Issues in thinking about God

Eight lectures in Michaelmas Term 2012

Week 1: Thinking about God in a pluralistic world. The challenge of modern theology

A couple of days ago I read a column in a national newspaper whose title had a strange attraction on me. It read 'Only theologians really understand religion'. Deep within me this must have struck a chord, though at the same time I was sceptical. And the text, I am afraid, proved my scepticism right. It turned out that this was actually a very useful article except for its title. Its author argued against some scientific experiments with 'religion' – he referred specifically to the attempt to show that seeing a picture of the Virgin Mary suppresses pain – on the grounds that this was based on an inadequate notion of religion. Quite rightly so, I thought, and it shows why thinking about religion, thinking about God is more important than some people think. Yet the 'theologian' he cited to bolster his claim was none other than the French scholar Emile Durkheim, himself an atheist and one of the pioneers of the sociological study of religion. Do not misunderstand me. His use of Durkheim was well chosen for his argument, but it illustrated the problem with his title and – I might say – to some extent the problem with these lectures.

Thinking about religion and about God is no longer an exercise to which only professional theologians or Church people are authorised and entitled; any such attempt takes place, rather, within an environment that is fundamentally pluralistic in character, and theological reflection must take notice of that. You may think this is a fact so obvious as to make it almost trivial, but it is surprising how often theological

developments are still considered as though they took place almost in a vacuum. The positions taken by individual theologians are then presented as primarily responding to those of other theologians in past or present. Now I am not saying that this is wrong; of course theologians define their own views in relation to their theological forebears, but one must not overlook that their arguments are also developed within a cultural, social, scientific, and economic context, and this is true not only for so called contextual theologies.

The major factor to be considered in relation to the phase of theological thinking about God that is to be covered in these lectures is undoubtedly the radical change in the way religion has been understood and practiced in Western Europe over the past two or three hundred years. This includes, but is not limited to, the rise of atheism, which in itself is of course quite a significant factor to be considered in lectures on the topic of God. To see this significance we only have to remember that, as far as we know, atheism has never else existed as a practical, religious (or if you so wish: non-religious) option in the history of humankind before. Sure enough, there has been debate about atheism, and people have often been called atheists long before this time. Thus in late antiquity Christians and Jews were called atheists by the 'pagan' majority of the Greco-Roman world because they denied the existence of their many gods. Christians in turn called pagans atheists because they did not know the true God. Up to the 17th century, in Europe atheism normally denoted the denial of God's trinitarian nature. And even in 17th century France, where atheism in our modern sense of the word had become a favourite topic of intellectual debate, such debates could still be punctured by the admission that no one had actually ever met an atheist.

Atheism then is, in an eminent sense, a product of the Christian world in Western Europe, and this at once shows why it is relevant for a theological lecture such as this one. As the societies, in which atheism became an option for the first time, were at the time thoroughly Christian, can we avoid the irritating suspicion that there may be a

connection between this dominance of Christianity and its transformation through the various reform movements of the late Middle Ages and of Early Modernity on the one hand and the rise of atheism from the late 17th century on the other? In other words, is there something in the Christian conceptualisation of God that made this development possible? And if so, does this mean that the rise of atheism has in itself a theological significance?

Our thinking about God then takes place in an environment in which atheism has become a viable existential option, and this fact cannot and should not be ignored – in the own best interest of theological reflection. Yet atheism is not the only aspect to be considered. As I said initially, in a sense atheism today seems to be but part of a wider phenomenon, which may be described as the pluralisation and at the same time individualisation of religious options. We cannot even start thinking about God without reminding ourselves that for the vast majority of people today, most believers included, belief in God is something that is fundamentally subjective, not only in the sense that faith and a relationship with God exists – if it exists – within an individual's subjectivity, but in the stronger sense that views about religion and God are a matter of choice for the individual person. Religion is, by most people, no longer seen as a matter of in principle objective knowledge, but as a matter of personal (or communal) inclination and taste. It seems therefore inappropriate, a category mistake, to ask whether a religious statement is 'true' or 'false' – as inappropriate as it would be to ask the same about preferences for music, food or clothes.

By contrast, traditional theology, whether we think of Augustine, Aquinas, or Calvin, was predicated on the premise that theology could be as much true or false as, say, biology or mathematics. Only this explains why these theologians felt mostly confident to battle adherents to other faiths or of rival interpretations of Christianity, and even occasionally to invoke the government's aid for squashing notorious heretics. Theology was an eminently cognitive and therefore public exercise.

Historically speaking, there is little doubt that this view was discarded in favour of the 'subjective' one once it was clear that post-Reformation plurality was here to stay. The great theological controversies between Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran and Anglican divines in the late 16th and during much of the 17th century were still conducted on the basis that they were all after a common truth, and that a common theological method could in principle discover it. You will never find any of those figures revert to the kind of statement that is now all but inevitable: 'For me as a Catholic …'; 'for me as an Evangelical …' In other words, they don't appeal to principles that would be inaccessible to the other side simply by virtue of an individual decision or choice.

