explicit the aim(s) of Christian discipleship would be to begin to give an account of formation, by eliciting the question I have been arguing is indispensable for a comprehensive account of Christian identity: How do we do this? Neither Tanner nor Milbank offers an answer.

Milbank's account has more in common with that of Rowan Williams, though Williams is more conservative regarding human access to divine truth. Milbank acknowledges that we can never be entirely sure of our perception of God, and yet he articulates a theology in which that perception is of paramount importance. Williams, on the other hand, favors the language of interpretation, judgment, and ambiguity when discussing our perception of God.

For Williams, the answer is never as easy as it looks – in fact, if it looks easy, it probably is not the best possible answer. We should not, however, mistake Williams' provisionality for hesitation: it is humility that qualifies his theological method. Still, Williams sometimes seems to leave in the background the difficulty of achieving the level of humility necessary for his account of Christian practice. The art of listening is not one that many have naturally, but must be acquired. In developing an account of Christian life that depends upon listening and patience for its proper practice, Williams needs also to acknowledge the difficulty of these two essential aspects.

Tanner and Williams thus share some of the difficulties we find in Milbank's account of active reception. All three accounts of Christian life problematically imply that self-identifying Christians have their desires pointed in the right general direction. And yet it is not quite clear how this comes to be the case – or if indeed it *is* the case. Christian performance, for Milbank, consists in response to an always-giving God, it is characterized by creative generosity rather than self-sacrifice. To put it another way, the self that is given in Christian action is one which constantly and actively receives its being from God. To find the resources with which to act Christianly, it seems on Milbank's reading, one simply needs to look for the Spirit moving within oneself.

The difficulty with this notion is not simply that it is "individualistic"; I have suggested that it does not take into account adequately the problem of sinfulness, which impairs individual discernment of God's presence in oneself and others. In fact, Milbank's failure to acknowledge the problems for his account presented by this lack of a theology of sin is found also in Tanner and Williams. While Tanner acknowledges sin's noetic pervasiveness, she offers no account of how the performance of Christian identity is affected by sin. Rowan Williams, though his understanding of Christian faith and practice is more carefully nuanced, and more guarded, also fails to incorporate the effects of sin's distortion into his account of Christian life. While he demonstrates clearly the centrality of rightly oriented desire to the practice of Christianity, he does not develop an account of the way in which such desire might come to be properly oriented. Like Milbank, Tanner and Williams outline the characteristics of a Christian discipleship without giving enough attention to the obstacles to that mode of living.

So Tanner and Williams also share, to a certain extent, Milbank's tendency toward an account of human and Christian nature in a state of grace without allowing for the full extent to which Christian life is also a continual progress *toward* this state. Gregory of Nyssa sees the incompleteness of the soul's transformation in this life as the context for his account of those habits of thought and practice that develop our attention to God and which are intrinsic to Christian existence.⁹¹ A number of aspects of Milbank's discussion of Christian life thus lead us once again to the question of formation: how may the habits of thought and practice that develop the attention to God necessary for the active reception of God's grace be learned?

In Chapters 4 and 5 I turn to Gregory of Nyssa for help with this question. Gregory's theology includes a precise account of the soul and the nature of its corruption by sin, a doctrine of sin that makes clear the way sin obscures humans' perception of God, and an account of Christian formation that takes the soul's corruption and the pervasiveness of sin into consideration. While at times Gregory's assumptions about human nature conflict with contemporary understandings of the body in particular, I suggest that his theology can provide us with a basic framework within which we might develop an account of Christian formation. I devote the next chapter to a discussion of Gregory's account of the soul, its corruption and its ascendance toward perfection in God. In the fifth chapter I attend specifically to Gregory's account of Christian formation and of the way in which Christian teaching and the Scripture guide the believer on her journey into God.

⁹¹ This approach is set out particularly clearly for instance in Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life*.

The Body's Reason

Gregory and Macrina on the Soul

In the first three chapters, I set out two basic problems in contemporary discussions of Christian identity. The first concerned the place of Christian formation in that discussion. I suggested the need to develop an account of formation appropriate for the postmodern context shared by Rowan Williams, Kathryn Tanner, and John Milbank. The second problem, which is related to the first, is the problem of sin: how might we articulate an account of sin? Each of my modern interlocutors acknowledged the problem of sin in some form; none, however, offered an account of how sin might interfere with the performance or practice of Christian identity as they described it. The complexity of their notions of performance and of the assessment of what counts as Christian makes this problem especially acute.

At the end of chapter 3, I suggested that we turn for help to Gregory of Nyssa. I should say at the outset that this chapter and the next, do not constitute an exercise in historical theology, but are an act of retrieval.¹ Gregory's accounts of sin and formation

¹ I do not use "retrieval" as an excuse to ignore the secondary scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa. Instead, I treat the historical theologians who have worked on Gregory's thought, especially in the last few decades, as aids to the project of bringing Gregory's theology into contemporary discussion in constructive theology faithfully.

provide resources for the development of the kind of account of formation and sin appropriate for the postmodern context. I begin with a description of Gregory's account of the soul. I will show that soul language, rather than being a corruption of biblical Christian theology, provides a site for exploring the interrelationship between such different topics as the contemplation of God and the practice of Christian community. My discussion of soul language builds on Rowan Williams' identification of the problem of the loss of soul language in the contemporary social context. The recovery of soul language, however, can only serve the purpose of bringing together discussions of sin, formation, and practice in the context of dense theological discussion – such as we find in Gregory's work. Gregory's doctrine of the soul suggests some foundational themes that soul language helps bring together. Gregory describes soul as linking memory and imagination to the body, and shows that the *telos* of the purified soul is sharing in the divine love.

My appeal to Gregory thus responds in part to Rowan Williams' argument in *Lost Icons* for the recovery of soul language. Williams rejects what he refers to as “the ‘soul’ of early modern philosophy, an immaterial individual substance.” Instead he suggests that we need to retrieve a notion of “soul” as “a whole way of speaking, of presenting and ‘uttering’ the self.” Importantly, for the purposes of the present chapter, Williams links this sense of soul “that presupposes *relation* as the ground that gives the self room to exist”² with an understanding of human beings as “agents at whose centre is ‘the image of God’, the capacity for reflecting God’s gratuitous making-possible of the life of what is other.”³ In this chapter I argue that the notion of soul Williams sketches is precisely what ought to be recovered as a first step toward constructing a theological account of Christian formation, including an account of sin. Thus, I focus my attention in this chapter on Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of the soul and its purification. His account of the soul has much in common with the notion of soul Williams hints

² *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 160.

³ *Lost Icons*, 161.

at in *Lost Icons*. Gregory's discussions of soul, especially in his treatises *On Virginity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, can help us to understand the relationship between bodily practices and spiritual "identity" formation. Gregory's account of soul also shows how the receptivity by which the soul reflects the divine image is *active*.

Two aspects of the soul's formation will become clearer in the discussion of Gregory's doctrine of the soul. First, I will discuss Gregory's recommendation of ascetic practice as training human beings for participation in God. Second, I discuss the soul's endless movement into the divine. For Gregory, formation is not the same as catechesis. The formation of the soul, which involves both shaping and purification, continues beyond the catechumenate, throughout the life of the individual.

I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of the place of soul language in Gregory's theology and its usefulness in the present work. Then I turn to Gregory's early treatise *On Virginity*. My reading of the treatise sketches the structure of Gregory's account of the soul and the soul's need for transformation, as well as the role of ascetic practice as vehicle for that transformation. Because Gregory regards the soul as the seat of the image of God, I pay special attention to his description of the nature and function of the image of God in humanity, which provides us with a basis for understanding his moral and ascetic theology. To complete my discussion of Gregory's account of the soul, I turn to those two treatises whose principal character is his sister, Macrina: *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and the *Life of Macrina*.⁴ In *On the Soul and the*

⁴ In my discussion of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* I refer to what Macrina says for the sake of simplicity. Since my purpose in reading the treatise is to discover Gregory's account of the soul, I assume that – whatever Macrina may or may not have said – Gregory uses the dialogue as a vehicle for presenting a doctrine of the soul. For more on the dialogue and the figure of Macrina within it, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67 (1998), 1–31; Virginia Burrus, "Macrina's Tattoo," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003), 403–417; and idem, "Is Macrina a Woman? Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection," in *The Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 249–264.

Resurrection Gregory identifies the soul's *telos* as participation in the operation of divine love and hints at the problems the soul faces en route to that goal. The *Life of Macrina* illustrates the ascetic life lived well and lived fully: Macrina displays the ideal of the apathetic soul.⁵ Because my aim is to draw out Gregory's account of the soul, my reading of these three texts is selective.⁶ My discussion of soul in the present chapter focuses on the soul as the object of transformation through ascetic practice.⁷ Chapter 5 continues the discussion of the soul's transformation, but shifts the focus from ascetic practice to the role of doctrine and Scripture in that process. In both chapters I follow Williams' lead in attempting to retrieve soul language for contemporary theological reflection.

Why Do I Speak of the Soul?

The first step in my discussion of Gregory's account of the soul is to offer an *apologia* for soul language. I am not offering a general discussion of the soul here, but showing that fundamental elements

⁵ Gregory uses precisely this term in *On Virginit*y to describe the soul in its ideal state: see *virg.*, GNO VIII/I, 277; FC 58, 28. It is the soul freed from passions that serves as guide to bodily purity.

⁶ For a comprehensive reading of these texts and discussion of Macrina's significance as a theologian, see Anna Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008). I use Silvas' translation for *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and have consulted it in my reading of the *Life of Macrina*.

⁷ Note: what I refer to as the transformation of the soul is not quite "transformation." Gregory does not see the soul as in need of transformation so much as reformation. The soul must be purified of all the "dirt" clinging to it through the hold of the passions, in order for the image of God to shine clearly through the soul. The object of asceticism is to cleanse the soul. What we see in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is a discussion of the soul's origin and *telos*, and its need for purification is obvious there. We will see a display of the apathetic soul in Gregory's telling of Macrina's life. Then, in chapter 5, I will draw from Gregory's *Catechetical Oration* an ontological description of the soul's fallenness and its subsequent bondage to the passions.

of Gregory's account of soul are still sustainable.⁸ It provides the discursive space for his description of the nature and possibility of progress in Christian life, which offers a way of talking about change that does not focus on moral behavior or avoid the question of progress in Christian life.

Soul language is an indispensable aspect of the patristic theologies on which many contemporary theologians draw. In what follows I will attempt not only to show the significance of such language from Gregory's account of formation, but also to show the possibility of recovering such language within the modern context. In the first place, rather than being a now-unsustainable item imported wholesale from "philosophy," this chapter will demonstrate that a doctrine of the soul like Gregory's is appropriate for theological reflection. The soul is intrinsic to Gregory's approach to Christology,

⁸ For further discussion of the nature of the soul in Gregory of Nyssa, see Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Soul and Body in the 4th Century* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009); Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: A Study of Theological Anthropology in Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad, 2003); Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 227–246; John Cavarnos, "The Relation of Body and Soul in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa," in *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie*, ed. Heinrich Dörrie (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 61–78; E. Peroli, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul," *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997), 117–139; Michel René Barnes "The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa's Psychology," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* (1994): 1–24; Ton H. C. Van Eijk, "Marriage and Virginitly, Death and Immortality," in *Epektasis*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), 209–235; Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958), 61–94. See also the scholarship on Gregory's notion of the image of God referenced in note 20 below. When we begin to explore how deeply Gregory's account of the soul has been shaped by theological need we see how difficult it is to assume that the mere use of soul language makes him subject to the accusation that his thought shows a "biblical" Christianity overcome by "Greek philosophy." The various adaptations that constitute his account of the soul must be considered individually and as parts of a constructive theological account of the soul. Perhaps Gregory can even show us what it means to adapt cultural materials in a slightly different way than Tanner might have imagined.

ecclesiology, and exegesis.⁹ In the second place, I will show that Gregory's language of soul may be appropriated without also assuming an unhelpfully dualistic or individualistic account of salvation.

Gregory answers the question "Why do I speak of the soul?" in the second book of his *Against Eunomius*.¹⁰ Although Gregory's main object in the treatise is to show that we cannot know God's essence, he turns to human psychology for an example of something about which we do speak, and yet do not comprehend. The soul, Gregory reckons, is a mystery beyond our comprehension:

Who is acquainted with its very existence, whether it is material or immaterial, whether it is purely incorporeal, or whether it exhibits anything of a corporeal character; how it comes into being, how it is composed, whence it enters into the body, how it departs from it, or what means it possesses to unite it to the nature of the body . . . how one and the same soul, in its eager curiosity to know the things which are unseen, soars above the highest heavens, and again, dragged down by the weight of the body, falls back on material passions, anger and fear, pain and pleasure . . . and all the contraries that are produced in the faculties of the soul?¹¹

Experience, Gregory suggests, confuses us: the passions and reason seem to battle each other within us. How, then, can we account for the unity of the soul? Whereas, as we will see later in the chapter, Gregory can talk about the soul in terms reminiscent of the contemporary philosophical treatments of the topic, here he goes instead to the biblical record. "What word," he asks, "of the inspired Scripture has taught us the manifold and multiform character of what we understand in speaking of the soul?"¹² The

⁹ For the manner in which Gregory interweaves exegesis and philosophical thought, see Mariette Canévet, *Grégoire de Nysse et L'herméneutique Biblique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983). For a parallel and very illuminating discussion of how premodern exegetes negotiated the relationship between an authoritative text and philosophical resources they found persuasive, see Bruce Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology in Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990): 69–102.

¹⁰ *c. Eunom.* II, 115 (GNO I, 259; NPNF V, 261).

¹¹ *c. Eunom.* II, 107 (GNO I, 258; NPNF V, 261).

¹² *c. Eunom.* II, 109 (GNO I, 258; NPNF V, 261).

Scripture, he suggests, does not give us a straightforward account of the composition and operation of the soul. Gregory compares our knowledge of the operation of the soul to our understanding of fire. We can ask questions about how it starts, how it burns, and so on, but finally, he says, “we heed only to the subservience of this fire to life, seeing that he who avails himself of its service fares no worse than he who busies himself with inquiries into its nature.”¹³

Gregory is at his most practical here, and what he says about the soul in this context helps us to see a dimension of his account of the soul that is not expressed so straightforwardly in either *On Virginity* or *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Soul language is given in Scripture, which does not offer us an explanation of how the soul works. For Gregory, the Bible functions more as an owner's manual or user's guide to a car or a computer than a science or engineering textbook that explains how it functions or how it is built. What we need to know about this concept, the information the Bible *does* give us, might be more aptly described as care for and use of the soul. So when Gregory talks about the soul's reflecting the divine brightness in *On Virginity*, he is not providing a technical account of a function of the soul; rather, he is describing the proper operation of this human capacity. The soul's function is to bear the divine image, to reflect God, and we take care of it (with the help of the Holy Spirit) so that it performs this function well.

Gregory's answer to the question does not crumble in the face of recent scholarly discussion that suggests that traditional Christian belief in a soul is not warranted.¹⁴ Gregory would very likely have listened carefully to the positions presented by Christian theologians who have discussed this topic in the last couple of decades, and responded to them as he did to the regnant philosophical notions in his own day. His answer comes in two parts. First, he

¹³ *c. Eunom.* II, 117–118 (GNO I, 260; NPNF V, 262).

¹⁴ See, for example, Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Warren Brown, Nancy Murphy, and H. Newton Maloney, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998); and Joel Green and Stuart Palmer, eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

says that we must speak of the soul because soul language is not only a part of philosophical discourse, but permeates the biblical record of the encounter between humanity and God. The objection that Gregory means something different when he uses the term will not stand: the concept of “soul” is already prevalent in Hellenistic Judaism. Second, bearing that in mind, he suggests that we do not speak of the soul as something whose essence we can grasp or define. Although the essence of the soul is inscrutable (like the essences of all created things), “soul” serves as an important placeholder for the complex of human faculties that relate human beings to God.

Gregory’s own account draws from a number of sources, and cannot be fit easily into a philosophical school. Although he frequently describes the soul in ways that suggest that his anthropology is fashioned according to a Platonic model, the mechanics of the soul are slightly different from other accounts. For example, in Gregory’s account the properly functioning soul is characterized by faithfulness to God rather than intellectual power. Gregory’s account of the soul thus offers an alternative to mind-body dualism: the soul is not the “mind” that can be opposed (conceptually if not practically) to the “body.”¹⁵ Instead, Gregory describes the soul and body in ways that attest to the inseparability of soul from body, and at the same time distinguish the work of the soul from the tasks of reason.¹⁶ The soul, as we will see in this chapter and the next, names that dimension of human being that allows the individual to receive grace and to participate in God.

¹⁵ Certain types of ascetical theology in the patristic and medieval periods seem to fall foul of the charge of dualism, and in recent years attempts have been made to talk about human beings as image of God and destined from eternal life in God’s presence in ways that steer clear of any kind of dualism. Theological proposals along these lines vary greatly. Some, as those mentioned above, respond to the findings of neuroscience, others address the problem of denigration of the body implicit in a hierarchical dualism. In this chapter and the next, I will argue that the charge of dualism does not stick to Gregory, and suggest that his account of the soul offers a different way of thinking about the contemporary dilemmas.

¹⁶ Gregory makes this clear in *De anima et resurrectione* and *De hominis opificio*; see Kevin Corrigan’s discussion of these texts in *Evagrius and Gregory*, 145–155.

The Apathetic Soul: Mirror of the Divine

I have given Gregory's reasons for using soul language and indicated what work he intends that language to do. In what follows, I turn to his account of the soul itself by examining his treatise *On Virginity*, which is widely regarded as Gregory's earliest written work.¹⁷ Gregory's initial discussion of the soul is important, because he demonstrates in it that the need to talk about the soul arises out of a concern for Christian formation. In *On Virginity* Gregory connects his account of the soul with the concrete practice of sexual renunciation;¹⁸ later, in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and other treatises, he adds a degree of technical precision to his account of the soul.¹⁹ I begin with the idea of soul as the subject of ascetic discipline, before delving into the technical discussion of the later treatise. Although my focus in this section is *On Virginity*, I will

¹⁷ I follow the now standard sequence suggested by Gerhard May, "Die Chronologie des Lebens und der Werke des Gregor von Nyssa," in *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse*, ed. M. Harl (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 51–66, which suggests that the treatise was written in 371 or 372. The same ordering is maintained by Ronald Heine in the introduction to his *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms. Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 8. Further evidence for it is offered in Michel René Barnes, "'The Burden of Marriage' and Other Notes on Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*," *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001), 12–19.

¹⁸ Notwithstanding Mark D. Hart's clever but ultimately unpersuasive re-reading. See his "Gregory of Nyssa's Ironic Praise of the Celibate Life," *Heythrop Journal* 33 (1992): 1–19 (cf. his "Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa's Deeper Theology of Marriage," *Theological Studies* 51 [1990], 450–478). Hart's thesis has provoked much discussion: for critique see Valerie Karras, "A Reevaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13 (2005), 111–121; for an attempt to extend it to other works see John Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), 219–247.

¹⁹ See, for example, Verna F. Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992). It is worth noting that Gregory does seem at points to be saying contradictory things. See Ekkehard Mühlberg, "Synergism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 68 (1977), 93–122. The cooperation of the individual and the Spirit is an example of inconsistency.

occasionally supplement my reading with material from *On the Making of Man*.

I first read Gregory's account against the backdrop of Milbank's interpretation of *On Virginity*, which is the backbone of his description of active reception. In his discussion, Milbank retrieves and rehabilitates the term *apatheia*. For Milbank, *apatheia* names the state of being (of the soul, Gregory might say) in which one is most fully capable of active reception. Milbank interprets the opposite of *apatheia* as a state of passivity, or being subject to the passions.²⁰ The basic impulses that direct us to meet our survival needs are not inherently sinful; for example, eating is necessary for our survival, and experiencing hunger does not make one subject to the passions.²¹ Those same impulses go astray when the need for food becomes the desire for culinary delights. Following Gregory, Milbank distinguishes between those impulses that remind us of the needs of the body and the passions, which enslave us to the pleasures of the body. Milbank argues from Gregory's discussion in *On Virginity* as well as several other works (mainly *Against Eunomius* and *Life of Moses*) that the Christian life is a life lived through the activity of receiving the very life of God, and growing in our understanding of ourselves as living by participation in God. This way of life, he seems to say, is the opposite of sinful passivity.

Milbank's reading of Gregory, however, misses what is perhaps the most important thing about *apatheia*: it is impossible to achieve such freedom from the passions without consistent discipline and the grace of God. According to Gregory, as we shall see, the Christian life is a life lived not by intuition, but by discipline. Whereas Milbank hardly touches on the question of discipline, Gregory makes discipline the focal point of the treatise. Almost his first move is to suggest

²⁰ "The Force of Identity," in *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 203. I will discuss the passions in Gregory's theology in more detail below. For further discussion of *apatheia* and the passions in Gregory's theology, see Smith, *Passion*, especially 81, 166–170, and 205; Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 172–176; and Richard Sorabji, *Emotions and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially 391–395.

²¹ Milbank differentiates between impulses and passions, and insists that "No passion does not mean no feeling" ("The Force of Identity," 203).

an example, so that those intending to pursue a life of virginity might have some rule by which to measure their own lives. Whereas Milbank concentrates his discussion on the *receptivity* that is really active, we see Gregory in *On Virginity* focusing on the quality of the *activity* that enables proper reception.²²

The image of God is activity because being in the image of God means reflecting God's *activity*.²³ I will discuss the image language Gregory uses in more detail below; here I give just one example. Gregory likens the soul's power of reflection to that which water or a mirror has by virtue of its smooth and shiny surface. The analogy illustrates Gregory's notion of active reception quite clearly. The water or mirror *receives* the beam of light from the sun and *creates* a beam of light from itself.

. . . the mind of man, when, after leaving this muddy and dusty life, it is purified through the power of the Spirit, becomes light-like, and it is mixed with the true and lofty purity, and it glows and is filled with rays and becomes light in accordance with the promise of the Lord who declared that the just will shine like the sun. We see this happen also on earth in the case of a mirror or water or anything that has the power of reflection because of its smoothness. For, when these receive the beam of the sun, they create another beam from themselves, but this would not occur if their clean and shiny surface became dirty.²⁴

Gregory describes the mirror surface as giving only what it has been given. The water or the mirror does not shine unless the sun (or

²² *virg.* 11–13 (GNO VIII/I.291–302; FC 58.38–46).