What does it mean to think about God under these circumstances? How is theology affected, in other words, by the subjective and thus pluralistic paradigm within which religion is today cast? Obviously, we shall need the eight weeks of this term to see in detail. Let me say though in anticipation of the individual approaches we shall study that we can in principle distinguish two main tendencies that have emerged. One of them seeks to preserve the universality of theology at the prize of its specific confessional character, the other holds on to the specific character of *a* theology but gives up effectively on its claim to universal validity. The former transforms confessional theology into rational or natural theology, as you find it classically in William Paley or today in someone like David Tracy. Such a theory claims universal truth precisely insofar as it abstracts from the specific doctrines of, say, Christianity let alone Catholicism or Calvinism. The latter, which you find classically in Karl Barth or later in George Lindbeck and the Yale School, preserves much of what is characteristic for a specific faith tradition, but this is achieved by abandoning the claim to universality. In other words, in order to appreciate this kind of theology you will be asked to start from an acceptance of major creedal statements; theology thus serves primarily the religious communication and clarification amongst those who belong to a certain community and believe in a set of doctrines already.

If thinking about God is thus in many ways a task that is connected with our own environment and determined by the parameters of our own social and cultural context, this is not to say that there is nothing that ties us to earlier attempts to come to terms with this topic. On the contrary, in many ways our own understanding of religion and our own notions of God are, in spite of all that separates us from the past, derived from and continuous with the theological tradition. Most concepts are borrowed from earlier thinkers, most avenues have been tried at least once, and quite often have those who started by intending to revolutionise the discipline ended by acknowledging their profound debts to those who came before them. Let me point out here two rather consistent themes that have surfaced and resurfaced one time after another in theological attempts to think about God.

The first I would call transcendence and immanence. Let me introduce it by saying that faith in God in the world of religions almost invariably expresses a tension between a conceptualisation of God in strongly anthropomorphic language and imagery and the belief that God can achieve things he could not possibly achieve if he were indeed so much like us. Human beings crave a relation with their gods, and in order for such a relation to exist they must be somehow like us. Yet at the same time, the reason we believe in such beings is that they are precisely *not* like us.

This tension has resulted, both in Greek culture and in the Jewish tradition, which was later taken over by Christianity and Islam, in a critique of the original anthropomorphic elements. Quite famous are the comments by the 6th/5th century philosopher Xenophanes:

> The Ethiops say that their gods are flat-nosed and black,
> While the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.
> Yet if cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw,
> And could sculpture like men, then the horses would draw their gods

> Like horses, and cattle like cattle; and each they would shape
> Bodies of gods in the likeness, each kind, of their own. (Diels-Kranz, fr. B 16, 15)

Xenophanes is not criticising religion per se, what he opposes is the tendency to imagine gods in a way that resembles human beings of one sort or another. This seems reasonable enough, but of course creates problems if applied rigorously. For if we take away any property in our conceptualisation that might be taken from the human and non-human creation, what is left? Nothing, it seems, given that any knowledge we have, any concept we could possibly use, and word we employ or any idea we possess are taken ultimately from the realm of our experience. Thus the imperative to think and speak of God in a way that avoids the use of improper anthropomorphisms leads directly to the problem of how we can know and speak of God at all? Is there anything we can legitimately say of God without falling into this trap?

The most influential attempts to solve this problem have come down under the label of the 'three ways' of divine predication. The first of those is the 'way of eminence', which was held notably by Duns Scotus. According to this view predicates we use for finite being in a limited way apply to God in an unlimited or eminent way. In other words, when we say God loves, this means essentially the same as saying 'a mother loves' except that God's love brings the love of the mother to a kind of perfection that one cannot find among human beings. In a similar way, one might say that calling God omnipotent is saying that he possesses what we call power, yet in a degree otherwise unknown.

Before him, Thomas Aquinas had argued for a subtly different understanding of these common predicates. Thomas thought that we used them neither in completely different meanings (equivocally) nor strictly univocally as Duns would maintain, but analogically. The meaning is not the same, but it is related because God created the world. Here is what he writes at one point in his magisterial *Summa Theologica*:

> But no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God...When we apply wise to

> God, we do not mean to signify anything distinct from his essence or power or being. And thus when this term wise is applied to man, in some degree it circumscribes and comprehends the thing signified...Hence, no name is predicated univocally of God and creatures. Neither, on the other hand, are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense... Because if that were so, it follows that from creatures nothing at all could be known or demonstrated about God; for the reasoning would always be exposed to the fallacy of equivocation. Therefore it must be said that these names are said of God and creatures in an analogous sense, that is, according to proportion. For in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocals, one and the same; yet it is not totally diverse as in equivocals; but the name which is thus used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions to some one thing; e.g., healthy, applied to urine, signifies the sign of animal health; but applied to medicine, it signifies the cause of the same health (Summa Theologica, Part 1a, q. 13, art. 5.).

Within the 20th century there has been heated debate about the permissibility of the doctrine of analogy, as it has been called. Notably, Karl Barth, who saw here the slippery slope that would allow people to infer whatever they wanted about God from creation, called it an 'invention of the Antichrist' and its prominent use in modern Catholic theology the only good reason for not becoming Catholic. On the other side of the aisle, modern Thomists like John Milbank have responded in kind and clearly consider this principle absolutely essential for any theological knowledge of God.

The third of these three ways is at the same time the most radical one. It is known under the name of 'via negativa' or negative or apophatic theology and rests on the assumption that any common use of predicates for created and uncreated being is equivocal and thus misleading. This argument was developed by philosophers, but came to dominate Christian theology for a long time and is still a major influence in contemporary debates. Does theology then have to end, as Wittgenstein advised at the end of the *Tractatus*: Of what one cannot speak, one must remain silent? Interestingly, at least some of those theologians given that they profess not to know anything about God, go to rather great lengths writing about him.

The negative theologians allow one way around their ban on divine predication, and this is through the use of negations. Thus, by saying that God is, for example, immortal, we do not say that we know what this is; we only say that unlike ourselves he does not die. Negative predicates then would seem merely to repeat in different words

that God is entirely different, transcendent and that, therefore, whatever we say or think about ourselves or about our world cannot apply to God himself. The most influential thinker in the apophatic tradition is an unknown 5th century theologian, whose writings have been transmitted under the name Dionysius the Areopagite (there is no doubt that he is not *the* Dionysius converted by Paul according to Acts 17; therefore he is often referred to as Ps.-Dionysius). In one of his writings we read:

> The Cause of all … cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live, nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. Nor is it sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to use or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nothingness nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial (*The Mystical Theology*).

What do we learn from this kind of theological language about God? I take it that the point is not so much that we are directly instructed in factual knowledge about God (this would go strictly against the idea of negative theology), but that a text like the one just quoted introduces the reader into a kind of meditation by means of which she or he is directed away from their normal preoccupation with worldly things until their minds open up to the possibility of an immediate contact with the divine which is no longer mediated through concepts, words, or theories. The apophatic tradition then has a strong spiritual and mystical bend, and it is thus no coincidence that it was popular within such religious traditions in Christianity and beyond.

I started this overview by noting a tension between transcendence and immanence within religions generally. Apophatic theology seems to go a long way to eliminate this tension at the expense of immanence. Its sole aim is, or appears to be, to understand that and how God is utterly transcendent. Yet is this in any obvious way the ultimate solution to this tension within Christianity? True, insofar as Christianity is emphatically a monotheistic religion, it seems only consequent to think about God as

someone who is ultimately remote and distant from anything humans can know or relate to.

Yet is there not something else that is distinct about Christianity? Is there not the notion that this same God 'became flesh through the virgin Mary'? Apophatic theology seems to go the furthest way in emphasising the utter uniqueness and transcendence of God, but it has regularly been criticised for not giving room to the centrality of the Incarnation for Christian theology. For if the notion that in Jesus Christ God became human is taken at all seriously, does this not have rather far-reaching consequences for our understanding of God as well? It certainly is no coincidence that the Platonist philosophers who were fond of the *via negativa* rejected Christianity chiefly because they felt it made nonsense of the idea of God by claiming such a being could be induced to undergo such a humiliating process.

For Christian theology, conversely, putting the Incarnation at the centre has inevitably implied a re-evaluation of the transcendence-immanence tension. God *did* after all enter the world, the Word became flesh, as the gospel of John famously put it. He cannot then, after all, be understood as merely detached, foreign, transcendent. There is, in other words, a strong case to be made from within Christian theology against the emphasis put on God's otherness in the apophatic tradition. This comes out even more clearly once we realise that the Incarnation has had a direct influence on thinking about God through the distinctly Christian doctrine of the Trinity. If this is more than a play with words and numbers, it must entail a mediation of the infinite and the finite, of God and world, time and eternity and so forth.

Yet this does not mean that putting Christ at the centre of Christian thinking about God tilts the balance in favour of God's immanence. Rather, it opens up another, different dichotomy, which I would refer to here as the nature-grace tension. The question is simple. If God reveals himself in and through Jesus Christ, what does this

mean about knowledge of God outside this revelation? This problem has not, for the longest time, caused Christianity too many qualms. Somehow it seemed possible to say that some knowledge of God was possible through creation generally, but that full and complete knowledge, specifically the knowledge of the loving and merciful God, was only revealed in Jesus Christ. The fact that, as far as Christianity was concerned, most of their non-Christian acquaintances (pagan philosophers, Jews, Muslims) seemed to have arrived at some such conclusion gave rather strong support to such a theory. Thus it was only under the conditions of modernity that this dichotomy opened up in its full force. In fact, it became part of the division between the two responses to the rise of religious plurality that I have described earlier. Once there was the option on the table that theology could either *ideally* become natural theology or *ideally* leave natural theology behind entirely, the distinction between nature and grace, which had of course been controversial for a long time, became dominant for the issue of God's knowability as well. Not surprisingly, it is again Karl Barth who led the fiercest assault arguing that from a theological point of view, knowledge of God had to come only and entirely through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. His critique of Thomas' doctrine of analogy does not therefore lead him to side with negative theology, but for him the issue is ultimately one of Christocentrism.

I conclude. Thinking and talking about God has always been controversial. The very knowability and the adequacy of any conceivable theology have been hotly debated for a long time. Christianity has, on the one hand, participated in the tendency of Platonism to emphasise the utter difference and transcendence of God in comparison to created being, but it has also through the ideas of the Incarnation and the Trinity produced a counter-balance to those notions.