²³ Gregory describes human imitation of divine activity in detail in *hom. opif.* IV. To be fair, I should note that Milbank believes that participating in the work of God is a central aspect of active reception. The difficulty is that Milbank does not discuss the context for the development of such activity.

²⁴ *virg.* 11 (GNO VIII/I.295; FC 58, 41). Gregory continues the discussion, indicating that this purification begins before earthly life is over: "the only way for the soul to be attached to the incorruptible God is for it to make itself as pure as it can. In this way, reflecting as the mirror does, when it submits itself to the purity of God, it will be formed according to its participation in and reflection of the prototypal beauty." This is the state of the soul, Gregory suggests, of the person who has learned to desire the beautiful itself.

moon) shines on it: it can only ever give light it has received. This, I think, is precisely what Milbank has in mind when he uses Gregory's theology in constructing his own notion of active reception. For Gregory, however, the mirror illustration also provides a way of talking about how sin obscures the image of God, and suggests a method for restoring it. Sin affects the soul's reflective capacity in two ways: by clouding it over, and – we read later in the treatise – by turning it away. Gregory does use both metaphors for the effect of sin on the divine image, though in *On Virginity* he spends more time on the problem of dirt than the problem of disorientation.²⁵ As we will see below, the reorientation of the soul is the work of the Holy Spirit, while the clearing away of the surface is the object of ascetic practice. I begin with the latter, as it is the central theme of *On Virginity*. I return to the problem of disorientation later in this chapter, and continue that discussion in chapter 5.

Thus Gregory writes *On Virginity* to encourage his readers to dedicate themselves to a life of virginity as a means of restoring the shiny surface of the soul. He emphasizes the need for guidance in such an undertaking and suggests that his treatise will help readers to choose an appropriate guide. Gregory's *On Virginity* offers a window onto the elements of his theology in an inchoate form. I focus here on two interrelated themes: Gregory's concern with the proper understanding of the image of God, and his understanding of the restoration of human beings to their original, pre-fallen condition.

Created in the image of God

The cornerstone of Gregory's account of the soul is the understanding of human beings as created in the image of God.²⁶ Gregory

²⁵ Partly, I suspect, this is because at the outset he credits the inclination to virginity, and indeed to ascetic practice more generally, to the work of the Holy Spirit. In the *Catechetical Oration* this work of the Spirit is presented more clearly, and I will discuss it in more detail in chapter 5.

²⁶ I am indebted in what follows to Warren Smith's perspicacious treatment of the image of God in Gregory's theology. It has provided a helpful framework for my own thinking, though I do not engage Smith's distinction between the structural likeness and the moral likeness. See Smith, *Passion and Paradise*.

builds his account of the image of God in humanity from two key themes: humans reflect and participate in the *power* of God and the *beauty* of God. I will begin with the latter, because in *On Virginity*, Gregory emphasizes the capacity of the image of God to reflect divine beauty. Virginity, as Gregory describes it through the first half of the treatise, aims at imitation of and participation in divine beauty.²⁷ Although I will discuss sin and its effects in more detail below, it is worth attending briefly to the capacity that Gregory attributes to the image of God. Because sin has both a disorienting and a corroding effect on the soul's reflective ability (as *imago Dei*), the question arises: how then, does one begin to address the dual problem of the sin-afflicted soul? First, we have to bear in mind that Gregory sees the likeness to God as an intrinsic feature of human being, and yet that human beings display this feature in varying degrees. The goal of ascetic practice is to *partake* "as far as possible" in the likeness to God that is part of what it is to be human. Paradoxically, Gregory does not suggest that the degree of likeness varies, but rather that the degree to which one *partakes* of the likeness varies. In *On the Making of Man* Gregory uses the analogy of a musical instrument to describe the soul's animation of the body, and describes reason's function in a similar way. Neither the corrosive nor the disorienting effect of sin can *remove* the image of God – it can still be "played." Note that the disoriented and clouded image retains its reflective potential, even in the most afflicted soul. What, then, activates it? Gregory's answer is twofold.

First, Gregory insists at the beginning of *On Virginity* that the power to turn and attend to God comes not from the soul but from God. Even to recognize virginity's "lofty form," its beauty and purity, is a perception given "only to those whom the grace of God has kindly assisted in their good inclination."²⁸ The purity of the one who opts for the life of virginity, moreover, comes through participation in God's purity and incorruptibility. Though it may be overstating the case to say that to embark on a life lived toward God is a *response* to God's grace, that grace is nevertheless

²⁷ Gregory frequently refers to the beauty of the life of virginity. See, for example, *virg.* 1, 5, 11–12 (GNO VIII/I, 251, 277, 296–302; FC 58. 9, 28, 41–45).

²⁸ *Virg.* 1. (GNO VIII/I, 251; FC 58, 9).

present at the beginning of the “good inclination” that sets one on the path to incorruptibility. To recognize the potential for beauty within, our perception has to be helped by Beauty itself.

The notion of the soul’s beauty goes hand in hand with the immortality and *apatheia* of prelapsarian human nature.²⁹

This creature, man, therefore, did not have the elements of passion and mortality essentially and naturally in himself from the beginning. For it would not have been possible for the meaning of the word ‘image’ to be preserved if the copied beauty were different from the archetype.³⁰

Gregory’s argument here hinges on the imitation of God’s beauty by the archetype: passion and mortality would not only detract from the beauty, but would alter its essence, such that the quality of the human reflection would be different from the original divine beauty. I will discuss Gregory’s account of the passions in more detail when I move from *On Virginit*y to *On the Soul and the Resurrection*; for the present, we need simply to note that the passions weaken the power and mar the beauty of the soul, corrupting the soul’s reflection of the divine image.

The soul *ought* to reflect the divine beauty, by being turned toward God as a mirror directed toward the sun reflects its light. But because we are drawn to pleasant things in the sensible world first, we must turn back to God. Our senses begin to direct us toward pleasure before our rational souls are fully developed. Thus from childhood we have habits of desiring the pleasant rather than the Good, the pleasing rather than the Beautiful.³¹ The first step in

²⁹ Gregory’s chief reason for recommending virginity is its power to purify the soul. To refuse sexual pleasure is, he seems to say, to initiate the overthrow of the passions. Virginity is not an end in itself, but it is a practice through which virtue is cultivated and in which one may begin to appreciate the good and the beautiful. Resisting sexual desire helps the soul to perceive what is truly desirable: God. Of course, this picture is dependent on a physiology that moderns are unlikely to share. For further discussion, see Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

³⁰ *virg.* 12 (GNO VIII/I, 298; FC 58, 42).

³¹ See Harrison, *Grace and Human Freedom*, 156.

the process of (re)turning is, for Gregory, a matter of perception. In order to orient oneself toward the Beautiful, one must learn to perceive it. As I have argued above, the apprehension of the beautiful begins with the help of God's grace. Even after the initial glimpse of the beautiful, however, "the faculties of the soul are not sufficiently trained in distinguishing between the beautiful and the not beautiful." Training increases perception and draws the soul to participate in beauty and to reflect it. This perception and participation becomes an ever-increasing attentiveness to the beautiful,³² which brings with it the reformation of desire. Gregory explains that if a person had "sought after the simple and immaterial and formless nature of beauty, [she] would not have been led astray in [her] choice of the desirable." There seems to be a circular development of desire: the more one seeks the truly beautiful, the better one is able to perceive it. The better one's perception of the beautiful, the more desirable it becomes. So, Gregory suggests that if we would seek the truly beautiful, "[t]he path leading us to the discovery of beauty would thus come into being for us and we would not squander our power of desire on any of the other things which distract us and which are considered beautiful and, for this reason, worthy of our zeal and praise."³³

Second, Gregory assigns some agency to the person who has been awakened by the Spirit to true Beauty. He describes the soul's beauty as being obscured by dirt, which accumulates on the surface of the mirror when the soul's desire is for pleasure rather than for God. Gregory's descriptions of purification are connected to this type of language (both in *On Virginity* and elsewhere).³⁴ He explains:

The one who falls into the mire of sin no longer is the image of the incorruptible God, and he is covered through sin with a corruptible and slimy form which reason advises him to reject. However, if

³² *virg.* 11 (GNO VIII/I, 292; FC 58, 39): "the man who has purified the eye of his soul is able to look at such things and forget the matter in which the beauty is encased, and he uses what he sees as a kind of basis for his contemplation of intelligible beauty. By a participation in this beauty, the other beautiful things come into being and are identified."

³³ *virg.* 11 (GNO VIII/I, 293; FC 58, 39).

³⁴ See especially *or. catech.* 8 (SC 453, 192–194; Richardson, 284).

purged by the water, so to speak, of his way of life, the earthly covering can be stripped off, the beauty of the soul may reappear again.³⁵

Sin obscures the image of God, so that the beauty of God, which the soul ought to reflect, cannot be seen. Gregory's mention of the "way of life" further indicates that the activity proper to the soul (as created to reflect God's image) is cut off. The description Gregory gives here emphasizes the instrument-likeness of the image of God: there is a sense in which, if the instrument is not being "played," the activity of reflection is not happening, then it might be said that the individual so dulled and silenced no longer is the image of God. This does not suggest that the image is fully lost, but rather draws attention to the active quality of *being* in the image of God. The activity Gregory recommends as an antidote to sin happens in the context of a way of life, in which imitation of the divine life is done in and by a community. Imitation, learning Scripture, and participating in the practices of the community are essential to the display of divine life commensurate with being in the image of God. Only in a pattern of relationships does the divine life show forth as it ought.

Although Gregory recommends a life of virginity in particular as an antidote to the condition of sin, he is quick to point out the limitations on human beings' ability to shed the mire of sin.

The rejection of what is alien means a return to what is proper and natural to oneself, but this is not possible to achieve, unless one be created anew. For, being like the divine is not our function, nor is it the product of human ability, but it is part of the generosity of God who freely, at the birth of the first man, gave our nature a likeness to himself. The human effort extends only to this: the removal of the filth which has accumulated through evil and the bringing to light again the beauty of the soul which we had covered over.³⁶

³⁵ *virg.* 12 (GNO VIII/I, 299–300; FC 58, 44). There seem to be two aspects to purification: turning and clearing. Gregory appears to say that the turning back to God is made possible by God, and is not within the power of the individual. The removal of dirt, however, seems to be the task of the individual, and is accomplished through ascetic discipline. See Mühlenberg, "Synergism."

³⁶ *virg.* 12 (GNO VIII/I, 300; FC 58, 44).

The notion of the soul's beauty as reflecting the beauty of its creator gives Gregory a means of talking about purification. As we saw above, essential to the beauty of the image of God in humanity is the lack of passion and mortality. Gregory links the two ways in which human beings are created in the image of God with respect to the passions. We will see, next, that being in the image of the power is also defined with respect to the passions.

Gregory's second way of talking about the image of God in humanity is to talk about human beings as the image of the power of God:³⁷

Man was the image and likeness, as it has been said, of the sovereign power over all beings, and, for this reason, even in the exercise of choice man is like the One who has power over all things, being enslaved by necessity to none of the things outside of himself, and he acts according to what seems best to him.³⁸

Here the likeness is described in subtly different terms. The power of the one created in the image of God is not the same as the power of God. Although Gregory says that humanity is the image and likeness of the sovereign power, it is in fact the exercise of authority in choosing that mimics the divine. The subtle shift in language is important. While Gregory elsewhere refers to the powers or faculties of perception and desire, using the term for power, *dunamis*,³⁹ here he draws the analogy between God's authority over all things and the human exercise of choice. It is important to note what is significant to Gregory about the sovereign power as it is reflected in human beings. The key phrase is "being enslaved by necessity to none of the things outside himself." In the freedom

³⁷ Not often does he do so as specifically as he does here – but this passage helps us to read other passages, which are far more common, in which Gregory describes human beings as possessed of free will and the ability to choose, as pointing toward this feature of being made in the image of God.

³⁸ *virg.* 12 (GNO VIII/I, 298; FC 58, 43).

³⁹ On the significance of *dunamis* in fourth-century theology and Gregory in particular, see Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000); Michel René Barnes, "Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendental Causality," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998), 59–87.

from necessity, which is equivalent to the freedom to choose, lies the human capacity for virtue.⁴⁰ The true reflection of God's power is, however, displayed not merely in the exercise of choice, but in the free choice of virtue.⁴¹ Virtue, moreover, is defined with respect to the passions. For Gregory, humans' freedom from necessity means freedom from the control of the passions.⁴² While desire persists, the soul that is not drawn to earthly pleasures is drawn toward God. In *On Virginit*y Gregory may give the impression that power is absolute authority, but he does so in the context of advocating particular choices in habits of thought and lifestyle. Gregory also defines God's power, in other contexts, as *zoopoion*: life-giving.⁴³ Thus the notion of the individual's free will or self-determination finds fulfillment only in agreement with God her Creator, and in life-giving relationship with others.

So, we find two streams running through the treatise: the image of the power and the image of the beauty. The pairing is significant because virginity functions with reference to both aspects or facets of the divine image, and in the soul these two kinds of likeness form a single image of the divine that combines the idea of power or potentiality with beauty. In Gregory's thought the connection is quite logical. The power of choice involves the ability to perceive properly. As Martin Laird suggests, "knowledge of beauty is the proper function of *dianoia*, but its capacity to get entangled in the realm of the senses causes it to grow thick and obstruct its more natural

⁴⁰ *hom. opif.* 16.11 (PG 44, 184B; NPNF V, 405); *or. catech.* 31 (SC 453, 280–82; Richardson, 309); *Hom. in Cant.* 5 (GNO VI, 160–161; Norris, 173): "Virtue must be uncoerced, voluntary, and free of all necessity." See also Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 22–23.

⁴¹ The relationship between the soul, the passions, and the image of God is more clear in *anim. et res.* It is clear from Gregory's discussion in that text that the ordering of the passions is essential for the proper display of the divine image.

⁴² For an exceptionally clear and accessible description of the relationship between freedom, choice, and the passions, see Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 67.

⁴³ Gregory's use here parallels 1 Corinthians 15:45, and conditions his use of authority (*exousia*). For Paul's use of the term, see J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), especially 260–262. See also Karl Holl, *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den grossen Kappadoziern* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1904), 209ff.

tendency.”⁴⁴ The perception and reflection of the beautiful displays the image of God within, as Gregory explains that “the one who has purified himself will see the divine beauty in himself.” But this perception is impossible while the soul – and with it the understanding – is in bondage to the passions. One can neither see nor desire what is truly good without purifying the soul. Gregory uses the example of a reflective surface, which we have already noted, to explain how the image works: when water or a mirror receives the beam of the sun, it creates “another beam from [itself], but this would not occur if [its] clean and shiny surface became dirty.” The purification of the soul has the restoration of its clean and shiny surface as its object, but this is not the final goal. The purification of the soul ultimately assists the person in the perception of the beautiful, which is what draws her steadily toward God. The accurate reflection of God’s life in the soul, in turn, is love.⁴⁵

The proper functioning of the soul also issues in virtuous action in which the love proper to the soul is displayed. This is the connection between *On Virginity* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: in the former Gregory focuses on the proper functioning of the soul. The soul should reflect the divine, as the seat of the image of God. Gregory’s discussion of the soul and the passions achieves greater precision in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, to which I now turn.

Gregory and Macrina on the Soul⁴⁶

The account of the soul begun in *On Virginity* is developed further in Gregory and Macrina’s discussion in *On the Soul and the*

⁴⁴ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 36.

⁴⁵ See Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 101–109; and William Harmless, SJ, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 347–358.

⁴⁶ For further discussion of the dialogue, see Warren Smith, “Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De anima et resurrectione*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 52 (2001), 37–60; Michel René Barnes “The Polemical Context and Content of Gregory of Nyssa’s Psychology,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* (1994), 1–24. Barnes suggests that the dialogue form of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* reflects Gregory’s engagement with an earlier generation’s moral and ascetic psychology.

Resurrection.⁴⁷ The latter treatise presents Gregory's most detailed account of the soul, including the soul's proper destiny, which is attachment to God in the endless operation of divine love.⁴⁸ Thus, whereas the previous section focused on Gregory's early and rather generalized discussion in *On Virginit*y of the general features of the soul's life, this section focuses on Gregory's much more technical discussion of the soul and the passions in the life of one being saved in the later *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

With Macrina as his conversation partner, Gregory develops a doctrine of the soul whose boundaries are defined by his understanding of the biblical idea of the image of God. In so doing, Gregory also relies on a range of ideas about the soul that come from the philosophical traditions of classical and late antiquity. In what follows I do not discuss exhaustively the philosophical sources of Gregory's anthropology.⁴⁹ My interest in Gregory's account of the soul is rather to understand the soul as that which is to be transformed in the process of Christian formation, and to demonstrate three points.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Of course the latter is a much later treatise, having been written probably ten years or so after *On Virginit*y. See, for example, Michel René Barnes, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in its Psychological Context," *Modern Theology* 18 (2002), 478.

⁴⁸ There is no other text in Gregory's corpus that gives as much detail and development to his account of the soul. My discussion of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* does make use of Gregory's other writings, especially the *Hexameron* and *On the Making of Man*, where references are helpful in understanding the meaning of Gregory's terminology in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

⁴⁹ There are several studies of Gregory's use of philosophical sources, especially considerations of the extent to which his anthropology follows Plato's account of the soul. For an especially helpful, extended treatment of the philosophical traditions on which Gregory draws in constructing his account of the soul, see Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, especially 48–74.

⁵⁰ My reading coincides at many points with that of Rowan Williams in "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. R. Wickham and C. P. Bammell (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 227–246. See also Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses"; George Papademetriou, "St Gregory of Nyssa on the Human Soul," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 45 (2000), 661–662; and Catharine P. Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue On the Soul and the Resurrection," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), 20–30. On the question of gender in the dialogue see Burrus, "Is Macrina a Woman?"; Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990), 441–471.

First, Gregory's treatise portrays the soul as created for the purpose of sharing in the divine operation of love, which is at the heart of the divine life. Second, because sin has corrupted the soul's ability both to reflect God's life and to participate in that life, a discipline for transformation is necessary for the soul to progress in virtue. The problem of the passions dominates this aspect of the discussion: in its bondage to the passions, the soul turns away from God and is attached to worldly goods. Third, and finally, the soul's progress into the divine life is infinite. Even those who exemplify the life of love and freedom from the passions have room to grow, so to speak.⁵¹ The desire that is rightly oriented toward God is never satiated, because each new vision of God's beauty incites the desire for more, and God's beauty is infinite.

On the nature of the soul: The body's reason

Gregory's account of the soul in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is grounded in the biblical idea of human beings as created in the image of God.⁵² For example, when Gregory asks Macrina about the place of anger and desire in the soul as she has defined it, he presses her precisely on the issue of the unity of the soul, a mark of its creation in God's image. She must provide an explanation of the relationship between anger and desire and the "intellectual essence" in the human being that does not imply that the soul is not a single entity or that people have multiple souls.⁵³ The unity of the soul is essential to the

⁵¹ For discussion of this concept in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, see Verna Harrison, "Receptacle Imagery in St. Gregory of Nyssa's Anthropology," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 23–27.

⁵² Though Gregory does not discuss the creation of human beings in the image of God at length in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, the assumption of that creation serves as a guiding principle throughout the dialogue. Gregory interprets a range of philosophical ideas about the soul using as a rule his understanding of the soul as the seat of the image of God. His belief in human beings' likeness to God provides the logic of Gregory's doctrine of the soul.

⁵³ Michel Barnes develops this idea at some length: he points out that *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and its companion, *On the Making of Man*, were both written during a period of heated debate about trinitarian theology. Thus Gregory has a stake – even in a treatise seemingly unrelated to the issues in the trinitarian debate – in safeguarding the consistency of his doctrinal formulations. See Michel René Barnes, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self."

soul's capacity for reflection of and participation in the divine life because God is one. As Macrina later says, once the soul has reached its goal, it will be "simple and one in form and accurately godlike." Only then does the soul cleave to "that truly simple and immaterial good, which alone is really lovable and desirable." Through the soul's continued pursuit of the good, the soul "becomes through likeness to the good that which the nature in which it participates is."⁵⁴ Thus the soul, created to be the image of God, is destined not only to reflect God truly but finally to participate in God and through participation to become one with God.

We should note here that the image of God, as Macrina presents it, is not a possession of the individual, but an activity in which the soul turns toward the divine and comes to participate in the divine life. This is why, as we have seen above, Gregory can be interpreted at points as saying that the image of God is not something we retain unless we are participating in God. The image of God is that mirroring of the divine image that only happens through imitation of and participation in the divine life.⁵⁵ As such, the soul is also characterized by its capacity for this activity. Macrina states clearly – when asked by Gregory to define the soul – that "the soul is a living and intellectual substance which infuses into an organic and sensate body the power⁵⁶ of living and of receiving the

⁵⁴ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 93; Silvas, 210).

⁵⁵ See Lewis Ayres, "Deification and the Dynamics of pro-Nicene Theology: The Contribution of Gregory of Nyssa," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49 (2005), 375–395; David Balás, *Metousia Theou: God's Perfections according to Gregory of Nyssa*, *Studia Anselmiana* 55 (Rome: IBC Herder), 1966; and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ *dunamis*. See Barnes, "Divine Unity and the Divided Self," 478. Barnes draws from the passage in which Gregory returns to this definition a series of conclusions about Gregory's psychology. He summarizes his findings as regards Gregory's account of the will: "the will is ineffective in its attachment to the good; this lack of effectiveness is due to what is experienced as a conflict in the will; and this conflict suggests divisions in the will, i.e., the will is not meaningfully – as a moral agent – one with itself" (480). While Barnes' examination of Gregory's psychology serves to clarify Gregory's trinitarian theology, we nevertheless can put his analysis to use in understanding Gregory's account of the soul. The fact that the soul is described as a power, especially, is central to the link between the soul's activity as the same power and activity that constitutes the image of God in humanity.

impressions of sense.”⁵⁷ Power language is important here for two reasons. First, Macrina’s description indicates that the soul is a power. Gregory most often uses terminology for the soul’s function that indicates the soul’s life-giving power.⁵⁸ The soul gives the *body* the power of life. Macrina explains that the soul is “the life-giving power mingled...with the bodily nature.” Moreover, she reminds Gregory that “the reasoning power cannot otherwise come to be in the bodily life except that it comes into being with the senses.”⁵⁹ In life-giving and sensing the power of the human soul resembles that of other living creatures. Only in the intellectual faculty is the human soul unique, and it is this faculty that (in its purified state) mirrors the divine. The image of God is connected to reason because part of the process of reflection and participation involves the recognition of like by like. This final, crowning faculty of the

⁵⁷ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 48C; Silvas, 179).