At the same time, the influence belief in Christ has had on the doctrine of God meant that another tension has opened up between natural and supernatural knowledge of

God. Over the past 200 years and culminating in the 20th century this question has been very much at the centre of theological debates about God.

This brings us back to the beginning. Thinking about God, knowledge of God within and without Christianity has become such a controversial topic due to the new, pluralistic situation within which any such attempt is now situated. We shall move on from here to consider next week some of the non-theological counter-currents that have influenced theological debate in our own time.

Week 2: The critique of theism and its theological background (Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, Nietzsche)

I introduced these lectures last week by pointing out the unique situation within which our thinking of God is situated. Intellectual developments over the past two hundred years have meant that discourse about God has increasingly become both more pluralistic and more controversial. It is the major purpose of this week's lecture therefore to add to this by giving some additional background on non-theological arguments during the 19th century, which have been, in one way or another, critical of traditional theology and of traditional theism: Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Friedrich Nietzsche. They all have this in common also that they became quite influential for theological developments in the 20th century, albeit in different ways.

One has, of course, to be careful not to paint with the same brush all these thinkers. Only two of them, Feuerbach and Nietzsche, consider themselves atheists and see the overt aim of their philosophical arguments and of their published writings in a stinging and devastating critique of Christianity and religion per se. Neither Kant nor Hegel had such an intention, and while the latter's students were split, in the 1830s, about the precise theological consequences of his philosophical system, it seems fairly clear that his attitude to Christianity is not, in any obvious way, polemical or hostile.

So let us look at this pair first. Why do they fit the title of 'critics of theism' even though, as I just said, neither of them delivered a devastating or polemical critique of Christianity? The answer is that both of them offered powerful challenges to long-held assumptions about the way thinking about God was to be done, and it is these challenges that have in many ways defined the field for any serious intellectual engagement with God during the 20th century. It is perhaps needless to emphasise that the thought of each of these people is so complex, and their ideas have been developed within so many and different writings that the kind of summary I

shall be giving is just short of misleading. Some further reading is, in any case, advisable, and for the rest I have to restrict myself very strictly and firmly to their view of God.

1. Immanuel Kant must have pride of place, not only because he is the oldest of the four, but also because he laid the foundations, on which everyone since has been building. He may be one of the last European philosophers for whom theology was so closely interwoven with philosophy that, in a sense, his philosophical oeuvre as a whole has a strong theological dimension to it; I should expressly warn against the hope of finding his theological views specifically in his late writing on *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone.*

For the purposes of this lecture I must focus entirely on Kant's epistemology and his rejection of the traditional arguments for the existence of God in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which has been in theology his most influential contribution. I leave to one side therefore his other major insight: his theological interpretation of human morality in his *Critique of Practical Reason.*

The *Critique of Pure Reason*, by many regarded as one of the most important works in the history of philosophy, was first published in 1781 and in a substantially revised 2nd edition in 1787. Critique for Kant means not just to criticise, but in line with the Greek work *krinein*, to examine and judge critically. His aim in this work then is a critical examination of pure, speculative or theoretical reason. Why was this necessary? Kant looks back at two conflicting evaluations of the power of speculative reason. One had been dominant in Continental philosophy since the early 17th century; thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz were associated with it. According to this tradition, human rationality can on its own refute scepticism. The sceptical question how we can know that our thoughts correspond to anything in reality they would answer by an attempt to show that at least in one case we can prove that the contents of our mind must have reality, namely in the case of God. This was achieved on the basis of the ontological argument, which claims that for the perfect being existence is a necessary predicate. The *ens perfectissimum* is at the same time the *ens necessarium.* Once this has been established, the reality of the world around us and the accuracy of our cognition of it are deduced from the ideal contents of the notion of God.

Against this tradition, Hume had reaffirmed a sceptical critique based on Empiricist principles. According to Hume, this impressive rationalist edifice collapses once we realise that the only basis of any knowledge we have is derived from sense perception. We know nothing independently of the data we collect through our senses, things we see or hear about are the ultimate source of all our expertise. Therefore, any epistemology that moves from these data towards their rational interpretation cannot make claims beyond inductive probability. Take causality: according to Hume this is essentially our experience that an event A is usually followed by event B. There is nothing intrinsic in A that 'causes' B, as far as we are concerned. All we can say that one appears to follow the other with some regularity and that, failing A, B will not occur either.

Kant's response to these rival theories essentially has two elements. He accepts that Hume's conclusion were inevitable *if* all knowledge did indeed derive from sense perception. Yet against this premise he holds that it is impossible for us to conceive of any bit of knowledge that is not *already* sense perception interpreted by rationality. This is because even the most simple thing we know about reality is never, nor could it be, purely empirical, but combines an empirical and a conceptual element. Kant's essential assumption therefore about our ability to know and understand reality is that in order for it to be reliable it must contain these two elements: empirical data based on our sense perception, and their conceptual interpretation through mental categories.

Yet while this is, in the first place, a refusal of Hume's empiricism and scepticism, Kant is far from siding with the rationalist tradition. For unlike these philosophers, he emphasises the necessity of an empirical grounding of experience and knowledge. Any knowledge is based on the duality of sense-perception and mental conceptualisation: this implies that, where one of the two is lacking there cannot be knowledge, and if there seems to be such, it is surely deceptive. This, Kant believes, is the case for the three major metaphysical ideas of a totality of the world, of the soul, and of God. All of them could not ever correspond to any potential act

of sense-perception, and for this reason, the intellectual and philosophical search for their purely speculative grasp is futile and misleading.

Kant devotes considerable care to the show this in the case of the arguments for the existence of God, and many of you will have heard of the claim, against the ontological argument, that existence is not a predicate. Yet it is more important to see that, within the setup of Kant's critical philosophy, these arguments must be fallacious, not because of any internal fault that could be remedied, but because of the fundamental concept of human knowledge within which they are integrated. Faced by Hume's stinging scepticism, Kant felt that the only way to defend the principal reliability of human experience and human knowledge was by tying it to the basis of sense-perception in principle. There is no way our cognition could ever reach beyond the borderline that is marked by the limits of our sensual interaction with the world.

Kant's contemporaries saw this argument as an attack against philosophical theology and thus against theism and religion generally. Kant himself did not disagree with the former, but he vigorously maintained that his critique of metaphysical approaches to God had not only *not* damaged Christianity, but that rightly understood it was helpful to the cause of the latter. 'I had to take away knowledge to make room for faith', is a famous phrase he uses in the preface to the 2nd edition of his first *Critique*.

Why is this? Kant argues theologically and in a way reminiscent of what I referred to last week as the transcendent-immanent fault-line in discourse about God. Provided the metaphysical arguments would hold (which they do not), they would conjure up an idea of God that is remote from and ultimately incompatible with that mandated by the Christian faith. These arguments may prove a God that is detached from the world, omnipotent and the principle behind the existence of the world. Yet this is a far cry from the notions of God as righteous, as merciful or as loving, of a God who cares for and interacts with humans and wills their salvation. Christians should therefore be happy to let go off them.

Jumping from here into the 20th century it seems clear that Kant's rejection of any metaphysical knowledge of God has deeply informed the debate about theological

epistemology. How *can* theology or any other discipline claim to know of and speak about God? Interestingly, two very different paths have been pursued: there were, certainly, liberals who took Kant's critical philosophy as their starting point to argue that theology needed to be radically transformed on the basis that God-talk was really impossible. Theology would, therefore, have to consider other topics and leave its traditional questions behind.

Yet more importantly, there were those who took Kant's thesis as a reminder of the traditional insights of negative theology, that we cannot know of or speak about God properly, and that it is therefore precisely a task of theology to seek ways of doing this, which do not fall into the traps highlighted by him among others. In one sense, and perhaps counterintuitively, the increased interest in revelation during (19th and) 20th century theology may well be a result of Kant's critical insistence.

2. With these insights we move on at once to the next person in our line, G.W.F. Hegel. Once again, he is not a critic in the strict sense of the word. In many ways, he restored and re-evaluated central elements of traditional doctrine, notably the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation take on an important place in his elaborate philosophical system. And, as in Kant, this is not restricted to those parts of his philosophy where he deals explicitly with religion and with Christianity, but these theological ideas are written into the deep structure of his thought.

It is impossible here to give even a vague overview of Hegel's system. Suffice it to say, that he believed that from within Christianity what was worth preserving was not primarily, as most 18th century Enlightenment people had thought, an idea of God and some moral guidelines, but that the core doctrines, which had been discarded by many, were of immense value, which only waited to be recognised.

Does philosophy have to think about God? Kant had argued that this was impossible, but Hegel passionately and pointedly disagreed. Philosophy had to take this topic seriously if it didn't want to provoke another dichotomy of faith and knowledge, which could be in the interest of neither philosophy nor theology. Yet *how* was God to be conceived? Is he utterly

transcendent? Hegel perceived the force of the pantheistic view, developed by Spinoza: if God is truly the absolute, how can he not be *in* the world? Clearly he must be everywhere, and this must include the entirety of the world. Still, Hegel does not fully agree with Spinoza, but opts for a view that has often been called panentheism: God is in the world, but he is not coextensive with it. God is the world, but this is not all he is.

Yet Hegel felt that in order to make any sense of God's absoluteness, this was only possible if he moved away from a purely static towards a dynamic conception of God. The oneness and the absoluteness of God could only be grasped properly if God himself was seen as becoming, as moving through the different stages that, taken together, constitute the history of the world. And this, precisely, was in Hegel's view, the speculative contents of the theological doctrine of the Trinity. This was not at all an incompetent attempt at maths, nor a nonsensical play with words, but the notion of God as one in three was based on the insight that only in this way the unity of the Godhead could be grasped and expressed properly.

We have to see the extraordinary thing that happens here: one of the central Christian doctrines, which at that time even many theologians had treated as a survival from a long bygone period of ecclesiastical and doctrinal history and a mere addendum to the fundamental truth that there is one God, is said to contain the deepest insight ever formulated into the being of God and a necessary aspect of any philosophical attempt to come to terms with the absolute. If anybody talks about the 20th century Trinitarian revival as though this happened out of thin air, this is where the foundations for this were being laid. Christian theology, it seems, is told to go back to the drawing board and readdress in earnest one of the most fundamental and yet too often neglected doctrines of its tradition.