⁵⁸ Gregory implicitly rejects the Stoic view of the soul; see Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 39–56. There is, it might be observed, a certain resemblance between the Stoic understanding of the soul’s pervasiveness in the body and Gregory’s understanding of the extension of the soul throughout the body. This is a fundamentally different theory of the unity of body and soul, however, as it is based on a different understanding of what the two elements involved are: for the Stoics, body and soul are blended as two material elements; for Gregory, the intellectual essence, which is immaterial, penetrates every part of the body mysteriously. For Gregory, the presence of the soul (mind) throughout the body enables the acquisition of knowledge: the mind directs the sensory organs and processes all information received through them at the point of contact.

⁵⁹ *anim. et res.* (PG 57Bff; Silvas, 193). Macrina explains the hierarchy of capabilities in the soul in some detail. On the most basic level, the power of life causes the growth and development of plant life, that is, those living things without sense-perception. Macrina sees this activity in human beings as well, and indeed this level of activity characterizes the very earliest stages of life in the womb. Next the power of life animates those with sense-perception, namely animals. Again, human beings share in this activity, beginning to develop sense-perception even before birth and continuing to develop throughout infancy. Finally, in the life of human beings the capacity for thought and reason exists. This faculty is unique to humanity: alone among earthly creatures the human being possesses the capacity for reason. Thus the soul encompasses all three of these levels: the capacity for growth and nourishment, the basic ability of perception through the senses, and the power of reason.

human soul distinguishes humanity. Alone among created things, humans possess the capacity for the recognition of the order of things, and the capacity for abstracting from that the existence and to a certain extent the character of the creator.⁶⁰

It is important to explore here the two ways in which Gregory's understanding of reason is qualified. I identify two characteristics of Gregory's notion of reason. First, the image of God does not consist solely in the soul's reasoning function. As Anthony Meredith points out, "to fail to display love is as fatal to our claim to be in the *image* of God as to be devoid of reason."⁶¹ The implication is that, to render differently that famous Pauline dictum, reason without love profits one not at all. The divine life in which one participates is nothing more or less, Macrina explains, than the operation of divine love. "For the life of the sublime nature is love, since the beautiful is wholly lovable to those who recognize it, and the divine recognizes itself . . . the divine life will always be activated through love."⁶² It is into that love that the human being ascends, and it is that love that ought to be displayed by a soul properly reflecting the divine life.

Second, the soul's power operates in the exercise of reason even as it gives life to the body. Intrinsic to the life-giving function and operating with it continuously, is the processing of sense-impressions. By its presence in the sensory organs, the soul not only gives life, but connects sense-impressions with the memory. I will discuss memory in more detail in chapter 5; for the present, we need only note that, for Gregory, memory is an important resource for the soul's intellectual function. Macrina's explanation of what is involved in the doctor's diagnosis provides a clear example of this interpretive function of the soul. She observes that his senses, even the sense of

⁶⁰ See, for example, *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 29A; Silvas, 178). Macrina's explanation of the "good part" in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. What is good according to sense-perception is not necessarily good, but what appears to the mind to be good. It is by the exercise of reason that a person chooses the good and orients herself toward eternity.

⁶¹ "The Concept of Mind in Gregory and the Neoplatonists," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 39.

⁶² *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 96C; Silvas 211).

smell, provide him with the information necessary to render his diagnosis. Then she asks:

How could these things be if there were not a certain intellectual power present to each of the organs of sense? Could our hand have taught us by itself, if the mind did not lead the tactile sense to knowledge of the subject before it? How could the ear apart from the mind, or the eye, or the nostril, or any other organ of sense, have helped us discern what we are looking for, if each of these existed all by itself? But it is the truest of all statements that one of pagan education is recalled to have expressed so well, that it is the mind that sees and the mind that hears.⁶³

Here I would like to make three points regarding Macrina's explanation. First, the soul connects the five senses to one another and to the memory. Macrina's mention of the doctor's "knowledge of the subject" points to the involvement of memory in the diagnosis. In making the diagnosis, the doctor's soul's rational faculty has a distinctly interpretive function.⁶⁴ The doctor is able to understand the meaning of the information gathered by his senses by combining it with his medical knowledge. The soul's cognitive function connects the body with the memory, forming an epistemic chain from sensation to cognition. So while the soul's reflection of the divine is bound to the characteristics of the rational faculty, understanding the soul's relationship to body and mind is a prerequisite for understanding Gregory's ascetic theology and his account of

⁶³ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 32A–B; Silvas, 179). The first reference Macrina makes to knowledge is the doctor's knowledge, which helps him to use the information gained through the senses to make a diagnosis: *tēn tou hypokeimenon gnosin*. When she goes on to describe the action of the sense-organs contributing "to the knowledge of the problem," the phrasing is quite different: *pros tēn epignosin tou zētoumenou sunērgēsen*.

⁶⁴ Macrina often refers to "mind" or "soul" as if the two were interchangeable. In those instances in which she uses "soul" to indicate the rational faculty, it seems likely that she means the soul in its intellectual capacity. The clearest evidence for this is that she calls "soul" that which exists after the death of the body: in this the soul reflects the immortality of deity. Yet it is not in the power of life at the level of growth or sense-perception that the soul is able to reflect or to participate in deity, but only through the intellect.

spiritual formation.⁶⁵ Second, the interpretive function of the soul suggests that, for Gregory, the soul is the seat of the imagination. It is the soul that directs the attention of the senses and organizes sense-perceptions. Macrina's explanation of the way in which the soul organizes sense-impressions to discover what is not seen from what is visible, using the example of her own doctor, makes clear that a central function of the soul is the creative or imaginative function. The doctor observes Macrina's condition with his five senses, but it is only through the "intelligent power" that what the senses detect is connected to the doctor's "knowledge of the subject." Moreover, she continues, it is the same process at work when Gregory looks at the sun: he does not conclude simply on the basis of its appearance that the sun is smaller than the earth. Rather, he attends carefully to the relative motion of the sun and moon and judges differently: the sun must be larger than the earth. She asks:

Do you then see what the sense of sight teaches you? Yet it would never have provided you with such insight by itself, if there were not something gazing through the eyes and using the data of the senses as guides of a kind to penetrate from what appears to that which does not appear.⁶⁶

The soul's activity here is imaginative:⁶⁷ it provides intellectual space and energy to combine perceptions with knowledge. That is, the soul – in its intellectual capacity – interprets what *is* seen to ascertain that which is *not* seen. Thus the doctor assesses Macrina's condition on the basis of how she appears, using those appearances to determine the nature of her illness.

⁶⁵ Gregory's account of the memory appears to participate in the Aristotelian tradition that distinguishes between an act of remembering as identifying merely the bringing to mind of discrete items in the memory and recollecting as an intentional act relating distinct items from the memory for the purpose of analysis, narration, or exemplification. Aristotle's relatively short treatise can be found online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/memory.html>; see also David Bloch, ed., *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection: Text, Translation, Interpretation and Reception in Western Scholasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁶⁶ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 33B; Silvas 80–81).

⁶⁷ I use "imaginative" here in a broad sense, which includes both inference and speculation; I am not suggesting that what the doctor does is imaginative in the way that, for example, the creation of a fictional character is imaginative.

The third point we should note in Macrina's explanation of the soul's nature takes us into the heart of the problem the soul has in attaining its proper goal, which is to become "simple and uniform and an accurate image of God." Integral to the soul's rational function, and inseparable from its creative or imaginative activity, is the faculty of free will.⁶⁸ But Gregory points out that the soul's activity is not limited to "the understanding and contemplative mind" and the management of "the organs of perception." The soul is a site of tension: reason conflicts with the passions.⁶⁹ In the following section, therefore, I examine Gregory's account of the passions.

***"Broken cisterns that can hold no water":
The problem of the passions***

In the dialogue, Gregory counters Macrina's description of the soul's function by claiming that the soul is also responsible for anger and desire. "We can observe many actions in which the desiring faculty takes the lead, and again many which arise because of anger," he says. Additionally, he reasons, neither anger nor desire originates with the body, but with the soul. He thus raises the question whether there are multiple souls in the body: "either anger and desire constitute other souls in us . . . or else not even the faculty of thought may be considered a soul in us."⁷⁰ To this, Macrina replies by observing that Gregory's question has been asked and answered in many other contexts; for her answer, however, she says she will rely on the scriptural record rather than the theories offered by philosophers. Macrina's answer thus differs from those of "the philosophers" because

⁶⁸ Cf. my discussion of free will, above. See also, for example, Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 23: Smith describes the will in Gregory's psychology as "simply a by-product of the soul's rational nature and therefore a capacity of the soul's rational faculty." The basis for any instruction in the discernment of the good is the assumption of the freedom of the will as a part of the rational faculty. See also John J. O'Keefe, "Sin, *apatheia* and Freedom of the Will in Gregory of Nyssa," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 52–59.

⁶⁹ Macrina alludes to the image of the chariot drawn by two horses in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

⁷⁰ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 49A; Silvas, 188).

of the assumptions with which she begins.⁷¹ In Gregory's theology, as we have seen, one of these assumptions is that the soul is a unity. Therefore a division within the soul is impossible: reason and emotion must be part of the soul.⁷²

Macrina explains that "since the principles of desire and anger are observed equally in the irrational and the rational natures, one could not reasonably characterize what is common as specific."⁷³ What is essential to the soul is the faculty of reason, which orders the soul and makes proper use of the emotions. The role of anger and desire is not that of sub-souls or co-equal parts of the soul with reason – so Macrina explains that these faculties are not intrinsic to the rational soul. Yet these emotional faculties are not to be eradicated completely: there remains a role for subdued aggression and desire in the movement of the soul toward God. This is perhaps most easily seen in Macrina's discussion of the soul's endless movement. The emotions are part of the movement of the soul and, when properly used, aid in the progress of the soul's ascent. This brings us to the third point in my reading of *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: the soul's infinite progress. Gregory's understanding of the movement of the soul will become clearer in the next section.

The upward call of God

Gregory introduces a question to which the whole of the dialogue seems to point: what moves the soul when desire is quenched?⁷⁴

⁷¹ Smith describes the difference: "The theological virtues, which rest upon belief in that vision of God, human nature, and the eschatological end of creation and history revealed in Scripture, transform the soul's intentional awareness (*orexis*) of the world from which all emotions come and so reorient the drives (*hormai*) of the soul toward the Divine. Thus even though virtues admired and encouraged by Nyssen may be almost identical to those admired and recommended by Seneca and Plato, Aristotle and Posidonius, the judgments and assumptions that inform the soul's *orexis* are decidedly different for Nyssen" (*Passion and Paradise*, 103).

⁷² Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 62–63.

⁷³ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 53A; Silvas, 190).

⁷⁴ This counters Origen's account of the fall of the soul from its original place with God. See Elizabeth Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History and the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 413–430. Clark suggests that Gregory may be putting forward theological ideas that might be considered Origenist while distancing himself from them.

Macrina responds with a detailed explanation of the soul's participation in God. Once the soul reflects God fully, it recognizes what is truly loveable and desirable and "is migled with it through the movement and activity of love, fashioning itself according to that which is ever comprehending and discovering."⁷⁵ Note: the language of movement here is the same terminology Gregory used to describe the questionable faculties of the soul, desire and anger. The shift here is significant. Whereas Macrina's explanation of the place of desire and anger in the human soul earlier concluded that those faculties as they exist in us now are not essential to the highest capacity of the soul, here she seems to say that the movement we associate with those faculties is transformed in the perfection of the soul. Richard Sorabji explains this transformation as a shift from appetite to enjoyment. Appetite does not relate us properly to the beautiful (that "which is really loveable and desirable"). Once we perceive the truly beautiful, appetite gives way to "actual enjoyment," and, at this stage, will directs us to beauty; we relate to beauty by will and by love.⁷⁶ The movement once associated with desire or anger is now the faculty of love.

The love that characterizes the soul in union with the divine replaces desire as the energy that keeps the soul moving in the right direction. In asking about what becomes of the soul once desire is extinguished, Gregory raises a question that alludes to Origen's discussion of the soul.⁷⁷ Macrina's answer dispenses with the troublesome aspect of Origen's doctrine of the soul, the problem of satiety. Although "the soul which has no insufficiency also casts out from itself the desiring impulse and disposition," satiety is not a danger. Offering her interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13, Macrina explains that "when the thing hoped for comes, all the others grow quiet while the operation of love remains." The soul's movement never stops, because the soul participates in the divine operation of love.

But then knowledge becomes love, because that which is recognized is beautiful by nature. The insolence of satiety cannot touch that which is truly beautiful. With no satiety able to disrupt this state of love for

⁷⁵ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 93C; Silvas, 210–211).

⁷⁶ Sorabji, *Emotions and Peace of Mind*, 393.

⁷⁷ See Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.8 and 2.9.2.

the beautiful, the divine life will always be activated through love. This life is beautiful by nature and lovingly disposed by nature towards the beautiful, and knows no limit to the activity of love, because no boundary of the beautiful can be comprehended such that love might leave off at the boundary of the beautiful. Indeed the beautiful is only limited by its opposite, but since its nature is unreceptive to the worse, it will go on towards the boundless and limitless good.

Inasmuch as every nature tends to attract what is related to it, and the human is in some way related to God because it bears within itself imitations of its archetype, the soul is by every necessity attracted to the divine which is akin to it, for it is altogether and in every way necessary that what belongs to God be secured as his own.⁷⁸

I have quoted Macrina's answer at length in order to display the logic of her argument: sufficiency in the soul does not lead to dangerous satiety because the soul becomes part of an endless circle of love. The satisfied soul knows, and therefore loves, the beautiful; there is no limit to this beauty and so also no end to the soul's journey in love.⁷⁹

Following her explanation of the nature of the object of the soul's purification, Macrina turns to the topic of that purification. It is important to note here that Macrina points to the development of hope, specifically of hope in the resurrection as an indispensable element in purification: "Hope initiates the forward movement" that sets one on the proper course.⁸⁰ The brief treatment of purification in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* centers on the fate of the passions in the resurrection. Importantly, though there is an end to the pain involved in purification, there is no end to the soul's

⁷⁸ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 93C; Silvas, 211–212).

⁷⁹ See also Warren Smith's discussion of this passage in *Passion and Paradise*, 186–187.

⁸⁰ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 92A; Silvas, 209). Warren Smith describes the role of hope in the healing of the soul in detail. He argues that hope counters the unbelief (in the resurrection) that keeps one unduly attached to earthly life. See *Passion and Paradise*, 97–103. See also Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses."

progress. The soul's participation in the divine life is characterized by endless growth in receptivity of infinite good.⁸¹

The purification that characterizes the soul's ascent begins in the course of earthly life. Gregory offers an important example of a life so lived in his telling of Macrina's life, to which I now turn. In particular I draw out the way in which Macrina's life as a part of community is essential to the growth of her soul. So far we have seen the extent to which the language of soul serves as a site for tying together an account of Christian anthropology and formation that begins with an understanding of human beings as by nature images of God, but which is also able to offer a remarkably sophisticated account of the deformation and reformation of that image in embodied human life. In what follows we will see how Gregory's account of Macrina demonstrates that the purified soul does not leave behind the Christian community but is an example to and within it. This exposition thus offers both one further aspect of an apologia for soul language and further indication about the formation of memory by example and belief – themes I explore through the next chapter.

The “Manly Virgin”: Gregory's Portrayal of the Apathetic Soul

Gregory uses Macrina's life and death as a vehicle for his portrayal of the soul freed from passions. At the same time, Macrina's life

⁸¹ *anim. et res.* (PG 46, ; Silvas 217): “For such is the participation in the divine good: it renders one in whom it comes about greater and more capacious, since it allows into the recipient an addition of power and magnitude, so that the one being nourished always increases and never ceases to increase. The fountain of the good wells up unfaillingly (cf. John 4.14) and the nature of the partaker makes of the entire inflow an addition to its own proportions, since nothing it receives is superfluous and useless. It becomes at the same time more attractive of the better and more able to contain it, each aspect growing along with the other, both the power which is nourished by the abundance of the good so that it grows greater, and the nourishing supply which matches the growth of those incremental powers. It is therefore likely that those in whom there is no limit to retard the increase will ascend to such a magnitude.”

shows forth the connection between soul language and Christian communal, embodied practice. The achievement of *apatheia*, in Gregory's understanding, is the aim of the Christian life; his description of *apatheia* as a feature of Macrina's life shows that such discipline develops in the context of a devoted community. Through Macrina, Gregory paints the portrait of one who is headed toward that eschatological participation for which human beings are created, and displays in the present the first fruits of purification. It is clear throughout the text that Gregory intends his sister to provide an example of the life of Christian virtue he discusses elsewhere and of which I have given an account in the preceding discussion in this chapter. I will discuss four themes in the text of the "letter" that illustrate Gregory's purpose in composing it. First, he makes clear that Macrina's life is exemplary. Second, her life is exemplary because of the level of freedom from passion she achieved. Third, Gregory describes the way of life Macrina shared with those in her community as transcending nature. Fourth, Macrina's life ends in love: Gregory reports Macrina's final words and attitude so as to make clear that her goal is to be received into divine love.

Macrina as example

Gregory begins the letter by recalling a conversation in which Macrina's ascetic accomplishments were discussed, and which resulted in Gregory's agreeing to write down her story at his friend's urging:

since you were convinced that the story of her good deeds would be of some use because you thought that a life of this quality should not be forgotten for the future and that she who had raised herself through philosophy to the highest limit of human virtue should not pass along this way veiled and in silence, I thought it good to obey you and tell her story, as briefly as I could, in a simple, unaffected narrative.⁸²

Macrina's story deserves telling, for she has achieved something notable. In Gregory's letter we discover Macrina's achievement also

⁸² GNO VIII/I, 371; Corrigan, 20.

constitutes “the highest limit of human virtue.” In this way the aim of the narrative shares with *On Virginit*y the task of providing an example of the kind of life we ought to live, and so to be able to recognize a good guide when we see her. Macrina’s leadership in the community she founded is based on the exemplary quality of her life: by virtue of her moral excellence she became a teacher of others. The purification of her soul is inseparable from the relationships she has with others – especially her mother. Macrina’s relationship with her mother provides the basis for her earliest efforts toward purification. Gregory writes that “under the guidance of her mother, she kept her own life spotless, being directed in everything by the approval of her mother’s eyes.”⁸³ In addition to her mother, Macrina’s web of relationships includes the women of the household and others who joined the community, her youngest brother Peter, the “great” Basil, and Gregory himself. Gregory’s presentation of Macrina as example describes her as reflecting the image of God. In relating a vision, which he later comprehends as being about Macrina, Gregory finds himself holding what seem to be the relics of a martyr. He saw coming from these relics “a bright gleam of light, as from a flawless mirror which had been placed face to the sun, so that my eyes were blinded by the brilliance of the gleam.”⁸⁴ The similarity to the language of reflection Gregory uses in *On Virginit*y is striking.

Gregory’s comparison of Macrina to the Christian martyrs is a second feature of the *Life*. He makes mention, in his account of her birth, of Macrina’s secret name: Thecla. Gregory also describes Macrina’s strength as martyr-like: when she learned of the death of Basil, having endured the deaths of her brother Naucratius and their mother, “she stood her ground like an undefeated athlete, who does not cringe at any point before the onslaught of misfortune.”⁸⁵ The language of the athlete used here is one frequently found in descriptions of ascetic practice in the fourth century, but that usage is itself an assimilation of ascetics to earlier Christian martyrs. The language

⁸³ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 377; Corrigan, 26). Macrina’s mother directed her education earlier in childhood, focusing Macrina’s instruction on the Scriptures rather than non-Christian literature (25).

⁸⁴ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 387; Corrigan, 33–34).

⁸⁵ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 386; Corrigan, 33).

is famously found, for example, in the martyrdom of Felicity and Perpetua and finds a very early Jewish parallel in such intertestamental literature as 4 Maccabees.⁸⁶ In this context he interprets his vision of the relics as relating to Macrina. Gregory makes the connection between the dream and his sister only after he discovers that she is ill. Gregory's references to martyrs become more pointed as he writes. He interprets his dream after he has seen Macrina: "what I had seen seemed to unveil the hidden meaning of the vision in my dream. What I had seen before me was truly the remains of a holy martyr, one who had been dead to sin, but illumined by the grace of the Holy Spirit." Gregory alludes to Stephen, the first martyr, as he describes the dying Macrina as seeing the "victor's crown" at the end of the race. After Macrina's death, the community "spent the whole night singing hymns around her body, just as they do in celebrating the deaths of martyrs."⁸⁷

In his description of the events surrounding Macrina's funeral, Gregory makes her reputation known. For although he has indicated that Macrina led a hidden life, scores of people, including the local bishop, join the funeral procession. He gives the reason for Macrina's fame as the contributions made by her community to the welfare of the surrounding area. Gregory concludes the narrative with an allusion to the end of John's Gospel. Like the miracles of Jesus which John cannot include, Macrina's life was full of wonders that would overwhelm the reader by their sheer number.

Macrina's apathetic soul

Gregory's portrayal of Macrina's life emphasizes what he calls on one occasion "the high quality of her thinking."⁸⁸ It is the strength of Macrina's reason that places her soul beyond the reach of passion's blows. Gregory's description of his sister's growth in virtue as a young girl recounts an ever-increasing dedication to a life of

⁸⁶ See *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (XVIII–XXI), trans. and ed. Thomas J. Hefferman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133–135, and 4 Maccabees 6:9–10.

⁸⁷ GNO VIII, 406; Corrigan, 49.

⁸⁸ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 386; Corrigan, 33).

perfection. In this, Macrina becomes teacher to her own mother: as her mother's eyes are Macrina's guide to keeping "her own life spotless," so her life becomes "an example . . . to her mother towards the same goal, namely that of philosophy, drawing her on little by little to the immaterial, more perfect life."⁸⁹ Thus Macrina is able to support her mother in the attacks of grief that follow the death of her brother Naucratus. Though Emmelia is overcome with sorrow, Macrina restores her. Gregory explains that in this episode "the excellence of the great Macrina became clear. Placing reason in opposition to passion, she kept herself from falling and, by becoming a support to her mother's weakness, she drew her back again from the depths of her grief."⁹⁰

Gregory frequently describes Macrina as transcending nature, so perfectly does she resist the passions. At the very beginning of the treatise, Gregory wonders whether the name "woman" ought to be applied to one who "has risen above nature."⁹¹ His descriptions of Macrina's childhood, education, and early adulthood demonstrate that she has been formed in contrast to the usual characteristics of femininity. Her education is from the Scriptures, and not from the poets; thus she is shielded from the passions of women depicted in the latter. Gregory makes clear that as Macrina grows, she stands firm in the face of grief, and in so doing supports her mother as well. Unlike the women of the household, who are portrayed as giving in to grief after Macrina's death, Macrina does not falter at the deaths of Naucratus, her mother, or Basil. But it is not enough to say that Macrina rises above female nature. In the comparison of his own grief at Basil's passing with Macrina's steadfastness, Gregory suggests that it is as if Macrina already has transcended *human* nature:

⁸⁹ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/1, 377; Corrigan, 26).

⁹⁰ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/1, 380; Corrigan, 27): "excellence" is *arete*.

⁹¹ While Gregory follows the custom of associating women with the passions, his statement about Macrina transcending nature goes beyond her transcendence of the "feminine." Her mastery over the passions is exemplary for men and women alike. See the discussion of Macrina as example in Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words"; and Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 110–132. For Gregory's portrayal of Macrina as exemplary in *anim. et res.*, see Henriette Meissner, *Rhetoric und Theologie: Der Dialog Gregors von Nyssa De anima et resurrectione* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991), 35–46.

. . . when in the course of our conversation we inadvertently made mention of the great Basil, then my heart sank, my face fell in sorrow and the tears poured from my eyes. But she was so far from being downcast by our sorrow that she made our mention of the holy man a starting point for the higher philosophy, and she expounded arguments of such excellence, explaining the human situation in terms of natural causes, unveiling to reason the divine providence hidden in sad events and recounting in detail events of the life to be hereafter as if she were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that my soul seemed to be almost outside of human nature, uplifted as it was by her words and set down inside the heavenly sanctuaries by the guidance of her discourse.⁹²

Macrina here does for Gregory in the face of Basil's death exactly what Gregory portrays her as having done for their mother following Naucratus' death: she supports him, and provides him with better things with which to occupy his mind.⁹³

Gregory's description of Macrina as surpassing nature reflects her total mastery of the passions. Macrina's perfection consists in a complete turn toward God, which we see most clearly in the way Gregory portrays Macrina facing her own death. "I suspected," Gregory writes, "that she had transcended the common nature";⁹⁴ this suspicion seems to be confirmed for Gregory by Macrina's lack of fear in the face of death. Gregory finds Macrina's attitude to be beyond what would be expected of any human being.

Instead, it was as if an angel had providentially assumed human form, an angel in whom there was no affinity for, nor attachment to, the life of the flesh, about whom it was not unreasonable that her thinking should remain impassible, since the flesh did not drag it down to its own passions.⁹⁵

⁹² *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII//I, 389–390; Corrigan, 35).

⁹³ Derek Krueger describes the scene: "In a pointed reversal of established gender roles, Macrina is masculinely steadfast, while Gregory is womanishly weepy" (*Writing and Holiness*, 115).

⁹⁴ GNO VIII/I, 395; Corrigan, 40.

⁹⁵ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII//I, 396; Corrigan, 40).

The way that Macrina confronts her own imminent death demonstrates, for Gregory, her soul's attachment to God rather than to the world. But Macrina is not simply impassive as she anticipates death. Gregory describes her as "making manifest to those then present that pure, divine love of the unseen bridegroom"; thus her anticipation is characterized by joy rather than sorrow. Gregory continues: "she seemed to transmit the desire which was in her heart to rush to the one she longed for . . ." ⁹⁶ Once again, the purification of the individual's soul has an immediate consequence for others within the body of Christ as social reality.

Conclusion: The Mirror of Desire

We have seen that, for Gregory, the center of human being is the soul. The notion of soul – far from involving Gregory in a now unsustainable anthropological dualism – enables a unified theological discussion of the interrelationship of desire, memory, imagination, the senses, and human attention to God. By bringing these various topics into relationship, Gregory's use of soul language can serve as an important resource for overcoming the lack I identified in the modern authors discussed through the first three chapters. The full utility of this language will, however, only become clear at the end of the book.

The most significant aspect of Gregory's account of the soul for the purpose of my argument is that desire is a faculty of the soul. Gregory's emphasis on the nature of the soul as embodied, however, shifts the conversation about sin and formation away from the intellectual. The importance of ascetic practice in Gregory's account of formation signals the significance of the body. Desire and imagination, though directed by the soul, cannot be transformed without attending to the body. And this is not a denigration of the body but respect for the body as essential to shaping the soul to receive God. The difficulty in orienting the soul toward God, who alone is truly beautiful, is that the senses apprehend earthly things as beautiful and draw the soul toward them. The intellectual faculty

⁹⁶ *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 396; Corrigan, 40).

of the soul must learn to use these sense-impressions as pointing beyond that which is within the grasp of the senses. The desiring faculty operates as the mirror in which the image of God may be reflected, and only the soul whose desiring faculty is oriented toward God will reflect God's image.

In this chapter, I have discussed ascetic practice as a means of transforming the soul. In particular, ascetic practice supports the development of hopeful imagination. That hopefulness both inspires and sustains the Christian undertaking ascetic practices. In self-denial, she looks to the one who gives life to body and soul, expectantly, asking to be filled from the source of life. Despite its indispensability in Gregory's theology, ascetic practice is not sufficient. The intellectual faculty requires further shaping in order to perceive the truly beautiful through the things of the world as well. Gregory discusses sin in relation to desire, as the soul needs to be formed appropriately to resist sin, and hence to grow in love through developing attentiveness to God. Ascetic practice provides one avenue for this development and the study of Scripture another.⁹⁷ In the fifth chapter I take up this aspect of Gregory's theology by showing how doctrine and the scriptural text contribute to the renewal of the soul. This chapter will draw together threads set out here and complete the task I set myself in the introduction: to offer an account of formation consonant with the accounts of Christian identity explored in the first three chapters.

⁹⁷ Even taken together, however, these are not sufficient for forming the soul to resist sin. The embodied soul develops in conversation and community with others on the same path. So also Gregory presses us to envision Christian identity as a journey rather than a destination, and a journey on which we need not only a map and compass, but also guides (as well as the light of God) to show the way. Going solo just won't do. Gregory reminds us that we need teachers and mentors, from the past and in the present. Essential to his account of Christian identity, therefore, is a particular account of being in community: Milbank rightly points out that Gregory implies a community of mutual influence that resembles monastic practice.

The Nature of Doctrine Revisited

Gregory of Nyssa on the Formation of Christian Imagination

In Chapter 4 I suggested that the key to the transformation of the soul in Gregory's account was the reshaping of the imagination. In this chapter I show how Gregory constructs a frame for the imagination of God, self, and world commensurate with the purification of the soul. "Knowledge" of God – centrally, recognition of the incomprehensibility of God's essence – revises creatures' self-knowledge and offers a vision of the life that is possible only in God. As we explore the relationship between doctrine, imagination, and knowledge of God, we will also see how Gregory's understanding of doctrine differs from Lindbeck's. While Gregory certainly believes that doctrine has content as well as a regulative function, he also believes that doctrine clarifies one's vision of the nature of God, and aids in the purification of the soul.

The present chapter thus completes the discussion of soul by identifying connections between soul, Christian identity, and the engagement with Scripture and tradition¹ that my three modern interlocutors agree is a constitutive part of Christian identity. For

¹ I take "tradition" as it appears in these discussions of Christian identity to include what Gregory describes as doctrine or teaching, including commentaries on Scripture. The relationship between Scripture and doctrine in Gregory's theology is complex; although there is much overlap in the way Gregory uses the two terms (and other related terms), they remain separate entities. I use "Scripture and doctrine" to name the whole body of Christian teaching as it is founded in the biblical narrative and handed down through the ongoing conversation in the church about that narrative.

Gregory, Scripture and doctrine are essential for the purification of the soul. Although Gregory does not use “narrative” as a term for what Scripture and doctrine teach, faithfulness to the biblical narrative is a guiding principle of exegesis. Moreover, I will argue that the engagement with Bible and tradition suggested (whether directly or implicitly) by Williams, Tanner, and Milbank plays a key role in Gregory’s understanding of the reformation of imagination and desire, which I have argued is central to Christian formation. In Gregory’s theology we see that Scripture and doctrine are ordered to a particular end, namely, giving the purified soul the shape and quality necessary for the proper reflection of the image of God. Furthermore, this discussion of Scripture and doctrine helps to show how the performance and discernment of Christian identity are to be undertaken by the one being purified.

In the previous chapter I showed how the soul, whose reflective quality is disoriented and obscured by sin, is purified by ascetic practice. I offered Macrina as Gregory’s best example of the way of purification. He uses her life to illustrate the development of the apathetic soul. The soul reflects the image of God most clearly and participates in the divine life most fully when free from passion. At the same time, we saw how Macrina’s purification, rather than being effected by solitude or study, was the fruit of a shared way of life. One aspect of Macrina’s life that I have not discussed in detail comes to center stage in the present chapter. In Macrina’s life, Gregory describes Scripture as her constant companion,² and in the dialogue *On the Soul and Resurrection* Gregory portrays Macrina as a master of doctrine.³

² For example, Gregory, *v. Macr.* (GNO VIII/I, 374; Corrigan, 23) describes Macrina’s recitation of the Psalter: “there was none of the psalms which she did not know since she recited each part of the Psalter at the proper times of the day . . . at all times she had the Psalter with her like a good travelling companion who never fails.”

³ Macrina deftly answers Gregory’s questions about the nature of the soul, in a manner that displays her understanding of some of the basic points in Gregory’s doctrine of God. See, for example, *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 44A-C; Silvas, 177): “when one beholds all these [variations and oppositions in the universe existing in harmony] with the discerning eye of the soul, how can one fail to be taught clearly by the things that appear that there is a divine Power, skillful and wise, manifesting itself in the things that are and coursing through everything, harmonizing the parts with the whole and completing the whole in the parts, encompassing all with a single

I divide the argument of this chapter into two sections. First, I use Gregory's *Catechetical Oration* to describe the purpose of doctrine in Gregory's theology.⁴ I also offer an account of the doctrines that are fundamental and which shape the soul in the most significant ways. In the second section, turning to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, I show how Gregory links soul to doctrine through the shaping of memory and imagination.

Doctrine and the Christian Life: Gregory's *Catechetical Oration*

I approach Gregory's *Catechetical Oration* as a statement of doctrine in a context in which fundamental elements of the doctrine of God were still contested, despite the promulgation of the creed following the first Council of Constantinople (CE 381). Although my reading of the *Catechetical Oration* focuses on the practical function of doctrine in the shaping of Christian faith and practice, it is important to bear in mind that Gregory is arguing for a particular doctrinal formulation rather than simply assuming it. He argues, moreover, that the doctrine of God he outlines is the foundation for understanding the nature of our salvation in Christ. Although there is no scholarly consensus on the precise date of the *Catechetical Oration*,⁵ the final version of the treatise would have been produced in the midst of an ongoing controversy

power, abiding the same in itself, yet moved about itself, though never ceasing from its motion, yet never changing to a place other than the one it holds?"

⁴ The explanation of what doctrine is *for* is a circular argument, though I believe not a viciously circular one: I argue that understanding the purpose of doctrine in general depends upon a grasp of one doctrine in particular – that of the soul and its purification. While this may be a circular argument, I offer it as a persuasive account of what doctrine does and how it is related to Christian identity.

⁵ It is generally believed to have been written between 381 and 385. Raymond Winling, in his introduction to the *Catechetical Oration*, departs somewhat from this tradition of interpretation, suggesting that the treatise was written *before* 381 and later revised following the Council of Constantinople and in the ongoing debate with Eunomius. See note 6 below.

regarding the interpretation of the doctrine of God.⁶ Thus I take the *Catechetical Oration* as offering us a window onto Gregory's doctrine of God in the mid-380s, when he faced a situation characterized by "interpretative undecidability." Much of Gregory's polemical edge is directed at Eunomius of Cyzicus. Because the contours of their debate concerned specifically knowledge of God's essence, we will see Gregory drawing very careful lines to identify the limits on human knowledge of God. Thus Gregory's doctrine of God also implies guidelines for reading what the Bible says about God as well as rules for speaking about God. I discuss Gregory's account of language for God and knowledge of God in more detail below.

In the *Catechetical Oration* Gregory articulates a doctrine of God intended to give hope to the soul intent on purification. Believing in God as Gregory depicts God creates the space for the development of the virtue of hope.⁷ One implication of my argument is that Gregory displays an understanding of doctrine that differs greatly from Lindbeck's. For Gregory, doctrine *is* an indispensable marker of Christian faith and practice. Like Lindbeck, Gregory sees doctrine as shaping Christian faith and practice by structuring our speech about God. But Gregory also sees the purification of the soul as a key purpose of doctrine, and one of the central functions of Christian doctrine is the creation and sustenance of hope.

⁶ It is also worth noting here that Gregory was one of the authoritative interpreters of the creed promulgated following the Council of Constantinople in 381. The discussion begun during the council did not end there; debates about the doctrine of the Trinity continued. See Anthony Meredith, "The Pneumatology of the Cappadocian Fathers and the Creed of Constantinople," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 48 (1981), 196–212; see also *Cod. Theod.* XVI.1.3 (cited in R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988], 820–821).

⁷ Warren Smith argues for the necessity of hope in the purification of the soul, linking the perception of God's beauty, the hope of eternal blessedness, and the transformation of the soul. See J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: A Study of Theological Anthropology in Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), 100.

The foundation of doctrine: Knowing God

Gregory makes a subtle but comprehensive statement in the middle of the *Catechetical Oration*, which tells us something about his conception of the work: “This is what the revelation of the truth teaches us, when we learn that God originally made man, and saved him when he was fallen.”⁸ For Gregory, the canon of Scripture has a single plot, which he summarizes with this statement of God’s creation and salvation of humanity. It is also clear from the *Catechetical Oration*, however, that knowing the story the Bible tells is necessary but not sufficient for grasping the Christian notion of God and salvation.⁹ The absolute distinction authorizes the claim that the Incarnate Word is God and therefore able to save fallen humanity.

My first step is to tease out the crux of Gregory’s doctrine of God, the absolute distinction between Creator and creation. This principle plays an important role in Gregory’s doctrine of salvation as well as in his doctrine of the purification of the soul. Gregory uses two rhetorical strategies consecutively in the *Catechetical Oration*;¹⁰ both strategies gesture toward the principle of distinction. He opens the treatise with the argument that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a mean between the two extremes of Jewish monotheism and

⁸ *or. catech.* 8 (SC 453, 200; Richardson, 286). “Revelation” translates *tou mysteriou*.

⁹ For an account of Gregory’s doctrine of God as the foundation of his theology, see Reinhard Jakob Kees, *Die Lehre von der Oikonomia Gottes in der Oratio Catechetica Gregors von Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 92–103.

¹⁰ In the strategies Gregory employs in articulating the Christian doctrine of God we will see his particular style of engagement with contemporary religious culture. Gregory certainly uses shared cultural elements – Greek philosophical notions about God and the Hebrew Scriptures – to set out his doctrine of God. What we find is that his account utilizes these common elements by arranging them with reference to his overarching principle for knowledge of God: the absolute distinction. For discussion of the use of shared cultural materials as basic to Christian practice, see Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 112–119. Tanner would probably resist the application of a principle as strict as Gregory’s to the materials with which he was working, however. The core of Gregory’s doctrine of God would seem rule-like in a negative way, read through the lens of Tanner’s argument in *Theories of Culture*.

Greek polytheism.¹¹ In so doing, Gregory appeals to common philosophical ideas about God.¹² His argument against the Greeks is supported by these commonplace notions, while his arguments against the Jews draw mainly on the Hebrew Scriptures. Gregory shifts to a different strategy once he has concluded this initial argument for the Trinity. He argues that the Christian understanding of salvation (especially the incarnation) conforms to basic notions of what is *fitting* for God.¹³ Gregory begins his discussion of the incarnation by anticipating the first objection: “Both [Jews and Greeks] . . . will equally reject the plan by which God’s Word became man, as something incredible and unbecoming to say of God.”¹⁴ Gregory uses this strategy for foreseeing and answering challenges throughout the treatise. He uses the concept of fittingness in two ways. On the one hand, Gregory uses fittingness positively, as when he argues that saving humanity befits God. On the other, he uses it negatively, as when he insists that God is not – cannot be – creator of evil.

These two rhetorical devices gesture toward the underlying logic of Gregory’s doctrine of God, which distinguishes the Christian understanding of divinity. Part of what forces the Greek to admit to God’s oneness is the fundamental difference between the way human beings bear certain attributes and the way we predicate those things of God. Likewise, in describing what is fitting for God, Gregory’s doctrine of God is founded on a clear and absolute distinction between what is God and what is not God. This distinction is the driving force behind Gregory’s articulation of the divinity of the Word and Spirit, and the incarnation and salvation. In the first instance, divinity is accorded to the Word and Spirit in part by virtue

¹¹ For discussion of this rhetorical strategy, see Rebecca Lyman, “A Topography of Heresy: Mapping the Rhetorical Creation of Arianism,” in *Arianism after Arius*, ed. Michel René Barnes and Daniel H. Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 45–62.

¹² For example, see Anthony Meredith, “The Idea of God in Gregory of Nyssa,” in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 137–138.

¹³ “The fitting” (*to propon*) is originally a term from a rhetorical context, which Gregory employs in his initial arguments for the Christian doctrine of God. For relevant primary references see Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der Literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft* (Munich: Max Hueber, 1960), 873.

¹⁴ *or. catech.* 5 (SC 453, 160; Richardson, 275).

of their not being creatures. Gregory argues that God must have *logos*, and we must conceive of God's *logos* in accordance with God's nature: thus the conception of God's *logos* must be of an eternally subsistent, living and creative Word. By analogy with human words or reason, we understand God's *logos* to be "neither entirely identical with [God's mind] nor altogether different . . . since it reflects the mind, it can no longer be thought to be different from it, but is one with it in nature, though distinct as a subject."¹⁵ The unity of nature confirms that God's Word is not a creature: God's Word is God, since the Word shares the divine nature.

Gregory explains the divinity of the Spirit in the same way: God certainly has a Spirit, since we learn from our own speaking that a word (*logos*) may only be spoken by means of breath (*pneuma*). But as God's Spirit, the Spirit must reflect God's nature. Thus "we think of it as a power really existing by itself and in its own special subsistence."¹⁶ Gregory leaves no possibility for the Word and Spirit to be anything other than fully divine: were we to think of the Word and Spirit as ephemeral, as our own words and breath are, we would be mistaken. To hold that God has both Word and Spirit requires the further step of holding that the Word and Spirit accord with God's nature rather than our own. The absolute distinction between God and creation means that anything we conceive of as pertaining to God must be thought in accordance with God's nature. As such, the distinction also serves as Gregory's primary hermeneutical principle.

The doctrine of the Trinity, including the divinity of the Word and Spirit, does not serve a primarily propositional function in Gregory's account of salvation, as it might initially appear. He does warn specifically against the mistaken notion that the Son and the Spirit are not divine:

if [one] imagines the Son or the Holy Spirit is excluded from the nature of the primal, real and good God . . . he should not include them in the confession of faith he makes at the time of his new birth. Otherwise . . . by withdrawing his faith from the transcendent nature, put himself back, as it were, in the same position in

¹⁵ *or. catech.* 1 (SC 453,150–152; Richardson, 272).

¹⁶ *or. catech.* 2 (SC 453, 154; Richardson, 273).

which he already is. For a person who brings himself under the yoke of anything created unwittingly puts his hope of salvation in that and not in God.¹⁷

At baptism, Gregory suggests, the catechumen embarks on the path to the purification (salvation) of her soul. One's understanding of the God who saves and the nature of salvation play an important role in that process:

if, on a false supposition, [the catechumen] sees a created nature in the Trinity and is baptized into *that*, he is born once more to a life which is subject to change . . . If . . . man is a created being and he thinks of the Spirit and the only-begotten God as similarly created, he would be foolish to hope for a change for the better, when he is only reverting to his own nature.¹⁸

The logical structure of the faith, which we will explore in detail in the next section, serves as the foundation for *hope*. The grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity does not function in the economy of salvation as an examination functions in a class, in which one must demonstrate understanding in order to pass. To conclude from what Gregory says here that only the intellectually proficient can be saved would be a mistake – a point to which I will return below. In *On the Soul and Resurrection* we saw the importance of hope in the purification of the soul. The hope of salvation, Gregory seems to be telling us here, depends upon the ability of the Savior to *save*, which depends on the Savior's divinity. The logic of the faith as Gregory presents it here is important for the purification of the soul discussed in chapter 4 because it directs the soul to the source of its purity and incorruption: God.¹⁹ Note well, however: "saving"

¹⁷ *or. catech.* 39 (SC 453, 328; Richardson, 322).

¹⁸ *or. catech.* 39 (SC 453, 328; Richardson, 322).

¹⁹ It is worth noting here that the implication is that the grasp of the divinity of the Son is necessary for salvation only insofar as the catechumen sees her or his soul as in need of salvation. Being joined to Christ in baptism, as we shall see below, effects an ontological change in the individual. Salvation, it seems, follows regardless of the understanding of the catechumen. The difference is that the one whose earthly life tends toward the purification of the soul will undergo less painful purification hereafter. The responsibility for understanding lays heaviest on those who would teach, and it is to those – bishops and perhaps catechists – that Gregory primarily addresses himself.

knowledge does not consist in *cognition*, but in the *hope* that springs from that knowledge.