Or is it? Hegel's philosophy has become a bone of contention between theological and secular interpreters ever since. And the reason for that is simple. While theologians can see in his philosophy an immense appreciation of the intellectual relevance of their own discipline, philosophers may simply ask what it means that these insights are developed here within what is after all a philosophical system. Whatever one makes of it, it is written and argued for

without direct use of or reference to revelation or the authority of the Christian tradition. So, if a philosopher *can* arrive at these insights, do we need the job of the theologian any longer? Was theology, perhaps, only a midwife helping over a long time span to develop ideas which, once they are there, can now thrive and flourish perfectly well within a secular framework?

In other words: is Hegel's philosophy encouraging a restoration of traditional Christian theology, focussing on topics like the doctrine of the Trinity? Or is it a kind of benign death knell to this discipline as it shows how the tasks traditionally assigned to it, can now be performed much better by secular reflection?

Whatever the conclusion, it should be clear that once again we have a 'critic' whose reflections were to become fundamentally important for theology in the 20th century. The imperative of his system is clear: think God – but it is equally clear that his heritage is ambiguous, and theologians have been equally inspired by the awareness that a system that promises a complete understanding of things human and divine may be a temptation more than a boon.

3. With this we come to the first person here who really was, and meant to be, a critic of Christianity. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) expressed his views most clearly in his 1841 book *The Essence of Christianity*. Its central thesis is in one way easily expressed: the theological claims religion makes about God express in reality an anthropological insight: In truth it is not God who created men according to his image, as Genesis has it, but human beings created God to their image. God is nothing other than the ideal concept of humanity projected into the transcendent realm:

'What is God to man, that is man's own spirit, man's own soul; what is man's spirit, soul, and heart – that is his God. God is the manifestation of man's inner nature, his expressed self; religion is the solemn unveiling of man's hidden treasures, the avowal of his innermost thoughts, the open confession of the secrets of his love.' (§ 2)

This, for Feuerbach, is clear enough from the anthropomorphic language predominant in practically all religions. We had heard about this last week, and also about the fact that this

feature of religion had drawn criticism as early as the 5th century BC. Theology had responded by seeking to refine language about God, not least through the use of negative predicates.

So is Feuerbach then merely restating in a more radicalised manner what many before him had already observed? In one sense, this is true, and it has soon been observed that from the fact that religion contains projection of human ideals into God one could not deduce that religion was *nothing but* projection. Yet Feuerbach is quite aware of attempts to avoid anthropomorphic language in theology, and he finds this contemptible. He argues that negative theology may satisfy the intellectual desires of some, but that it is far removed from the religious needs of the masses. This, he argues, simply is not any longer religion because religion is relish, it is tied to human interest in their salvation which requires some personal interaction with God or gods. The god of negative theology could not fulfil this function any longer, he is impotent and without any religious significance.

Feuerbach's own solution therefore is to recognise that what humans yearn for in religion is something they need to accomplish themselves. It is the fulfilment and perfection of their race. The projection that is mistaken for God in religion is in reality this ideal state of humanity, which it is our task to achieve and complete.

Feuerbach clearly has influenced theology in ways quite different from Kant and Hegel. He could only be seen as a warning sign: how could the question about God appear to be receptive of such an answer? He has been studied and taken seriously where people have realised how easy it is to construe God within any intellectual discourse in a way that makes him seem more like a human projection than anything else.

Few people, I think, have taken seriously his critique of negative theology, though this too needs to be taken into consideration. I have pointed out in my first lecture that there are good theological reasons to be wary of a solution that posits God simply as so remote that any criticism is deflected by his transcendence. For by the same token much that makes God potentially relevant for the believer dissipates alongside. Feuerbach is a potent reminder of this problem too.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche is the last on our list, and like Feuerbach he is difficult to integrate into a theological discourse about God if only because his way of writing about religion is so overtly hostile that it seems all but impossible to find anything worthwhile considering from a theological point of view. Yet one should not be deceived. Nietzsche, in spite of his aphoristic way of writing and in spite of the venom with which he attacked religion, has been perhaps the single most influential figure at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, and very little serious theological thought in the 20th century has not been influenced by him.

Nietzsche took Feuerbach's view that gods are human projections probably for granted. In any case, this is not his major concern. He is often quoted with the word that God is dead, but this perhaps more for the utter quotability of it than for its fundamental significance for Nietzsche himself or for the world at large.

What Nietzsche really contributes to our debate is that he asks more specifically what ideas of God specific cultures and specific religions produce, and it is his analysis of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in this regard that deserves attention. For Nietzsche sees this religious tradition as arising from the desires of a group of underdogs who felt they could not reach their normal social, economic or political objectives and therefore develop religion into a tool of nurturing the ensuing resentment. Ideas such as judgment day and the eternal fires of hell for those who are rich and privileged to him speak a distinct language (and much of this is indeed to be found in the New Testament).