Gregory's insistence on the renewing of the mind according to the faith of the church is thus of a piece with his commitment to the purification of the soul. Through the series of topics Gregory discusses in the *Catechetical Oration*, he conveys to the reader not simply what the church believes, but why church doctrines, especially the doctrine of God, are so significant. The problem with mistaking the Word for a creation of God has to do with the reordering of desire and freedom from passions. The disordering of desire and entanglement in the passions that resulted from the Fall can, on Gregory's view, only be undone by the One who created humanity. Being united with the Word by baptism means participating in the One who has the power to restore one's soul – because the Word *is* God. The way of seeing the world in God and the world as God's world, as well as finding one's place in it, are all related to the understanding of God, including the belief in the divinity of the Word and the Spirit. The *Catechetical Oration* details the doctrine of God and also articulates a doctrine of the knowledge of God. Together, these doctrines form the foundation for the Christian imagination of the Creator and all creation.

The doctrine of salvation and the purification of the soul

If the absolute distinction warrants the claim that the Incarnate Word saves us, as I have argued above, it also undergirds Gregory's description of what that salvation looks like. I have shown how, for Gregory, Christian hope depends upon the Creator–creation distinction. Here, I suggest that the formation of hope initiates the purification that the soul undergoes as the process of “being saved.” Gregory's concern for the proper conception of God cannot be extricated from what he considers an appropriate understanding of salvation. The evil from which humanity is being saved and the new life offered to all through God's saving work can only be seen properly through the doctrine of God Gregory sets out in the *Catechetical Oration*. The evil that entered human existence at the Fall *diluted* human nature as it was created to be: in constant communion with God. We learned something of this from *On Virginity*.

Rather than understanding evil as a principle existing in the universe, having its own subsistence, we ought, Gregory argues, to think of evil as privation: evil is like our failure to see the sunlight when we close our eyes. The sun still shines, and we have the power to perceive it, but we choose not to observe its light. In the same way, fallen humans are marked by a perverse tendency to keep our spiritual eyes closed, thus shutting off our perception of God and simultaneously guaranteeing our continued inability to reflect God properly. Just as Gregory explained the active and reflective quality of the image of God in *On Virginity*, in the *Catechetical Oration* he correlates likeness to the divine with the clarity of one's reflection of God.

In *On Virginity* Gregory focused on the practice of virginity as a tool for cleaning the mirror so that it might reflect God – to whom the soul looks continually – more clearly. Here, in the *Catechetical Oration*, Gregory emphasizes the distinction of the reflected surface from what is reflected in it, and shows how that distinction is necessary for the proper functioning of its power to reflect. Salvation from the state of darkness into which humanity fell involves a restoration of the original condition and function of the image of God in the human soul. How does that process involve grasping the absolute distinction between Creator and creation and the proper understanding of the Trinity? The connection lies in the shape and orientation of desire. To be restored to the attentiveness to God for which humanity was originally created, the soul requires two therapies. First, the proper perception of God is necessary, so that human beings might regain the ability to discern the good.²⁰ Second, human beings need to be freed from bondage to the passions so that the desirable and the desired are one in the soul.²¹ A proper conception of what is desirable and rightly oriented desire are the foundation for the growth of the soul in the love of God. Each

²⁰ See *virg.* 11 (GNO VIII/I.296–297; FC 58, 41–42); see also Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35–36.

²¹ This latter step (which should perhaps be first) is what Gregory seems to say (here and in *On Virginity*) that human beings cannot do. In *or. catech.* the distinction between what humanity can do and what is only possible for God is more clearly laid out.

of these therapies assumes the goal of participation in God as the meaning of salvation.

In Gregory's discussion of salvation, the moment of baptism has a special significance (as we have seen above). He explains that "what happens in the economy of baptism depends upon the disposition of the heart of him who approaches it. If he confesses that the holy Trinity is uncreated he enters on the life which is unchanging."²² Gregory seems at first to be attaching the efficacy of baptism to the understanding of the one being baptized; but it is not so technical as that. What is most important about this passage is the way in which it connects the event of baptism and the life that follows to what is in the imagination of the one approaching baptism. Baptism acknowledges that participation in God which characterizes eternal life. It is at this point that the absolute distinction, while not prominent in the discussion, is indispensable.

Prior to his discussion of baptism, Gregory describes the relationship between the idea of absolute distinction and the incarnation (which is included in his doctrine of salvation). The basis for the incarnation is the same as the basis of our participation in God: the absolute distinction is also the basis for omnipresence. Gregory explains that

every created thing is equally inferior to the Most High, who, by reason of his transcendent nature, is unapproachable. The whole universe is uniformly beneath his dignity. For what is totally inaccessible is not accessible to one thing and inaccessible to another. Rather does it transcend all existing things in equal degree. Earth is not more below his dignity, and heaven less. Nor do the creatures inhabiting each of these elements differ in this respect, that some have a direct contact with his inaccessible nature, while others are distant from it. Otherwise we could not conceive of the power that governs the universe as equally pervading all things. In some it would be unduly present, in others it would be lacking.²³

The first problem Gregory mentions with regard to the idea of degrees of presence is that it would mark the divine nature as inconsistent, which is impossible. For our purposes, there is a more

²² *or. catech.* 39 (SC 453, 328; Richardson, 322).

²³ *or. catech.* 27 (SC 453, 268; Richardson, 305).

significant reason for Gregory to emphasize the universal presence of the divine nature: it is through the presence of God to all creation constantly and consistently that human beings participate in the divine nature. Formal recognition of this participation is a part of what is invoked at baptism.

This is the most basic activity required for what Milbank has termed active reception to take place: the perception, however limited, of God's infinite goodness makes possible the active reception of the same.²⁴ At the same time, for Gregory, receiving goodness from God implies reflecting that goodness toward one's fellow creatures.²⁵ The final step in my discussion of the *Catechetical Oration* is to describe the character of the knowledge of God in Gregory's doctrinal framework. We will see that, for Gregory, mystery plays an indispensable role in marking out language for God and shaping the imagination.

The knowledge of God: Gregory on language and imagination

I have suggested that one of the ways in which doctrine aids in the purification of the soul is through hope. Warren Smith offers a particularly helpful discussion of the role of hope in the reshaping of desire. In his account, the vision of hope consists in the grasp of "the goods to be enjoyed by those who pursue virtue." Desire should not be squandered on ephemeral goods, but oriented toward those goods of which the Christian is assured. "Moreover," he adds, "through hope, not only is the Christian encouraged to stay the course, but the character of her soul is actually transformed by this

²⁴ Note that those who do not perceive still receive their being from God: *all* creation is sustained by participation (*Hex.* PG 44.72–73). *Active* reception parallels Gregory's account of the activity of being in God's image, which requires attentive participation in God. Still less is it the case that those who cannot grasp the concepts Gregory uses to explain the doctrine of the Trinity are not *saved*. Gregory's concern here is to make sure that those who can grasp the fundamentals of the Christian doctrine of God understand it properly.

²⁵ See Milbank on this point as well. He sees participation in God as also involving a participation in the work of salvation: receiving always engenders giving. See "The Name of Jesus" and "The Force of Identity" in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

vision of hope.”²⁶ Smith seems to me to be exactly right but in need of supplementation. I would add that doctrine is essential in the creation and sustenance of hope. The vision of eternal goods is sharpened by what doctrine teaches. After all, it is through a detailed and sophisticated account of the doctrine of the soul that Macrina attempts to restore Gregory’s hope. Smith implies that such doctrine helps create hope, but does not say so explicitly.²⁷

In discussing Gregory’s theology, I have used the language of “knowing” sparingly. Gregory himself hesitates to use such terms, preferring to speak of “conceptions” or “suppositions” about God.²⁸ For Gregory’s doctrine of God involves a clear line of distinction beyond which knowledge cannot pass. The absolute distinction between Creator and creation implies also that what is beyond that boundary is utterly incomprehensible to the human mind. So it is: Gregory emphasizes throughout the *Catechetical Oration* the impossibility of understanding the mechanics of trinitarian unity or the manner of the union of Word with flesh in the incarnation. He describes the character of our *knowledge* of God explicitly in his summation following his explanation of the Word and Spirit:

In effect, a studied examination of the depths of this mystery does, in a veiled way give a man a fair, inward apprehension of our teaching on the knowledge of God. He cannot, of course, express the ineffable depth of the mystery in words, how the same thing is subject to number and yet escapes it; how it is observed to have distinctions and is yet grasped as a unity; how it admits distinction of Persons and yet is not divided in underlying essence. For the Person of the Spirit is one thing, that of the Word another; and different yet is the Person whose Word and Spirit they are. But when once these distinctions are grasped, the unity of the nature still does not admit of division.²⁹

²⁶ *Passion and Paradise*, 100.

²⁷ For a fuller account of hope as Smith reads it in the dialogue between Gregory and Macrina, see his “Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa’s *De anime et resurrectione*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 52: 1 (2001), 37–60.

²⁸ See *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 191–196; and Richard Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 241–246.

²⁹ *or. catech.* 3 (SC 453, 154–156; Richardson, 273–274).

Gregory allows for a certain kind of knowledge of God, but he insists on the depth of the mystery and the secret (“veiled”) nature of what is apprehended, resisting any technical description of God’s trinitarian essence. His vocabulary for talking about knowledge of God here is consistent with his use in his works against Eunomius.³⁰ In the *Catechetical Oration* and in his works against Eunomius, Gregory affirms the value of human conceptions of God and at the same time denies these conceptions any purchase on God’s essence. Doctrine offers a way of thinking and speaking about God that enables the articulation and transmission of the faith but remains bound to the creation and cannot pass beyond its boundaries. We should note also that Gregory consistently presents doctrine as the best reading of the narrative of Scripture. Statements of doctrine and the interpretation of Scripture develop together and together discipline the Christian imagination.

Gregory certainly sees doctrine as providing a certain kind of rules for the practice of Christian faith – especially insofar as the *practice* of faith involves confessing and teaching the faith. He also sees the rule function of doctrine as inseparable from the purification of the soul. Doctrine orients the imagination, directing the soul toward God. Moreover, understanding the nature of the soul and its purification is essential to knowing what to do with the rules furnished by Gregory’s doctrine of God.

Doctrine, Desire and the Formation of Christians: Gregory’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*

Gregory’s account of the nature and function of doctrine suggests that the purification of the soul is a cyclical process. In what follows, I read select passages from Gregory’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in order to make manifest the various elements of this process. One whose soul is purified by the disciplined attention required for knowledge of God partakes more deeply of the divine life, which in turn leads to greater purity and clearer perception. In this section, I will show how Scripture and doctrine function for Gregory as aids to the transformation of imagination and desire that takes place

³⁰ C. *Eunom.* II, *passim*.

as the soul is purified. One of the key aspects of this transformation, as we will see, is the development of Christian virtues.³¹ The attributes of God, which the shining and properly oriented soul reflects, are displayed in human life as the virtues.³² In the course of this discussion, it will become clear that one aspect of the purification of the soul is a revision of memory. I will take that up in the next section.

The beginning of purification, as we have seen, is a proper orientation toward God, in whose purity the soul participates. For Gregory, there are only two possibilities for the orientation of the soul: if one is not directed toward the good, one will be drawn deeper into the evil that corrupted human nature at the Fall. Being oriented toward the good enables (and is demonstrated by) good Christian performance, or charity.³³ The opposite orientation fixes desire to transitory and therefore false goods; for Gregory, this is characteristic of the state of sin. It is impossible, on Gregory's model of Christian faith and practice, to enact charity without simultaneously being aware of and struggling against one's sinfulness. A key aspect of the development of habits of charity is attentiveness to the divine mystery: Gregory suggests that Christian daily living involves keeping God's ultimate mysteriousness in tension with

³¹ Warren Smith captures the essence of Gregory's understanding of the place of these virtues in the soul's turn to God: "Nyssen maintains that the intellect that is grounded in the theological virtues is both free from mistakes of judgment about man's true nature and destiny and is strengthened in its grip over the soul's appetitive drives. For it is the understanding of our place in the divine economy as apprehended through the theological virtues that enables the soul to reevaluate the objects of its desires and so turn from the sensual and mundane to the intelligible and eternal goods of God. The theological virtues, which rest upon belief in that vision of God, human nature and the eschatological end of creation and history revealed in Scripture, transform the soul's intentional awareness (*orexis*) of the world from which all emotions come and so reorient the drives (*hormai*) of the soul toward the Divine" (*Passion and Paradise*, 102).

³² See Verna Harrison's discussion of the virtues as participated perfections in *Grace and Human Freedom according to St. Gregory of Nyssa* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 91–94.

³³ As we saw in chapter 4, Gregory makes clear in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* that love is the destiny of the purified soul. In my discussion of his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* we see again that participation in the divine love necessarily involves the sharing of that love, which overflows the soul.

particular positive beliefs about God. In the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he presents certainty about doctrine as tempered by the affirmation of its foundation: the absolute distinction between Creator and creation described in the previous section. As we will see, attentiveness to the inscrutability of God and to one's own sinfulness make for a very different performance of Christianity from that which John Milbank describes in his reading of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory's picture of the tension between certainty and mystery at the heart of Christian life stands in marked contrast to Milbank's portrayal of Christian practice as flowing relatively freely through the medium of human intuition. My discussion of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* focuses on how the transformation of imagination through doctrine is connected to the reordering of desire.

Before proceeding to the commentary itself, I want to draw attention to two particular aspects of it. First, Gregory's terminology implies a prior judgment about the inseparability of Scripture and doctrine in Christian formation. Gregory discusses the place of instruction or doctrine at various points throughout the *Commentary*. The terms he uses for doctrine and Scripture vary, and there is often overlap in the terms for doctrine and Scripture.³⁴ For example, in Homily IX Gregory parallels "[divinely] inspired words,"³⁵ with "good teachings,"³⁶ and "every kind of instruction."³⁷ The slippage in the terms he uses for doctrine and Scripture becomes understandable

³⁴ In Gregory's references to Christian teachings, he uses *logos* to refer both to the Scripture and to the instruction about the faith of the church. Nor does Gregory have technical language for doctrine: in addition to *logos*, he uses *mathemata*, *paidagogos*, and *didaskalios* interchangeably. Although the topic of language for Scripture and doctrine in Gregory's theology is a rich one, deserving further investigation, it does not bear directly on the argument of this book. What is important for the argument of the chapter is that, for Gregory, doctrine and Scripture were much more of a piece than they are for contemporary Christians, especially those in Protestant traditions. Gregory articulated Christian faith by appealing to tradition, the Bible, and/or philosophy as the situation required.

³⁵ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 269–270; Norris 285): *tōn theopneustōn logōn*. Gregory uses what is effectively the same phrase in the twelfth homily (*tōn theopneustōn rhematōn*) to introduce a direct quotation from the Song of Songs.

³⁶ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 269; Norris, 285): *tōn agathon mathēmaton*.

³⁷ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 270; Norris, 285): *ek tēs pantodapēs paiduseos*.

in light of his understanding of Scripture. While it is certainly the case that Gregory thought that some of the Bible could be taken as read, and benefit derived from the literal meaning alone, the *Song of Songs* presents him with rather a different kind of text. For Gregory, the display of erotic love in the text must be read not as a literal reference; rather, the message of Scripture must be read *through* the actual words of the *Song*. What the text yields, in Gregory's interpretation of it, is instruction for those intent on a life of purification. Scripture, for Gregory, functions as shaper of the imagination: the Bible is a source of instruction for the disciplined life. At the same time, Gregory clearly uses certain doctrinal principles as guidelines for exegesis. *Within* Gregory's reading of the *Song of Songs* we find a discussion of doctrine or instruction. The teachings include both the Scripture and what the Scripture, rightly interpreted, reveals. The biblical text and the doctrine of the purification of the soul are inextricably intertwined, and mutually interpreting. Allegorical reading reinforces the Christian imagination, through the use of metaphor to explain doctrine.

Second, the transformation Gregory describes in the *Commentary* is not merely a matter of cognitive development: the heart is molded by the words of the text and its interpretation into a receptacle for divine love. It is important to remember that the transformation of the soul does not consist primarily in a process of intellectual development.³⁸ Gregory views the biblical text as having a central aim, which is the communication of God's saving work as effected once and for all through the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Christ. The *Song of Songs* – properly interpreted – helps us to understand more completely the life Christ has made available to those who are intent on the purification of their souls. This basic principle is of enormous help in teasing out the relationship between doctrine and the ascetic life displayed in the *Commentary*. Each homily repeats some portion of the overall message of exhortation to purification that Gregory sees in the text as a whole. The homilies elaborate different aspects of the

³⁸ Martin Laird makes a helpful distinction between the knowledge of comprehension and faith's grasp of God in *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 82.

purification of the soul, and Gregory reads the various passages as illustrating dimensions of divine and human nature.³⁹

As we will see more clearly below, the purification of the soul stands behind Gregory's discussion of Scripture and doctrine. Learning what Scripture teaches is not simply an intellectual exercise: the goal of all knowledge is love of God. Gregory explains that there are two ways of growing beyond childishness in the faith. "Both sets of souls," he explains, "have become one body with the Word, but some of them are joined to him by a disposition shaped by erotic love (such were the souls of David and Paul)." The alternate disposition is characterized by fear. For Gregory, the "more perfect habit of mind" does not coincide with a well-developed intellect, but a soul that clings to the Word.⁴⁰

"Stretching out to what lies before": Doctrine and perception

The intellect cannot guarantee the purification of the soul, but it can hinder it. Thus, I first draw attention to the development of the hopeful imagination that is the goal of purification. Note that I do not use "imagination" to render one term in Gregory's text,

³⁹ For Gregory's exegetical method, see Mariette Canévet, "Exégèse et théologie dans les traités spirituels de Grégoire de Nysse," in *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse*, ed. Marguerite Harl (Leiden: Brill, 1971): 144–168; Mariette Canévet, *Grégoire de Nysse et l'herméneutique biblique: étude des rapports entre le langage et la connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1983). See also Verna Harrison's discussion of Gregory's "iconic" reading in "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 113–130; and Ronald Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 360–370. On the use of figural reading and other exegetical techniques used to tease ascetic meaning out of awkward texts, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially 70–152. For a sophisticated account of allegory and its effect on the soul, as well as a defense of Origen's account of allegory, see David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ *Hom. in Cant.* XV (GNO VI 461; Norris, 489, 491). Gregory cites Ps 71:28 and Rom 8:35, in which David and Paul describe themselves as relating to God through love.

but to describe a function of the soul that links sense perception, emotion, and intellect. In Homily VI Gregory comments on Song of Songs 3:1–8 (I quote here only the portion of the text whose interpretation I discuss below):

Upon my bed by night
I sought him whom my soul loves.
I sought him and did not find him,
I called him, and he did not hearken to me.
I will arise, then, and go around in the city,
in the markets and in the streets,
and I will seek him whom my soul loves.
I sought him and did not find him.
The watchmen making their rounds in the city found me.

.....

Who is this coming up from the wilderness,
like tree trunks of smoke, myrrh being burnt and frankincense,
from all the powders of the perfumer?
Behold Solomon’s bed;
sixty mighty men surround it
out of the mighty men of Israel.
They all bear a sword,
being instructed in war:
each man has his sword on his thigh
because of fear by night.⁴¹

Gregory’s introductory remarks indicate that the main point of the passage is to teach about God’s transcendence; his interpretation of the text then shows how deeply doctrine shapes the imagination. Gregory begins by outlining two types of created nature, the sensible and material, and the intelligible and spiritual, laying a foundation for later exegesis. Gregory further distinguishes between two kinds of spiritual nature: the created and the uncreated. The spiritual nature that “has been brought into existence by an act of creation” is linked by orientation and participation to the uncreated nature that has brought it into being. Created spiritual nature “looks eternally

⁴¹ *Hom. in Cant. VI* (GNO VI, 172–173; Norris, 183). I have quoted the text from Norris’s translation.

upon the First Cause of the things that are and is preserved in every respect in the good by its participation in what transcends it.”⁴² The spiritual nature maintains relation to God for all creatures who possess it. This is its purpose, and union with uncreated spiritual nature is its destiny.

Drawing out this basic doctrinal principle in the opening remarks of the homily prepares the way for Gregory’s discussion of the formation of the soul necessary for the recognition of divine beauty. Homily VI links perception of one’s own intellectual nature with the perception of God, its creator and sustainer.⁴³ The infinite beauty and perfect goodness of God attract the soul to God; the more pure the soul is, the clearer the perception it affords. Coming to desire God involves developing the perception of one’s participation in God. We saw in the previous chapter that Gregory sees the activity of reflecting God’s likeness as an ever-increasing partaking in the image of God. Here that connection is made slightly differently: Gregory describes the same process as participation in the good. As we saw with participation in the beautiful, participation in the good increases with clarity of perception. To see the good clearly is to desire it, and the clarity of perception indicates a clean “mirror” in the soul that will therefore reflect the good it perceives. Moreover, deepening participation in the good makes the mutability inherent in human nature a constant change for the better.⁴⁴ Gregory again describes participation in the good as limitless, even

⁴² *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO VI, 174; Norris, 185–187).

⁴³ Gregory’s logic here is the same as in *On Virginit*y: self-perception and perception of God are inseparable. See, for example, *virg.* 11–12 (GNO VIII/I, 296–300; FC 58, 41–44), where Gregory suggests that recognition of the truly beautiful coincides with seeing its reflection in oneself.

⁴⁴ See also Gregory’s comment in the *Catechetical Oration*: “Now that alone is unchangeable by nature which does not originate through creation. But whatever is derived from the uncreated nature has its subsistence out of non-being. Once it has come into being through change, it constantly proceeds to change” (*or. catech.* 8, SC 453, 200; Richardson, 286). After the Fall, the only way to change for the better is through the restoration effected in Christ’s death and resurrection. Moreover, in the Eucharist, Christ “unites himself with their bodies as that mankind too, by its union with what it immortal, may share in incorruptibility” (*or. catech.* 37, SC 453, 324; Richardson, 321).

as the good itself is limitless.⁴⁵ Not only is the soul preserved in the good by participation.

It is also, in a certain fashion, always being created as it is changed for the better by being enhanced in goodness. For this reason, no end point can be conceived for it either, and its growth toward the better is not confined by any limit, but the good that is given at any particular time is always a starting point for something more and better, even though it already appears to be as great and complete as possible.⁴⁶

The opposite, Gregory implies, is also true: without increasing participation in the good, one can only change for the worse. Purification is possible only by participating in that good which does not change.⁴⁷

Only after Gregory has set out the main themes of the homily does he discuss the first verse of the text: “Upon my bed by night / I sought him whom my soul loves. / I sought him and did not find him.” For Gregory, this refers to a stage of ascent, in which the bride expects to see her beloved – but does not. Gregory writes:

by a discerning consideration⁴⁸ of the words before us . . . we are taught not plainly that the greatness of the divine nature know no limit, and that no measure of knowledge sets bounds to a seeker’s looking – bounds beyond which one who is reaching for the heights must cease to move ahead. On the contrary, the intelligence that makes its course upward by searching into what lies beyond it is so constituted that every fulfillment of knowledge that human nature can attain becomes the starting point of desire for things yet more exalted. . . . Since, then, the text represents the soul as a Bride and designates him whom she loves with her entire “heart and soul . . . and strength” (Mark 12:30) as a Bridegroom, it is logical that she – who in her own mind has attained the highest of her hopes and has already, in her own judgment, been united with the

⁴⁵ cf. *anim. et res.* (PG 46, 93–96; Silvas 210–211).

⁴⁶ *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO VI, 174; Norris, 187).

⁴⁷ The unchanging goodness of the Creator offers an unlimited horizon of growth in the good for the pure soul. See GNO VI, 174; Norris, 185.

⁴⁸ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 179; Norris, 190): *theoria*.

One she desires – should call her more perfect participation in the Good a *bed* and should term the time of her going to bed *night*. Now the word *night* points to contemplation of things unseen, just like Moses, who entered into the darkness in which God was . . .⁴⁹

Gregory teases out of the verse a crucial lesson: God's ultimate incomprehensibility. The bride has ascended to what she believes to be the summit, where she expects, finally, to behold the one she seeks. Yet what she finds is darkness. Gregory interprets the later verses, which describe the bride's reunion with her beloved, as showing that in the *darkness* she eventually finds her beloved. The finding in the darkness signifies to Gregory that the sought-after One's "existence is known only in incomprehension of what it is, in whose case every conceptual trait is an obstacle to its discovery for those who seek it." Gregory interprets the bride's thoughts: "having departed from the whole created order and passed by everything in the creation that is intelligible and left behind every conceptual approach . . . I found the Beloved by faith."⁵⁰

Two points are noteworthy in this piece of Gregory's interpretation. First, he outlines clearly the limits of human knowledge of God in a way that reflects the tension between doctrine and mystery. The bride *thinks* she has ascended to the point of the vision of God, but finds darkness. The darkness of God marks the ultimate incomprehensibility of God, which is the mystery at the heart of the faith. Yet, as we saw in the *Catechetical Oration*, the incomprehensibility of God's essence is the foundation of Gregory's doctrine of God. The grasp of faith is important, because the mystery, which is beyond comprehension, is precisely what is to be believed.⁵¹ Gregory's exegesis here corroborates his doctrinal formulation: the means by which we comprehend created reality do not enable us to comprehend the uncreated. My description of this tension in Homily VI parallels Ronald Heine's discussion of the same theme in Gregory's *Life of Moses*. Moses likewise encounters the darkness that symbolizes the ultimate incomprehensibility of God's essence; Gregory draws on the image of darkness to explain the limits of

⁴⁹ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 179–180; Norris, 190–193).

⁵⁰ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 183; Norris, 195).

⁵¹ On this paradox, see Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, especially 102–103.

human knowledge of God. This limit, however, is intended as a *positive* guide to the imagination: how and what we think about God should be shaped by the incomprehensibility of God's essence.⁵²

It is worth pausing here to note the relationship between the experience of the mystery and the grasp of faith. For Gregory, knowledge of God is inseparable from profound trust in God's goodness. Faith, hope and love increase in the soul undergoing purification even as God's incomprehensibility appears more "dark" and impenetrable. Certainty about God's providence – goodness, reality, love, *God-ness* – grows in tandem with certainty about God's incomprehensibility. At first this perhaps seems counterintuitive. But compare it to the experience of spousal familiarity and love: the ultimate mysteriousness of a spouse does not abate with time. The inscrutability of his habits may indeed increase together with the certainty of his love. So the irksome habit (say, of leaving one's shoes in the middle of the floor) remains utterly incomprehensible, without being read as evidence of lack of love.

Second, Gregory suggests that one's change in perception is founded on the realization of the incomprehensibility of God's essence. Instead of merely meeting darkness, the bride perceives in the darkness that the foundation of knowledge is the incomprehensibility of God's essence. The transformation of perception involves a change in the way we remember and the way we interpret what we experience through the senses. Gregory refers to Philippians 3:13 in order to describe this change: as the soul ascends

It stretches forward in forgetfulness of things that have already been accomplished. For that good which is now and again discovered to be a better thing, not to say something surpassing, focuses the attention of those who have shared in it upon itself and does not permit [them] to look toward what is past, since it voids the recollection of inferior things by the enjoyment of those that are to be honored more highly.⁵³

⁵² Ronald Heine, *Perfection in the Virtuous Life: A Study in the Relationship Between Edification and Polemical Theology in Gregory of Nyssa's De Vita Moysis* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), 115–119; on the theme of perpetual progress, see 97–114. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 97–108.

⁵³ *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO VI, 174; Norris, 187).

Taking his cue from the phrase “in forgetfulness of things that have already been accomplished,” Gregory sketches a mental scheme in which hopefulness, which points ahead, brings with it a different attitude toward the past. Forgetting plays as important a role in the process as remembering. What once seemed good now lies behind; a glimpse of God’s beauty and goodness redirects the appetite, and awakens the soul’s desire for God. Past joys and pleasures, Gregory suggests, cannot compete with the vision of God.

This shift in perspective on the past is paralleled by the retooling of the senses, which is another fruit of the soul’s ascent. Whereas elsewhere Gregory describes the five senses as asleep, or even dead, in relation to the soul being purified, in his interpretation of Song of Songs 3:7–8 he regards the senses as allies in the effort to achieve perfection. Gregory interprets the warriors around Solomon’s bed as the senses, properly armed.⁵⁴ He explains that

The eye’s sword is to look across and through everything toward the Lord, and to contemplate what is right, and not to be defiled by any unseemly sight. Hearing’s weapon, similarly, is hearkening to the divine teachings and refusal to take in vain talk. In this way it is also possible to arm taste and touch and smell with the sword of self-control, protecting each of the senses in the appropriate manner.⁵⁵

We may understand Gregory’s references elsewhere to the senses as asleep or dead, in light of what he says here, as dead to *sin*: “what marks out the person who looks upon God is never to contemplate sin with any of the sense organs.”⁵⁶ The shift from expecting to perceive beauty in the material world to desiring God’s transcendent beauty changes the soul’s relationship to the senses. The soul may still receive information from the senses, but will no longer be overwhelmed by what promises sensual pleasure. Putting together the transformation of sense perception and remembering, Gregory may be read as suggesting that the memory itself no longer

⁵⁴ Gregory moves from the five senses to the sixty valiant men by way of the twelve tribes of Israel, in quite an intricate bit of exegesis that I need not detail here. See *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO 195–197; Norris 209).

⁵⁵ *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO 197; Norris, 209).

⁵⁶ *Hom. in Cant.* VI (GNO 197; Norris, 209).

connects goodness with what can be perceived through the senses. As the imagination contemplates God more deeply, the senses and the memory are transformed, allowing that contemplation to become more and more profound. Doctrine plays a key role in this process, aiding the perception of the Holy Spirit, which in turn supplies good actions.

***“We mold within ourselves a honeycomb”*: Doctrine and virtue**

In Homily IX, as in *On Virginity*, Gregory outlines the connection between the transformation of the soul and the reception of God’s life: meditation on Christian doctrine reforms memory as well as hope, evidenced in a life marked by virtue. I focus on his interpretation of a small section of the text:

Your lips drop honey, my bride,
 honey and milk are under your tongue,
 and the fragrance of your garments is as the fragrance of
 frankincense.
 My sister bride is an enclosed garden,
 a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed.

 Your outsendings are a fountain of gardens, a spring of living water
 That pours forth from frankincense.⁵⁷

Throughout his discussion of the text, Gregory connects memory, imagination, and virtue.

The language Gregory uses reveals a subtle but inextricable bond linking doctrine and memory, virtue and desire. Gregory uses the first half of verse 11 (“Your lips drop honey, my bride / honey and milk are under your tongue”) to develop an account of the cultivation of virtue. The soul on the way to purification is compared to the bee flying over fields of flowers: the Christian “flying over the grassy meadow of inspired words, should suck from each of them something that assists the acquisition of wisdom.” For Gregory, this process is integral to the transformation of the soul. The gathering of nectar from the flowers of the field of good

⁵⁷ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 261; Norris, 277).

teaching requires the creation of an interior space within which the “bee” can store what it has collected. One should therefore not only gather from the meadow of Scripture and doctrine but also

make oneself into a honeycomb, storing the fruit of this labor in one’s heart as in a beehive, fashioning for the manifold teachings separate storage places in the memory, like hollow cells in a honeycomb. In this way, one will make a business of this noble work of the virtues . . .⁵⁸

The soul reshaped by this “hard work” reaps a double benefit. Reshaping the heart to receive more fully the divine teachings is its own reward, as the one so attuned will be ever more replete with that which is truly desirable: God. Gregory adds here that the love for which the soul longs will be poured out by the Lover; as “a soul of this sort becomes an object of the Bridegroom’s desire and glorious in the sight of the angels.”⁵⁹ Gregory’s exegesis here illustrates that which Williams identified as the process of learning that God desires us as God desires God. The thorough transformation that reorders memory, so that memory itself redirects the soul to the proper object of its desire, allows the soul to reflect God’s beauty ever more clearly. As this takes place, the soul is drawn into the exchange of trinitarian delight, which is its destiny.

Gregory makes clear that these changes in the soul are not merely *interior*. The evidence of the reshaping of memory, the transformation of the soul, and the reception of divine love is a life marked by the virtues. The image of God, reflected ever more clearly as the soul’s desire for God increases, far from being a matter only of inner delight, radiates from the soul as virtue:

the goal of the life of virtue . . . is likeness to the Divine, and for the sake of this goal both the soul’s purity and its separation from any passionate disposition are in virtuous persons carefully realized, so that a certain impress of the transcendent Nature comes to them also, on account of the nobler quality of their life . . . many things must twine together if a noble life is to be woven. Just so the divine apostle enumerates threads of this sort, threads by means of which

⁵⁸ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 269; Norris, 285).

⁵⁹ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 269–270; Norris, 285).

pure works are woven together; he mentions love and joy and peace, patience and kindness and all the sorts of thing that adorn the person who is putting on the garment of heavenly incorruptibility in place of a corruptible and earthly life.⁶⁰

The virtues are inseparable from the image of God: the virtuous life shows forth the purity of soul necessary for the reflection of God's image. Thus Gregory describes the bride's garment mentioned in 4:11: "the garment of virtues imitates the divine blessedness because it has been made like the unapproachable Nature by its purity and impassibility."⁶¹

While Gregory does not discuss desire directly in this passage, the underlying theme is woven into his discussion of the passions. The freedom from passion he describes is commensurate with (and inseparable from) the proper orientation of desire. For Gregory, as we saw in chapter 4, keeping the passions in check is essential to allowing one's desire for God to grow. When appetite for pleasure does not overwhelm the rational soul, then desire can run its proper course, and achieve its proper end, which is to direct the soul further and further into the divine life. In *On Virginit*y we saw that the image of God cannot be clearly reflected in a soul whose desire is not properly oriented. Gregory's portrayal of Macrina showed that the purified soul *desires*: her soul longs for union with God to be achieved by becoming one with Christ. Macrina began that process as she pursued virtue; Gregory depicts her death as movement toward complete unity with Christ.

Gregory compares a soul like Macrina's to the garden described in the Song. Like that garden, it is "protected on every side"; its enclosure is "the fence of the commandments."⁶² The enclosed garden, with its sealed fountain, is the soul whose attention is properly directed. Gregory interprets "fountain" as "the soul's faculty of reasoning, which teems within us with all sorts of thoughts and fountain-like, gushes them forth. But the motion of the reasoning

⁶⁰ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 271–272; Norris, 287).

⁶¹ *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI 272; Norris, 287).

⁶² *Hom. in Cant. IX* (GNO VI, 274; Norris, 289): *ton entolon*. Gregory seems to be referring to moral precepts in general here, not to the Decalogue.

faculty becomes properly *ours* only when it is going in the direction of what is beneficial for us and when it assists us in every way to possess what is good.”⁶³ The restructuring of the memory bears fruit as those thoughts produced by the soul’s rational faculty (which, we will see below, Gregory also refers to as the heart) reflect the teachings that have been taken into the heart. Gregory draws a parallel between the commandments and purity of the soul, by which he illustrates the importance of moral precepts in forming and maintaining a virtuous life. The garden is protected by the commandments; the fountain is sealed by purity. Both the enclosure and the seal contribute to the strength of the soul’s rational faculty, by directing the soul’s attention toward the divine. Echoing his characterization of the pure soul in *On Virginit*y, Gregory presents the state of the guarded soul here: “no turbid thoughts muddy the transparency and clarity of its heart.” The garden tended carefully gives “increase to God’s planting”: the virtues.⁶⁴ The quest for purity Gregory outlines in *On Virginit*y and the coincident restructuring of memory together form the soul for participation in the attributes of God, portrayed in human life as the virtues.

Gregory emphasizes the connection between virtue, purity (or freedom from passion), and the image of God in a different way with regard to following the teaching of the church (“health-giving truths”).⁶⁵ To this end, he traces two possible interpretations of saffron (4:14). The first is that saffron is mentioned “on the basis of [its] tendency to produce a median state [analogous to] the absence of defect and excess in the condition of virtue.”⁶⁶ A second possibility Gregory suggests is that we “take the enigma of saffron to bear on our understanding of the faith.”⁶⁷ Because within the saffron flower are several smaller flowers, not all of which have medicinal qualities, those who do not know the difference might pluck the wrong ones. So also “clever deceits” may lead one astray from “health-giving truths.” In Gregory’s view, both interpretations of saffron are equally acceptable: whichever interpretation we

⁶³ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 275–276; Norris, 291).

⁶⁴ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 276; Norris, 291).

⁶⁵ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 285; Norris, 301): *ton ugieinon dogmaton*.

⁶⁶ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 284; Norris, 299).

⁶⁷ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 284; Norris, 299).

choose leads to the same end, “for in a certain way, both are one – possession of perfect virtue, and possession of the Godhead – since there is no virtue outside the Godhead.”⁶⁸

The development of virtue and the reformation of desire are the basis for the kind of activity we associated with the reflection of God’s image in the previous chapter. Gregory writes:

The Word with his praises brings the Bride to her greatest height by calling her a *spring of water that is living and that flows from frankincense*. As to these things, we know from the Scriptures that they pertain to the life-giving nature . . . it is the divine Nature that is mentioned when living water is mentioned, and here in our text the truthful witness of the Word constitutes the Bride a *well of living water* . . . by the fountain, the Fount is exactly imitated; by her life, the life; by her water, the Water. The Word of God is living, and the soul that has received the Word is alive.⁶⁹

For Gregory, the virtuous life is the life received from God as the soul’s attentiveness to and capacity for the divine life is developed through ascetic practice and the storing up of memories of God gathered through attention to doctrine and Scripture. The “divinely inspired words” (whether Scripture or doctrine) transform the memory and so make the heart the proper receptacle for the divine life. The process of transformation of the memory comes to the forefront in the next section.

“*This law written in the heart*”: *Doctrine, memory, and desire*

Homily XIV capitalizes on Gregory’s discussion of the retooling of the senses in Homily VI and the revision of memory by doctrine as depicted in Homily IX. Gregory’s interpretation of Song of Songs 5:13–16 teases out the relationship between the development of an appetite for wisdom, the training of the “perceptive faculties” of the soul “by the possession of good teachings,” and the conversion of desire.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 285; Norris, 301).

⁶⁹ *Hom. in Cant.* IX (GNO VI, 292; Norris, 307).

⁷⁰ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 271–273; Norris, 287).

His jaws are like bowls of spice pouring forth perfumes.
 His lips are lilies, dropping abundant myrrh.
 His hands are skillfully sculpted, golden, filled, tharseis.
 His belly is an ivory tablet on a sapphire stone.
 His legs are marble pillars
 resting on golden pedestals.
 His look is like Lebanon the chosen, like cedars.
 His throat is sweetness, and [he is] totally desire.
 This is my kinsman,
 and this is my close one, O daughters of Jerusalem.⁷¹

Gregory shifts focus here to the activity and content of the memory, and shows by way of examples how well-armed senses and properly structured memories function: we see it in the lives of those changed by their encounter with the “good teachings” of the apostles. Gregory portrays Paul⁷² as a vessel shaped by the word of truth for the task of dispensing teachings like “the varied blossoms of the virtues” to a wide range of hearers. One of those hearers – Gregory’s second example – is Thecla. She received Paul’s teaching “with her soul,” whereupon her “corporeal senses” were pronounced dead. Gregory’s final example is Cornelius, whose transformation was brought about by the words of “the great Peter . . . [who] filled the souls of his auditors with myrrh.” The teaching of Peter and Paul, Gregory explains, is like “myrrh that does the passions to death. We should note well the specific role Gregory ascribes to the “mouth” of the church. “By their agency,” he explains, “the great champions of the faith were imbued with the myrrh through the good confession at the time of their martyrdom in the contest for true religion.”⁷³

Gregory takes these examples as evidence of the way the church strengthens the faithful with good teachings. Doctrine nourishes the soul and enables the soul to evade the bondage of the passions, and it works on the soul significantly by means of the memory. The

⁷¹ *Hom. in Cant. XIV* (GNO VI, 400; Norris, 423).

⁷² Paul is, of course, a singular example, as his conversion was brought about by an encounter with the Word himself rather than the words of others.

⁷³ *Hom. in Cant. XIV* (GNO VI, 405–406; Norris, 431).

mention of memory⁷⁴ occurs twice in Gregory's interpretation of 5:14. Gregory directs attention to the "belly" and the "tablet" in particular as signifying the heart. Gregory draws on the use of "tablet" in Habakkuk and "belly" in Ezekiel to interpret this verse in the Song of Songs.

For if the Word instructs us to write the divine vision down clearly on a tablet, it may be the case that by "belly" it means the purity of heart by which our memory registers the divine visions in writing. Further, the One who as it were opened the mouth of the great Ezekiel and put into it the scroll of the book that was full of letters on either side, both inside and outside, said to him, "Your mouth shall eat and your belly shall be filled" (Ezek 3:3), thus giving the name "belly" to that in the soul which thinks and reasons, in which the divine teachings are deposited.⁷⁵

...

So by all of these testimonies we are led to understand the pure heart when the word "belly" is used, and this becomes the tablet of the divine law in those who, as the apostle says, show "that they have the requirement of the law written in their hearts" (Rom 2:15), who have such letters graven in their soul not by ink but by the Spirit of the living God, "not on tablets of stone" (2 Cor 3:3), as the apostle says, but on the pure, white, and polished writing tablet of the heart. For such must the governing part of the soul be if it is to be stamped with a clear and distinct memory of the divine oracles, spelled out in clear letters.⁷⁶

Gregory ascribes an active role to memory in the first of these passages, as it is memory, working through "purity of heart," that stores the divine teachings in the part of the soul that thinks and reasons. The memory here works *on* the soul, filling up the soul with the good teachings that, as Gregory will argue, have the power to transform those who receive them. In the second passage, the

⁷⁴ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 413, 415; Norris 439, 441). In both cases, the term Gregory uses for memory is *mneme*.

⁷⁵ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 414–415; Norris, 441).

⁷⁶ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 414–415; Norris, 441).

work is done by the Spirit. The same part of the soul is the receptacle; it receives the same content as “a clear and distinct *memory* of the divine oracles.” In both passages, Gregory gives memory an important place, both by what it does and by what it is. As that which fills the soul with what comes from God, and that which the Spirit imprints upon the soul, memory is essential in relating the human soul to God.

Gregory uses the image of the marble pillars to connect the divine words or vision in the heart with the practice of the faith. The church itself rests on the pillars of the truth of Christ, Gregory explains, but he presses further to discover what can be meant by the *two* pillars – the “legs.” Gregory uses a similar tactic here to the interpretation of saffron in the previous text. He begins by observing that “the brisk and concise word of the Gospel renders the entire perfection of the virtuous life something brief and easily itemized” – that is, the commandments to love God and neighbor.⁷⁷ Gregory explains:

Since then the Lord says that the whole of the Law and the Prophets *hangs* upon “these two commandments,” and in our text the Bride states that the body *is supported* by two pillars set on golden pedestals, it will surely be correct to adduce those two commandments in order to construe the enigma of the legs. The Lord calls one of them “first” and the other “like” the first.⁷⁸

Gregory suggests also that these are the pillars Paul recommends to Timothy. Faith and conscience are the same as the two great commandments: “When [Paul] says ‘faith,’ he means loving God with one’s whole heart and soul and strength, and when he says ‘good conscience,’ he means a disposition to love one’s neighbor.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 418; Norris, 443).

⁷⁸ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 419; Norris, 445).

⁷⁹ *Hom. in Cant.* XIV (GNO VI, 419; Norris, 445). The careful observer will note that the reference to “pillar” in 1 Timothy is not in the same context as the reference to faith and conscience. To identify the “pillars” in the Song of Songs with the “pillar and support of the truth” (the church) in 1 Tim. 3:15 is a feat of exegetical acrobatics. Faith and conscience are mentioned in 3:9, but have a slightly different context: Paul says that deacons should hold “to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”

Bringing what Gregory says here together with his reference to memory as structured by doctrine in Homily IX and the importance of the memory of the good in Homily VI, we can make some general observations about the role of memory in the transformation of the soul. First, like the senses, the memory is restructured, so that it points one away from transitory goods to God's eternal goodness. Second, this restructuring, in turn, teaches the soul to desire God consistently. Third, doctrine changes the heart and the memory in part by guiding the development of virtue.