Yet more important than those direct outbursts of hatred against those better off, according to Nietzsche, is a more subtle variation of essentially the same emotion. This he detects crucially in the Christian notion of love. This idea, he argues, has been propagated by those who had to hope that God would love them because in no other way could they have expected to find mercy in his eyes. Yet this was the most perverse reversal of the natural order: human beings love God, not the other way around. He who loves is lacking in something, and the attempt to make God into such a being indicates the wish of those who happen to be miserable to force even the supreme being into their own likeness.

We can see, in a way, Feuerbach rearing his head again. Yet, as I said, for Nietzsche the point is less the mere fact of projection which he probably considered established, but the fact that within the Christian tradition this 'transvaluation of values' had occurred and those in charge had projected not just any God, but a god who would in his turn encourage and motivate all that is despicable and weak in humanity.

So the resulting question for the debate about God is not so much whether he can be believed in or not, but what idea we have of him and, closely connected with this, how we conceive of ourselves and of humanity which, according to Genesis, has been made in his image and likeness.

At the end of this brief overview, we have essentially four questions resulting from the four non-theological figures we have looked at across the 19th century (they are not, of course, necessarily compatible with each other):

- How can we know of and speak about God given that our metaphysical attempts to establish his existence inevitably fail (Kant)?
- What does it mean for theological approaches to God that he emphatically needs to be thought about (Hegel)?
- How can we make sure the God who is discussed is not merely a projection (Feuerbach)?
- What is the cultural and social impact, specifically, of Christian attempts to think about God (Nietzsche)?

Week 3: Negative theology and its problems (Barth; Marion)

I have described in last week's lecture how during the 19th century some serious challenges arose to theological thinking about God. I have not included in this account cases of pure materialism or atheism which consist in little more than a denial of traditional claims about the existence of God. The four major figures I looked at, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche all have this in common that, while criticising some crucial elements of traditional theology, they can be read as directing Christians away from theological misconceptions and towards a more appropriate, somehow purer conceptualisation of their notion of God. At least since the Reformation European Christianity had been familiar with the idea that it was part of the job of the theologian to expose and correct long-standing errors that had crept into theological usage as a consequence of neglect, of pagan influence, or simply as a result of human sinfulness. This idea of such a cleansing or purifying task of theology is a major driver in modern theological developments. Sometimes modernising theologians are introduced as though they had been particularly keen to betray the essence of Christianity to its opponents or, at least, as a kind of appeasement politicians who believe that the appetite of the Beast can be stilled by feeding it with a limited amount of traditional doctrine without seeing that each single concession will inevitably make it more aggressive. I am not denying that there may be some justification for this criticism, but more importantly it misses out on the motivation behind much of modernist reforming theology, which is the willingness to accept that the pre-eminent critics of Christianity point out something that exists within it and should, in Christianity's self interest be excised from it.

In fact, this interest exists not only in liberal or modernising theologians, but is a driving force behind more conservative theologies as well. I shall today look at two thinkers in particular, who in many ways are quite different: Karl Barth and Jean-Luc

Marion. The former lived mostly during the former half of the century, the latter is still alive and working; the former is Swiss and Reformed, the latter French and Catholic; the former is a died in the wool theologian, the latter by training a philosopher. In spite of these differences they offer a similar reply to some of the challenges I described last week. This reply can, in a first attempt, be characterised as the answer of 'negative theology'. It is then taking up a long-established tradition within Christian God-talk. Yet we shall see very soon that the appropriation of this tradition (which in Barth is largely unacknowledged while Marion is happy to see himself as part of it) within modern theology has its own problems and ultimately its modern context may tell us more about the concerns of both these authors than their ties to more traditional lines of Christian theology.

1. Karl Barth's doctrine of God in his dialectical phase

We start with Barth and look at him here primarily in his early role as the major figure in a movement that is often called 'dialectical theology' (roughly from 1918 until 1930). The word 'dialectical' is here used idiosyncratically: it refers neither to Plato's intellectual technique nor to that of Hegel, but merely to the tendency within this theological movement to emphasise to the extreme the distance between God and creation, between human beings and their creator. Barth stated this view categorically in the preface to the second edition of his landmark commentary on *Romans*, 'If I have a system it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven and you art on earth.' This in a nutshell is the foundation of dialectical theology – that theology ought to start from the recognition of (to use another famous Barthian phrase) the 'infinite qualitative distance' between God and world.

We can easily see, first, that this is a first important attempt to think about God in the 20th century; second, how this responds to some of the critical challenges you heard about last week; thirdly, that this harks back to the more traditional problem I discussed in my very first lecture as the transcendence/immanence fault-line.

a) First, it is clear that Barth's major concern is God. One might say that, in spite of all the changes and all the developments of his thinking over his rather extended academic career, this is the one remaining cornerstone of his theological thinking. He had been brought up in a theological atmosphere where most of his theological teachers were willing to grant to Kantian philosophy the impossibility of thinking about God; the consequence they would draw from that was that theology had to engage instead with the human basis of religion. Barth came to disagree with this approach to theology radically and fundamentally. Theology, he would urge, is not theology if it does not think God. We can see here, incidentally, the issue I had brought up last week as the major challenge from Hegel's philosophy. Barth probably wasn't aware of Hegel during his early, dialectical phase, and when he read him he realised that he had not done full justice to his stated aim of thinking God. Why not? By merely emphasising that God was different he had in a way again let go of him. We shall come back to this problem.