Gregory's interpretation of the final verses of the passage shows even more clearly the place of desire in the transformation of the soul, and how that transformation relates one to Christ through the teaching of his body, the church. Gregory takes "the chosen" to signify both Christ and "the body of Christ filled out by its individual members."⁸⁰ So the Bride praises both Christ (referring to "the Lord's beauty") and Christ's body (referring to "the beauty of the Bridegroom in its totality"). When Gregory turns to "sweetness" and "desire" in verse 16, he continues the interchangeability of Christ and Christ's body; he assigns a place for those within the body of Christ who serve as the "throat" of the body of Christ as well, emphasizing the diversity of the members.⁸¹ (It is worth noting here that Gregory allows for the souls of the faithful to be shaped *differently* and yet to be equal in purity and clarity of the divine reflection.) The sweetness issuing from the throat comes from the same source and serves the same purpose as the "good teachings" so far discussed: to draw the soul ever more consistently and deeply toward God, the soul's true desire. "Perhaps," Gregory muses, "one will not be mistaken if one understands the term 'throat' to signify the servants and interpreters of the Word, in whom Christ speaks."⁸² Gregory includes John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul in the company of those who comprise the throat. Earlier in the homily,

⁸⁰ *Hom. in Cant. XIV* (GNO VI, 423, Norris, 449).

⁸¹ Gregory returns to the image of the body of Christ first mentioned at the very beginning of the homily. There is certainly much more to be said about the role of the body of Christ in the formation of the soul through good teaching, but it is peripheral to the discussion here. I hope to consider this more deeply in a future monograph on the church.

⁸² *Hom in Cant. XIV* (GNO VO, 425; Norris, 451).

Gregory emphasized the “mouth’s” work of strengthening resistance to the passions, which enabled the “champions of the faith” to hold to the confession of the faith. In the passage at hand, Gregory picks up this theme, but elaborates on a different feature of the words and their speakers. He expands his group of examples (discussed above), explaining that

all the prophets, in handing over their organs of speech to the Spirit that sounded within them, became *sweetness* as they poured the divine honey forth through their throat. Kings and common folk alike consumed it to their benefit. The pleasure of it did not check desire through surfeit; rather did it nourish longing by affording a taste of what desire seeks.

That is why she names the whole of him *desire*, as if she were capturing the beauty of the One she sought in a kind of definition by this word, for it says *totally desire*. How blessed are the members through whose contributions the whole body becomes *desire*! By their perfection in every good thing they produce a fascinating beauty blended out of all of them, and the result is that the whole body – not only the eye and the hair but also the feet and hands and legs and around the throat – is desirable, and, because of the transcendence of its beauty, none of the members is counted inferior.⁸³

Gregory draws together here a number of themes that run through the *Commentary*. The “taste” of sweetness increases desire, just as the glimpse of God’s beauty and goodness redirects the appetites. What myrrh accomplished with respect to the passions in Homily VI, sweetness does here, turning desire toward its proper object. That sweetness, moreover, parallels in the body of Christ the work of memory in the transformation of the soul: what the apostles and prophets receive and pour forth becomes “the divine honey.”⁸⁴

The effect of the good teachings of the “mouth” extends through the whole body. All partake of the sweet words, and by the words “the whole body” becomes equally desirable. The individual soul that in desiring and reflecting the proper object of its desire becomes

⁸³ *Hom in Cant.* XIV (GNO VO, 425; Norris, 451).

⁸⁴ Cf. Gregory’s reference to “[divinely] inspired teachings” in Homily IX; see footnote 36 above.

desirable to the Beloved is here shown to be not a lone soul at all, but a member of the body of Christ. Although there is much more to be considered in Gregory's description of the body here, I want to note that the individual's *grasp* of the doctrines is not the mechanism by which her soul is made beautiful. We cannot rightly interpret Gregory as placing a sophisticated understanding of complex doctrines at the heart of Christian discipleship: the soul that cleaves to Christ by being united to Christ's body is not "counted inferior."

In the *Commentary* the soul stands at the intersection of doctrine and practice. The process of its transformation involves a retooling of the senses and the memory, the reorientation of desire, and the development of virtues. All of these aspects of the growth of the Christian involve some aspect of the soul; moreover, the virtuous soul manifests itself in the keeping of the two great commandments. Thus Gregory adds something indispensable to Milbank's account of the individual as active recipient of the divine life: the need for ongoing training of the soul. For Gregory, receiving from or participating in God's life coincides with the reshaping of memory and the development of virtue. Gregory's doctrine of the soul makes clear the link between formation and active reception.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I summed up the two main difficulties I identified in the accounts of Christian identity presented in the first three chapters: the problem of sin and the lack of an account of Christian formation. In chapter 4 I argued that Gregory's account of the soul offers Christians a way to talk about precisely that complex of imagination, sin, desire, the vision of God, and concrete practices essential if we are to discuss adequately Christian formation and the Christian negotiation of identity. While I took my cue from Rowan Williams' call for a retrieval of soul language, I suggested that a simple retrieval of soul language without overt theological commitment would be inadequate: soul language can only serve the purpose of unifying the various themes in Christian life in the context of a dense and sustained theological discussion. To think about Christian life as life lived through the soul toward union with God is to articulate the goal of Christian life together with the "means" of Christian

living. The soul is not, in Gregory's vision (or my own), the "essence" of the person: that is, the soul is not the "true self" Rowan Williams rejects. Rather, the soul names a dimension of the embodied person only accessible through language and both seen and developed through concrete practices. In Gregory's understanding of the soul, sin is that which inclines the Christian soul away from God. Since the soul's central purpose is to reflect the image of God, the obscuring effect of sin prevents the soul from allowing the Christian to live toward God. The clear, pure soul both allows the vision of God – which is an indispensable feature of Christian life for Gregory – and reflects the beauty and the love of God back into the world through Christians' concrete actions. Gregory describes the purification of the soul as involving a high degree of discipline formed by Scripture, doctrine, and one's fellow Christians.

In the present chapter I have argued that the formation of the Christian soul involves the reshaping of imagination, the reorientation of desire, and the creation of hope in God. In effect, the imagination of the appropriately formed soul may be described as a *habitus*. Gregory's account of the habits of thought and practice that aid in the construction of such a *habitus* go beyond the descriptions offered either by Kathryn Tanner or John Milbank. Tanner's account of Christian identity as a task implies the importance of developing certain habits that facilitate one's participation in the argument about what constitutes Christian identity. Underlying Tanner's discussion of the community of argument are certain rules for engaging in the conversation. In particular, these rules involve certain practices of speaking and listening charitably. Engagement in the conversation is inseparable from the effort to live faithfully – a point Tanner seems to assume but never states. The habits of thought, speech, and action appropriate to the "internal" conversation (about Christian faith) mirror those habits suitable for engagement in the wider cultural context. Tanner implies that an attitude of charitable listening and humility in interaction with one's neighbors are key characteristics of a Christian *habitus*. Yet, as I suggested in chapter 2, Tanner does not offer any suggestions regarding the development or discernment of these qualities.

Milbank's attention to language and to the metaphysical undergirding of Christian faith and practice encourages us to view the world as in God and from God in such a way that our self-

perceptions are drastically altered by Christian belief. So also Gregory tries to paint for his readers a picture of the world and God that is founded on grasping the radical incomprehensibility of God's being and of the manner of our own salvation. Milbank interprets well Gregory's account of God, creation, and salvation, especially as regards the incredulity of the Christian story. In Gregory's view, which Milbank reads faithfully, the Christian story is not to be believed without some astonishment, and it most emphatically does not accord with the "natural" world. Milbank shares Gregory's view that faith itself and the practice thereof are a kind of ongoing miracle. Knowledge of God is not within our grasp: only the conceptions we can devise using finite and clumsy language can create within us the receptivity to grace that marks Christian existence. Learning to imagine ourselves and the world in God allows us to think and live in a way that facilitates the attention to God necessary for participation in the divine love.

In the first place, however, Milbank does not take into account in any significant way the distorting effect sin has on our participation in and imitation of the divine life in Gregory's theology. As we have seen in these two final chapters, Gregory considers sin the enemy of reception and prescribes therapies for resisting sin and even, to a certain degree, for freeing oneself from sin. Second, Milbank does not take seriously enough the role of practices of formation in conditioning the soul for active reception. Although he sees that Gregory's context for developing one's discernment is a community whose life together centers on the practices of Scripture and Eucharist, he does not suggest a similar context for the development of receptiveness for the contemporary Christian.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Milbank specifically acknowledges Gregory's key context for the development of the soul: "monastic social practice" ("The Force of Identity," 206). Although Milbank does not say so, Gregory does not suggest that every Christian must participate in this kind of intensive training in order to practice Christianity faithfully. The question might be raised with respect to Milbank's discussion of Gregory on this point whether there were other contexts that might be considered suitable, and what parallels we might find in contemporary Christian practice. See also Elias D. Moutsoulatos, *The Incarnation of the Word and the Theosis of Man according to the Teaching of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Constantine J. Andrews (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2000).

Thus, while Milbank's account of active reception approximates the notion of Christian life in Gregory's theology, it still falls short of the mark. Milbank seems to agree with Gregory that participation in the Eucharist and engagement with Scripture are essential components of Christian life, but he does not make the connection between those practices and the formation of Christian habits as Gregory does. Both Gregory and Milbank emphasize the gift character of Christian identity; Gregory is at once more emphatic about the development of a receptive soul *and* about the fact that God gives us our identity in Christ and enables us to receive it.

For Gregory, the whole complex of doctrine and Scripture – reiterated in the reading and preaching of the word and the celebration of the Eucharist – serves a key function in the shaping of the Christian imagination and so in the formation of the soul. We see more clearly in Gregory's description of Christian life the composition of the Christian *habitus*. That is, what makes the *habitus* Christian involves particular beliefs about God and the nature of creation and human destiny as well as the performance of certain practices – such as the recitation of Scripture or the discipline of virginity. Macrina's example shows the importance of formation in the development of the habits conducive to active reception. Gregory's presentation of her *Life* calls attention to the context of its performance: Macrina's achievement of virtue reveals itself not only in her mastery of the passions, but in the charitableness of her actions. We should also note that Gregory's discernment of Macrina's charity happens in the context of a community that supports such judgments. Gregory does not perceive intuitively, but recognizes Macrina's charity through its reflection in and through the community of which she was a part.

There is, in Gregory's theology, an understanding of the world and God that fosters the development of Christian habits of thought and practice. Catechesis introduces those being instructed to the way of seeing God and the world that corresponds to the faith of the church and the appropriate way of living the Christian faith. The formation of the Christian soul reorients desire and creates hope, which guide Christians' perception of and relation to the world. In Gregory's account, Christian formation builds up a set of imaginative resources, particularly from Scripture and doctrine, that enable the flexibility suggested in my three modern interlocutors'

accounts of Christian identity. The habits of thought and practice that Gregory prescribes tend toward the formation of a Christian whose imagination and action spring from the source of Christian life: God. Gregory urges Christians to develop those habits that will strengthen their resistance to sin, and so enable their reception and reflection of the divine love which all were created to share.

Doctrine, Discipleship, and Christian Identity

Throughout this book I have tried to persuade you that the account of Christian identity formulated in the first three chapters is compelling: Christian identity, on this reading, is fluid with respect to core and boundaries, yet insistent that the conversation about identity relies on the Christian past as its indispensable interlocutor. As such, this account makes space for the retrieval of an account of Christian identity grounded in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa that builds on it by detailing the shape and formation of the Christian subject implied in the modern account. Thus, despite its anchor in late antiquity, this description of Christian identity plays well in the contemporary arena for theological discussion, as Milbank's engagement with Gregory of Nyssa suggests. Doctrine plays a key role, as a central topic of the conversation about Christian identity and also as that which shapes imagination and guides performance. The habits of imagination and action that make this performance possible, I have argued, emerge as the soul adapts to the presence of God and reflects God's love. One essential habit of the transformed soul is hope: hopefulness orients desire toward God expectantly. We might say that Christian identity, individually and corporately, consists in holding onto hope both in conversation with the past and engagement with the present. Understanding

Christian identity in this way adds some detail and definition to the account drawn from the first three chapters, and suggests a direction for further discussion, which I undertake in this final chapter.

The starting point for this discussion is the idea that Christian identity consists in attentively receiving from God one's very existence. John Milbank offers Gregory of Nyssa as an example, and Gregory offers his sister Macrina. I want to add to these one further example that I think illustrates the movement of active reception as it is qualified by the struggle against sin we find in Gregory, and the idea of a cycle of transformation we found in Rowan Williams. The image on the cover of the book shows the dynamic of faithful Christian discipleship in an illustration of a famous gospel narrative, the calling of Peter. Jesus has been teaching the multitudes from Peter's boat; when he has finished his teaching, Jesus says, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Peter's response captures perfectly the logic of Christian practice as I have been discussing it: "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing; but at your bidding, I will let down the nets." Although the evidence is strongly in favor of calling it a night, Peter heeds Jesus' words. There is something about Jesus and his teaching that compels Peter to do this apparently foolish thing. Christian discipleship, I have been arguing, operates according to its own logic: not the evidence but Jesus' word leads Peter. Peter's response to Jesus' invitation to act on trust puts Peter in a place to experience the surprising plenitude of God.

Peter's *action* positions him for *reception*. And two things change for Peter as a result of this experience. First, in his astonishment at the catch of fish, he glimpses the glory of the Lord. Second, the new light in which he sees Jesus shines on Peter as well, and he perceives his own sinfulness. "Depart from me, O Lord," he says, "for I am a sinful man." If Peter's initial response of trust signals an overcoming of those habits that would prevent him from heeding Jesus' words – and I think in some measure it does – then this response is initially puzzling. Yet it reveals the cycle that active reception implies: moving forward in faith means overcoming sin not once, but over and over again as the light of Christ penetrates deeper into our hearts, revealing what blocks reception. In a world marked by fallenness, following Christ often (if not always) involves a struggle against the resistance that comes to us from within (in

the form of sin) and from without (in the form of cultural values that run counter to the ethics of the kingdom).

We need to rethink what it means to be Christians in a counter-Christian world without resorting to a set standard against which we might measure belief and practice. Being a Christian means doing the Christian thing, for Christian reasons, in a Christian way. But – and this is the central question – what makes the thing, the reasons, or the way *Christian*? We cannot specify an answer in advance of actual situations: there is a sense in which being a Christian means doing what Jesus did – which Jesus himself identified as only that which “He sees the Father doing” (John 5:19). That is, Christian faith and practice seem to depend on an angle of vision above all else. And Gregory of Nyssa’s account of Christian identity does not immediately appear to help answer this question. Christians are so called only because of their identification with Christ; imitation of Christ, in turn, is no mere copying, but is a participation in Christ. But what does that *look* like, and how do we know when we are *doing* it?

As Rowan Williams has insisted, neither our vision of Christ nor our self-knowledge is clear enough to allow us to answer these questions easily, and I am not suggesting otherwise. Instead, I offer some clues, based on my reading of Gregory of Nyssa, that can help us to stay on the road. In chapters 4 and 5, I showed one way in which Gregory can help us move forward. For Gregory, the vehicle for our participation in and reflection of God is the soul. So also, our Christ-likeness is an affair of the soul, and the depth of our participation in Christ and the clarity of our reflection of Christ depend upon the orientation of our desire, which is the mirror of the soul. The reshaping of desire is central to the formation of our Christ-likeness, and Gregory identifies two tools for reworking the heart: doctrine and ascetic practice. Christian doctrine gives catechumens an account of the human predicament, both its problem (sin) and its solution (charity as a mirroring of and sharing in divine charity), which grounds Christian faith and practice. Right doctrine, for Gregory, points the way for the soul on its journey of transformation; we ought to think of the rule function of doctrine as setting guideposts for Christian imagination. Ascetic practices provide a therapy for sin, help to reorient desire toward God, and encourage growth in charity. While Gregory does

not offer particular practices appropriate to the current context, he directs us toward practices that support our efforts to be mindful of the ways in which our desire and our vision are distorted by sin. I say little about ascetic practice in this chapter, but that is not because it somehow drops out of the picture. Ascetic practice both builds and testifies to the hope that I am arguing here is at the heart of faithful discipleship. The purpose of Christian asceticism is to deny oneself, take up the cross, and follow, in the hope that in losing our life for Christ's sake, we will gain it.

Furthermore, Gregory of Nyssa tells us that Christian identity consists in participation in the source of all Christian love and action: it never sits still. So, I have suggested that Christian identity is a journey rather than a destination. In the first chapter, I picked up the term "true discipleship" from Kathryn Tanner as the description of Christian identity in action. I want to return to that concept here: Christian identity consists in following Jesus. Discipleship is a useful term because it indicates three aspects of the journey: following, which draws the Christian forward; incompleteness, which characterizes life lived on the road; and the relationship of participation and reflection that grounds Christian identity. The question now can be put differently: How do we know we are on the right road, headed in the right direction?

On the Road: Excursus on Acts 14:22

Look for examples of catechesis or of ongoing formation in the New Testament.

No, I didn't find many, either. The best clues to the shape of growth in Christian faith I did find were in Paul's return to Iconium, Lystra, and Antioch. Although he insists elsewhere in Acts that he only goes to preach the gospel where it has not been heard, in Acts 14–15 he returns to these three cities, and at the end of the fifteenth chapter he sets out to check on all the cities in which he had preached the gospel. So, what does he have to say to the converted? Acts 14:22 gives us a hint: ". . . they returned . . . strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." The Christians in Lystra, Iconium, and

Antioch would have been acquainted with tribulations: believers in these cities were subject to vigorous persecution. Certainly there is plenty of unpacking I might do, if I were in the New Testament commentary business. For the purposes of my argument here, however, I make just two observations about the verse.

First, the visit from Paul and Barnabas strengthened the souls of the disciples. There is a parallel here between what Macrina does for Gregory in *On the Soul and Resurrection* and what Paul and Barnabas do for the disciples in these three cities. The aim of what is said – teaching, exhortation – is to build up the believers’ souls, enabling them to carry on despite suffering. Second, the exhortation itself suggests that ongoing formation includes encouragement to remain faithful (no less difficult now, I submit) and a reminder that tribulations are a part of the package. The resource the disciples most need is *hope*. That is what strengthens their souls so they can “continue in the faith.”

I noted that John Milbank’s account of Christian identity in particular seems curiously at odds with the description of struggle that characterizes Christian life in the New Testament. I do not think that his concept of active reception excludes it, however, as I have indicated above with reference to Peter. To complete the picture of that movement integral to Christian discipleship, we need to look again at the struggle. Acts 14:22 helps us to see it as it occurs with respect to a resistant culture. Moreover, we will see that implicit in coping with opposition from without is the struggle against sin, which also marks Christian disciples on the journey.

Rethinking Christian Identity: An Old Idea in a New Place

Describing Christian identity as discipleship is hardly a new idea. Literature in practical and pastoral theology uses the language of discipleship routinely, and it is a topic that receives a good deal of attention.¹ But it is a concept little used in systematic or constructive theology. Peruse *Modern Theology*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*,

¹ See, for example, recent work by Eugene Peterson, Walter Bruggeman, and Roger Walton.

and more, for the last ten years: discipleship is not a subject that comes up. Kathryn Tanner's use is unusual, and it is worth noting that discipleship does not figure in the scholarly responses to *Theories of Culture*.² Gregory of Nyssa's account of identity-to-Christ implies that thinking about Christian identity as discipleship requires us to reflect on our theological anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology: who we are, where we find ourselves "on the road," and where we are headed. I cannot undertake the project of detailing those implications here, but hope that what I do have to say will stimulate further conversation.

The notion of discipleship helps us to fill a gap in Gregory of Nyssa's account as well. The stumbling block in Gregory's theology is in the difficulty in grasping the interaction between human agency and the work of the Holy Spirit.³ Granted, this falls into the category of deeply mysterious things about Christian faith, and I am by no means attempting here to resolve the debate about grace and free will that has kindled so many theological arguments. The particular slippage within Gregory's account, however, opens up an area for further reflection. Reading Gregory, we find both that it is all the work of the Holy Spirit, and at the same time it is all up to us. Thinking Christian identity as discipleship makes that apparent contradiction into a way of life: Christian life is to be lived specifically in the tension between grace and free will, sharpening and strengthening our reliance on the Holy Spirit, who helps us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Thinking Christian identity as discipleship thus gives more specific content to the account of Christian identity offered in the previous chapters. The concept of discipleship refers identity back

² See, for example, the reviews of *Theories of Culture* by Maurice Wiles (*Journal of Theological Studies* 50.2 [1999], 830–832), Reinhard Hütter (*Modern Theology* 15.4 [1999], 499–501), and Philip Kenneson (*Anglican Theological Review* 81.1 [1999], 174–175). The dominant theme in the reviews is, not surprisingly, *culture*.

³ This is a topic in the scholarly discussion of Gregory of Nyssa. See, for example, Ekkehard Mühlenberg, "Synergism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 68 (1977): 93–122. Verna Harrison suggests that, for Gregory, human freedom continually cooperates with God's grace (*God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010], 14–15).

to the original: Christian identity is about being identified with Christ.⁴ Again, this is not a new idea, but it is a view of Christian identity that finds little place in contemporary systematic theology. As such, it also offers a standard by which to measure – and Jesus is not the only standard, as I will explain below. Discipleship makes a place for accountability and for the companionship that characterizes accounts of Christian life such as we encounter in the New Testament and in literary accounts like *Pilgrim's Progress*, just to give two examples. In the space discipleship creates in the conversation, we find room for talking about formation, sin and doctrine, and signposts pointing the way forward.

Formation

Thinking Christian identity as discipleship puts formation at the heart of the matter: identity is not the form, it's the *being formed*. Discipleship is all about formation: to be a disciple, by definition, is to be in a process of becoming like the Master. Disciples are on the road to salvation. Gregory reminds us that we are eternally “getting there,” ever closer to union with God. The idea that we are in an eternal process of formation sits neatly with the account of human being that Tanner, Williams, and Milbank all assume, and Williams discusses in detail. For all three, as well as for Gregory, being human means being in a process of change. Gregory insists, furthermore, that change is not neutral: if we are not changing for the better, we are changing for the worse!

Gregory's emphasis on change points to the dynamic character of Christian identity. The relentlessness of change in human life calls for vigilance about the direction of change, and involves the whole life of the disciple in the process of formation. Not only that, but a key aspect of our changing for the better is our re-narration of the past in the light of Christ. For the disciples at Antioch, Lystra, and Iconium, this re-narration would have been facilitated by the exhortation they were given: the reminder that

⁴ Gregory himself makes this point emphatically in a treatise entitled “What it means to call oneself a Christian.” Unfortunately, I have not had space to discuss the treatise in these pages.

the way of discipleship includes tribulations helps discernment. Rather than being an unwelcome interruption, tribulations show the disciples that they are headed in the right direction. Discerning “true discipleship,” the work of *poesis*, and the process of making sense (again and again) all emerge in the struggle forward in faith, as disciples strive to change for the better.

Discipleship also puts relationship at the core of Christian identity.⁵ Our identity to Christ is not first of all about what we do, it is about what God does in creating us and in receiving us into his presence by uniting us to Christ in the Holy Spirit. Christian identity, marked ideally by faith, hope, and love, is something we receive. We “put on Christ” not by our own doing, but by the work of the Holy Spirit. The disciple’s task is to allow that identity, her being in Christ, to orient and to define her. Virtue will be the fruit of discipleship in most cases, as the example of Macrina demonstrates; yet we must be careful not to tie identity to achievement. Our identity in Christ is secured by relationship, not by virtue. Disciples are marked by relationship to the Master first of all, and develop in accordance with their own gifts and capabilities.⁶

Thus also thinking Christian identity as discipleship places us all on the same plane – we’re all disciples, none the master – without requiring homogeneity. This speaks to Kathryn Tanner’s concern about religious virtuosi. The crucial feature of our Christianness – or, perhaps, Christian-hood would be better – is that we are followers of the same Christ. Discipleship allows for some to be farther ahead on the road, or stronger travelers (see, for example, *Pilgrim’s Progress*), without making them masters. The “champions of the faith,” as Gregory called them in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, are not the preachers and theologians, but the faithful. And the example Gregory offers in his portrait of Macrina is that of a faithful disciple of Jesus (and her theological insight is not the pinnacle of her discipleship). It seems that part of Tanner’s problem

⁵ I am grateful to Stanley Hauerwas for suggesting “character” as an alternative to “identity.” Although in the end I concluded that it would not do, I would have missed something I think is important about the nature of Christian identity had I not been pressed to consider character as a substitute.

⁶ We should also bear in mind that the relationship to the Master originates with him and not with us.

with religious virtuosi is that undue authority or power might be accorded to them; but Gregory makes clear that the measure of faithfulness is humility – so he describes his elder brother, Basil (“the Great!”) as being taken down a peg by their elder sister. Puffed up by his rhetorical training in Athens, Basil has missed the point of Christian practice; Macrina sets him straight. Basil’s example of missing the point suggests my next topic: the problem of sin.

Sin

I have suggested that thinking about Christian identity in terms of a life of discipleship makes clearer why sin matters for Christian identity.⁷ Because identity (for all three of my modern interlocutors, as well as for Gregory of Nyssa) consists in living toward God and reflecting God’s image so that Christ’s identity (as the “image of the invisible God”) becomes ours (i.e., we participate in his identity), attention to sin is necessary. If the object of Christian identity is Christ-likeness, which we reflect by receiving and participating in the divine life, then “sin” names that which blocks reception, blurs reflection, and attenuates participation. So far these are only abstractions. Can we make any more concrete observations about what constitutes sin?

In the first place, I have argued that although desire plays a key role in the formation of subjectivity in the critical theorists Tanner, Milbank, and Williams engage, only Williams places desire at the heart of Christian identity. Gregory of Nyssa gives more intense and sustained attention to desire as the engine of Christian life. I suggest that we need to attend to the question of desire in a way that pushes beyond the connotations of eros common in postmodern discussions of subjectivity. For example, Judith Butler talks about desire in almost exclusively sexual terms in her groundbreaking work,

⁷ I have been helped in my thinking about sin by the recent work of Ian McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and Cornelius Plantinga’s classic *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). I found, however, that opening the door to a detailed conversation about the nature of sin proved to be a rabbit warren I had best not go down in the final chapter!

Gender Trouble; Talal Asad, whom I drew into conversation with Williams in the second chapter, manages to shift the discussion away from sex, but does not give positive content to a desire that is not erotic. In the second place, in my “excursus” I promised to return to the New Testament witness to the interior struggle that characterizes discipleship. I criticized John Milbank in particular for the discontinuity of his intuitive grasp of the Spirit’s leading with what the New Testament, especially the Pauline corpus, says about our ability to hear rightly and to act accordingly. In what follows, I draw these two concerns together: the New Testament suggests – on the reading of this theologian, at least – that desire does play a crucial role; that role, however, often has only a peripheral connection to eros, if any. What the New Testament suggests, which Gregory’s theology reinforces, is that desire is inseparable from imagination, and imagination and desire together direct our hope.⁸

I cite just two examples. First, Romans 12:1–2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is a rich and complex picture of Christian discipleship, and much could be said about how it bears on the themes of this book.⁹ For the purposes of this chapter, however, I note only the following. First, the continuity between body and soul that Gregory observes also operates here: what you do with your body is a spiritual act. Second, the training of the body and the shaping of intellectual desire that go hand in hand in Gregory’s theology also find a place here. The result of the transformation is – as my modern interlocutors would want to point out – a way of seeing, a way of seeing in which what is seen as good, acceptable, and perfect is the

⁸ Gregory mentions the first of my examples, briefly, at the conclusion to *On Virginity*, but does not discuss either passage in detail. His own favorite New Testament verse seems to have been Philippians 3:13.

⁹ See footnote 10, below.

will of God. Far from an imagination in which the will of God might arbitrarily direct us to something we do not want to do, the renewed mind finds desirable that which God wills. Third, the transformation that takes place, which involves bodily sacrifice, spiritual worship, and renewing the mind, therefore adjusts the person's whole orientation away from the world and toward God. Bearing tribulations in the world goes hand in hand with the internal shift from seeing the world as desirable to seeing God as desirable. So, as Paul continues on in the chapter, it is not surprising to find that he connects learning to "abhor what is evil [and] cling to what is good" with "rejoicing in hope" (Romans 12:9, 12).

My second example comes from 2 Corinthians. Paul writes: "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (11:3). Two things in the passage (10:1 to 11:6) are significant for my argument here. First, Paul characterizes the struggle in which Christians are engaged as not "a worldly war"; rather, he says: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." Second, the battle imagery gives way, later in the passage, to the language of devotion; Paul describes the Corinthians as the bride, betrothed to Christ. It quickly becomes evident, however, that the heart of the devotion to Christ that Paul describes is faith in the gospel, the truth about Jesus. Perseverance is anchored in the imagination shaped by the truth of the gospel. The Corinthians need the "divine power to destroy strongholds" that prevent proper knowledge of God, and so need to cultivate "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." More might certainly be said about the connections made here;¹⁰ I only want to draw attention to the way the imagination figures in the struggle Paul describes. The battle against sin takes place first of all in the imagination, and the most important weapon in that battle is the truth about Christ. I will discuss the role of that truth in the next section.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ellen Charry's *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) – Charry uses passages from the letters to the Romans and Corinthians to describe Paul's understanding of Christian identity and Christian formation, but does not discuss the above passages in detail.

What sin involves is not first of all “what I have done, and what I have left undone,” but the orientation of all my action and inaction. To refer briefly back to Romans: the rich theological reflection of the eighth chapter speaks directly about hope. Paul describes the longing of all creation for redemption, for which we hope, and “wait for . . . with patience” (8:25). That in turn helps us with sin – sinful desires are not just “guilty pleasures” but the fruit of setting our hearts somewhere else. Gregory refers all desire to God; the essence of our human nature is longing for God. To call a desire “sinful” is to name it as pointing away from God. However else we may want to describe sin, it signals a failure of hope.

Doctrine

Hope brings us back around to what strengthens the souls of the disciples: doctrine, in its broadest sense. In Acts 14:22, the reminder that the disciples *are* on the way to the kingdom of God, that the way leads “through many tribulations,” completes the exhortation to continue in the faith. Keep going: you are indeed headed in the right direction. I argued in chapter 4 that the doctrine Macrina expounds in *On the Soul and Resurrection* serves precisely this function. Through her exposition of the doctrine of the resurrection, Macrina communicates to Gregory the hope that allows her to face death unflinchingly.

Doctrine is connected intimately to Christian identity, but not in the way Lindbeck imagined. Kathryn Tanner, Rowan Williams, and John Milbank would all agree with Gregory of Nyssa that the identity of Christians is bound up with the narrative of salvation as it is presented in Scripture and doctrine. The two are inseparable and indispensable in forging our identity to Christ. On this view, the Scripture-shaped imagination is equally the doctrine-shaped imagination. Scripture and doctrine together comprise the “teaching” that shapes the soul. Gregory of Nyssa helps to fill in some of the blanks I identified in the first three chapters. He puts doctrine and narrative together as the teaching of the church, and assumes that the two are interwoven and mutually interpreting. Gregory also identifies a connection between doctrine (understood broadly as faithful Christian teaching) and discipleship. Doctrine shapes

hopeful disciples. So, doctrine is essential to Christian identity because Christian identity is practiced as discipleship, and doctrine trains disciples. I examine the “training” doctrine does below.

Understanding Christian identity as discipleship thus also shifts our understanding of what doctrine is *for*. Lindbeck made it clear that doctrine was not saving knowledge. But he makes no connection between doctrine and salvation. I argued in chapter 5, however, using Gregory of Nyssa as my conversation partner, that doctrine plays a key role in the formation of Christian imagination. Thus, for Gregory, the grammatical function of doctrine is not unimportant: the rules that govern speech about God do so by directing desire such that it structures the imagination according to hope in God.

How does this work? To take one example: in the *Catechetical Oration*, Gregory of Nyssa insists that the catechumen grasps the divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit before baptism. He seems to say that otherwise the baptism doesn’t “take.” But if we look closely at what he says, we find that his main concern is with baptism as a part of intellectual formation rather than ontological change. (It is ontological change as well, of course, but that change is not the focus of my argument here.) Baptism is the end of one journey and the beginning of another, and understanding the doctrine of the Trinity is important for setting out on that second journey. Gregory explains:

For what happens in the economy of baptism depends upon the disposition of the heart of him who approaches it. If [the catechumen] confesses that the Holy Trinity is uncreated he enters on the life which is unchanging. But if, on a false supposition, he sees a created nature in the Trinity and then is baptized into *that*, he is born once more to a life that is subject to change.¹¹

To be sure, Gregory has a polemical end in mind in writing these words. Christian identity itself seems to hang on the confession of the Son and the Spirit as uncreated. But why? “For a person who brings himself under the yoke of anything created unwittingly puts his hope of salvation in that and not in God.” He goes on to explain that what matters is the “hope for change for the better” that is only possible if one grasps that the life into which one is baptized is the

¹¹ *or. catech.* 39 (SC 453, 328; Richardson, 322).

good that does not change: God.¹² The intellectual transformation that happens at baptism is a transfer of hope from self to God.

But how is this hope held variously by disciples of varying abilities? I am helped here by a recent PhD thesis by Peter Comensoli that connects the *imago Dei* to the *status viatoris* of human life as it is expressed in the theological anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Comensoli observes that “a human being imitates the image of God to the extent that he or she lives a life in conformity to it.” For Thomas, however, we have the likeness not by dint of living in conformity to it, but as intrinsic to our being human creatures. Thus the concern about likeness has to do with “ways in which human beings may choose to move away from it.”¹³ Following on from this, he suggests that if

imitation is best measured in terms of loss, and not gain, then the profoundly impaired are less able to move away from imitating the nature that they already have after the image of God. It is those who are capable of choosing who are most at risk of losing the good of their humanity, of becoming less perfectly in the image of God . . . It is now the rationally capacious who are challenged to judge the quality of their own living in conformity to the image of God in which they are created.¹⁴

Although I think he overstates the case somewhat (surely the perfection of the image of God in us is subverted by original sin – but that is another matter), he points us to a central feature not only of the *imago Dei*, but of discipleship as the mode in which Christian identity is lived. His reading of St. Thomas supports the view of discipleship as a living *toward*, that is, living in hope.

This reading also helps us to see how participation in Christian identity as I have described it is possible for the cognitively impaired. Using the way the *imago Dei* is lived as the paradigm, we can describe participation in Christ as living out an identity fashioned at baptism. Gregory of Nyssa and his contemporaries worried about post-baptismal sins precisely because the ontological change effected by baptism was considered radical and total. How, then, does the

¹² *or. catech.* 39 (SC 453, 328; Richardson, 323).

¹³ Peter A. Comensoli, “Recognizing Persons: The Profoundly Impaired and Theological Anthropology” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011), 264.

¹⁴ Comensoli, “Recognizing Persons,” 265.

corruption of the rational will persist? Even as the “rationally capacious” find living out the image of God more challenging, so also living according to one’s baptismal identity asks more of the intellectually robust. That is, taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) is harder work for the one whose thoughts are more plentiful, varied, and complex. The riches of imagination can aid the task of discipleship, but in order to do so, the imagination itself must be trained by doctrine to nourish hope, encourage perseverance in faith, and demonstrate the love in which Christians participate as members of Christ. Doctrine is a gift for the “rationally capacious,” to structure our imaginations according to Christian hope.

Doctrine seen in this light, as that which trains disciples, helps us to see how an account of Christian identity such as Tanner, Williams, and Milbank have proposed can be embraced without excluding the cognitively impaired. Whereas in each of their proposals Christian identity depends heavily on comprehension of the narrative at the very least, doctrine and narrative seen as relating to the disciple’s formation do not require the same sort of engagement from every disciple. Comensoli writes “the good that is the image of God is already there to be lived, and failure to live according to this good – understood as a choosing to pursue life accordingly – is to abandon being *en route* ‘in hope’ towards the perfection of that good.”¹⁵ This is astonishingly close to Gregory’s description of the image of God as something of which we are partakers. We reflect the image as we are able, and as we grow in faith, hope, and love.¹⁶

¹⁵ Comensoli, “Recognizing Persons,” 265.

¹⁶ One important bit of language in Gregory’s theology that Comensoli uses only sparingly is soul language, which I discussed in chapter 4. For Gregory, “soul” functions, at the very least, as the place holder for the seat of human desire, reason, and imagination, and the site of the “infusion” of the infused or theological virtues; “soul” identifies that which is to be transformed in the process of Christian formation. Importantly, for Gregory, this complex of reason and desire includes free will. Our capacity to choose the good is precisely what has been damaged in the Fall; we tend to choose what is pleasant. So healing the rational capacity is crucial to the life of Christian discipleship: developing *this* identity requires changing the way one attends to the world and to God. (Milbank’s account takes this shift for granted, missing the need for *shaping* of the “receptacle” in order for active reception to succeed. Williams insists on spiritual discipline, but does not integrate the disciplines into his account of Christian identity.)

Hope plays a key role in our consciousness of the transition from participating in God by nature (as God is the source of being) to participating in God through Christ: hope changes us. Straying from the road of discipleship occurs not through a failure of understanding, but through a failure of hope. Discipleship isn't *unintellectual*, but it is certainly *more* than intellectual and doesn't *require* a particular form or level of intelligence. Gregory helps us to see this, in a roundabout way, in his description of the saints.

The saints

We would be mistaken if we read Gregory as regarding Christian teaching as the only, or even the primary, resource we have in strengthening our souls for the journey. If he did, perhaps *On the Soul and Resurrection* would have been a sufficient record of his sister Macrina's influence. But Gregory does not stop there: his *Life of Macrina* presents (as we saw in chapter 5) the paradigm for Christian discipleship. In the struggle against sin in the process of formation, so Gregory suggests, we have allies: the saints whose exemplary lives offer inspiration as well as a pattern to follow as we attempt to live lives worthy to be called Christian. I want to mark three places where Gregory refers us to examples of virtue as essential to our own forward movement. The first of these is in *On Virginity*, which I discussed in chapter 4. Gregory insists at the beginning of the treatise (as I observed in chapter 4) that an indispensable element of the life of virginity (whether understood literally or allegorically) is an example to follow. In order to undertake the life of virginity as he describes it, the first step is to find a model. The guidance he offers in the treatise will not do on its own. The role of this model, for Gregory, is twofold. First, we are "inclined to embrace some course of life with the greater enthusiasm, when [we see] personalities who have already gained distinction in it." A worthy example stirs aspiration, and turns our desire toward the pursuit of such a "course of life." The second benefit of an example is guidance: "the candidate for this life is told to school himself by recent masters." The saints who inspire and guide us in these ways are both those who have gone before (like the apostles and martyrs) and those just ahead of us

on the road (like Basil, who is the example in *On Virginity*, and Macrina).

The second example is the *Life of Macrina*. At the outset, Gregory makes clear that he is holding up the life of his sister as an example of a life led according to Christian precepts and in light of the narrative of salvation through Christ. He frames the *Life* as a response to a correspondent who was “convinced that it would be a benefit if the story of her noble qualities were told, because then such a life would not be forgotten with the passage of time, and she who had raised herself by philosophy to the highest summit of human virtue would not have passed by ineffectually, veiled in silence.”¹⁷ The story Gregory tells depicts Macrina as teacher and example, and likens her to the martyrs. The purpose of the narrative is not identical to the model Gregory recommended in *On Virginity*, however. Gregory’s portrait of Macrina is carefully crafted, crediting her with at least one miracle as well as complete self-control. As she appears in the *Life*, Macrina plays the heroine who inspires her audience rather than the master after whom disciples may pattern their own lives. In writing Macrina’s *Life* Gregory moves from regarding her as a companion on the journey (albeit somewhat ahead on the road) to a champion of the faith.

Third, Gregory draws our attention specifically to “the champions of the faith” in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. As we saw in chapter 5, the champions are not those who defend the faith by writing treatises and debating at councils, but those who defend it with their very lives. The teachers of the faith serve its champions. Gregory opens the heroic dimension of the faith to any who would follow Jesus. While it may be true that not everyone can join in the polemics and refute heretics, anyone can be a champion of the faith simply by enduring tribulations, which takes us back to Acts 14: those disciples holding fast to the faith in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch exemplify Gregory’s champions.

Each of these moments in Gregory’s writing on Christian doctrine and Christian life shows us how the saints (broadly understood) help us on the road of discipleship. The saints provide us with examples

¹⁷ Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 110.

of “true discipleship”: they inspire us, bolstering our hope, and guide us, sometimes helping us to see where we’ve fallen short and how to get up again. The saints also help us to remember Jesus faithfully: since they reflect the life of Jesus, we can imitate Christ by imitating the saints.¹⁸ The faithful who have traveled the road before us help us along even as they mark the way.

*Receiving the identity of Jesus, or, holiness is in the struggle*¹⁹

Earlier I suggested that thinking about Christian identity as consisting in discipleship helped us to ask questions about that identity differently: How do we know we are on the right road, headed in the right direction? I have argued that the saints show us the way forward and doctrine strengthens our souls for the journey. I am afraid, however, that the picture I have sketched here of Christian identity as discipleship might look rather grim: success, after all, is not the essence of discipleship. Perhaps the nearest likeness I have given to Christian discipleship is not the shining *Life of Macrina* but the beleaguered disciples in Acts 14. The teaching they receive is hardly cheering: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Discipleship is not about winning every skirmish along the way; it is about the hope that keeps us in the battle. We can take our failures to live up to the image of Christ (or the examples of the saints) as part of the road; we can count them as failures without having our identity as disciples diminished. In the process, doctrine points the way forward, shaping our imaginations so that through the tribulations we can discern – maybe more clearly as we go on – the kingdom of God toward which we hasten in hope.

I leave you with two examples we might take as examples of life on the road, one cinematic and one theological. When I say

¹⁸ For an elaboration of this principle, see James C. Howell, “Christ Was Like St. Francis,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 89–108.

¹⁹ I owe this phrase to my parish priest, Fr. Tony Curren, who used it in a homily in August 2010.

that discipleship is about staying in the fight, the image in the forefront of my mind comes from the film *The Mission*. If you have never seen it, do. One of the central characters, Rodrigo Mendoza, chooses his penance (if you want to know what his sin was, you'll have to watch the film): to drag his armor up to the mission above the falls in the company of the Jesuits under the leadership of Fr. Gabriel. Although the scene in which he arrives at the top is amazing, it's the getting there that interests me here. On more than one occasion Mendoza loses ground, sliding down the muddy hillside (or chasing after his armor). Each time, he begins again. Discipleship is about getting up again, in the company of the faithful, setting our sights on the summit, and being drawn forward. That is the shape of it, at least, for the rationally capacious. His real triumph is not reaching the summit, it is getting up again. Small victories build the disciple, even as the obstacles try him.

The second example is more complex, and it also comes with a recommendation. Each time I teach my systematic theology class, I suggest that if they really want to understand why they ought to know Christian doctrine, they should read Kathryn Greene-McCreight's *Darkness Is My Only Companion*. The story she tells of making her way through seasons of mental illness reflects the doctrine-shaped imagination at work. Because her work with doctrine and Scripture has formed her soul for the hope that characterizes disciples, she makes sense (as Rowan Williams might put it) of a period of her life, and grapples with the apparent meaninglessness of mental illness. The most striking thing about her account is the way it is shot through with Scripture, especially the psalms, doctrine, and the church's prayers and hymns.

Of course, during some of the most difficult times she describes, Greene-McCreight can employ very little of her knowledge of doctrine and Scripture (if any at all). She found herself, though she does not speak about it in precisely this way, rationally incapacitated. I found what she had to say about her experience of incapacity evocative: she reflects on the character of her own identity and of her Christian faith. Following treatment that left her memory severely impaired, she could not remember much at all. The memories that should have bolstered her hope failed her. Yet, she says that her "identity in Christ remain[ed] the same." Her Christian identity persisted despite her inability to recall the story of Israel

and the New Testament, despite her forgetting the prayers of the church. She never stopped being a disciple of Jesus, even when the activity of following was imperceptible. And she testifies to the sustaining power of the church that held her hope when she could not hold it for herself.

That is the other side of discipleship. Christ draws us forward as we are able to follow, and carries us when we are not. Doctrine trains disciples; it also sustains a church which enacts Christ's love and strength, and carries those unable to follow. That, however, is the subject for another book.

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