b) Second. For the moment it is more important that even the dialectical Barth saw thinking about God as the task of theology. Yet the way he conceived of that task was almost entirely formed by the terms of Kant's critical epistemology. Barth completely agreed with the emphasis of the *Critique of Pure Reason* on divine transcendence and the impossibility to reach God through the means of our own cognition. Consider the following quotation from *Romans*:

> Being what we are, human beings in the world, we cannot hope to have escaped the 'religious possibility'. […] We may storm from one room into another, but not out of the house into the open. We may understand, however, that even this final, inescapable possibility [i.e. religion] is, even in

> its most daring, most acute, strongest, "most impossible" variants a *human* possibility …

There are three statements contained in this quotation, and these may be said to be pure Kantianism: first, human beings cannot get beyond the limit that is set to their cognitive capacities. Secondly, we therefore have to confine ourselves to the realm of experience. But thirdly, we are able at least to appreciate that this is our situation, we are, that is, capable of an epistemological critique of our religion. Barth's theological reappraisal of the need to bring God back into the centre of theology is, then, in its first form strongly influenced by Kant's epistemic challenge to theology.

And it is precisely this Kantianism that stands epistemologically behind Barth's celebrated (or notorious) theological critique of religion. Religion, for him, is any human attempt to cross the border between the realm of our own experience and the transcendent realm of the divine. This is an attempt that must fail, and for this reason revelation, God's own intervention to bridge this gap, is the only alternative. Barth saw here a stark contrast:

> One cannot say of the obviously existent religious capacity of man that it is, as it were, the general form of human cognition, which then receives its proper and true contents in revelation and in faith. On the contrary, we are dealing with a contradiction: within religion the human being rebels against, and cuts himself off from, revelation by obtaining for himself a substitute for it, by taking for himself what should be given to him by God through revelation.

It is quite interesting to reflect at this point the relevance of the Kantian challenge for theology. It is often seen as encouraging a hyper-secular theology that avoids any reference to God. Barth's dialectical theology, however, is a good example of its potential for precisely the opposite conclusion. To emphasise the utter transcendence of God underlines the need for his revelation. This is Barth's theological bottom line. It comes out in his life-log obsession with what he called natural theology (once again, you may remember my mentioning this in first week: Barth thought this was the invention of the anti-Christ).

c) There can be but little doubt, third, that Barth's dialectical theology ushered in a new wave of theological debate about the transcendence-immanence problem in Christian theology. Barth's own position, at least initially, is as clear as anybody could want it to be: the task is to think of God as the other, and the temptation is to identify him with anything that is part of creation. We should not forget, of course, that a major factor in his own development was the experience of WWI and war theology with its uncanny willingness to employ biblical and theological ideas to bolster the national war effort. Barth felt that the only antidote against this was a complete ban on any such use of the notion of God. He came to realise later on that there were ethical and social issues that made theological intervention desirable or even necessary, and that not least for this reason his 'ban' needed qualification.

The question arises of course whether not Barth's early theology is simply a new version of negative theology. Interestingly, Barth himself denied that. In his important paper 'The word of God and the task of the ministry' he addresses the dilemma of the preacher who is charged to preach the word of God while at the same time understanding that this must be impossible for any human being. Barth then goes on to sketch two traditional strategies of avoiding this problem. One was orthodox doctrine, the other 'mysticism'. The former relies on the assumption that revelation has made available to human beings a certain set of doctrines which can then be used as though they contained knowledge of God. Yet this, according to Barth fails because it does not sufficiently recognise the sovereignty and otherness of God. In traditional dogmatic theology the living God becomes, as it were, locked up in a prison of folio-bound volumes.

Yet the mystical approach fails as well, Barth argues. The reason for this is that while it claims to be purely negative, in reality it *is* making positive statements. There is a way, Barth thinks, that the mystic believes that while doctrine may fail to deliver us knowledge of God his own religious experience can. Thus he makes the same mistake

as the dogmatician did, only at the individualistic level. He believes access to God is interior and private, but the point is, according to Barth, that there is no man-made access to God, but that God himself needs to open up to us, and that this has happened in revelation through Jesus Christ.

Is what Barth here criticises the same as negative theology? I think we can safely say that Barth's picture of a mystic who insists on private knowledge of God may be truer for some popular forms of 20th century mystical piety (consider the people who like to buy books about medieval mysticism today!) than for the tradition of negative theology. The apophatic tradition would insist that all conceivable knowledge of God is denied, not just the public and official theology of Church doctrine.

Barth's own rejection of the mystical path to God then doesn't really count against the view that his dialectical theology is really negative theology. We see clearer where the difference lies, if we remember again Barth's emphasis on revelation. What he means by this is not, of course, any revelation God could have given to humankind, but more specifically his one revelation in Jesus Christ. It is important for Barth that *this* is the only way to God. He rejects negative theology insofar as he thinks it contains even the germ of the possibility that God could be reached in any way other than through Christ.

It is this element of his thinking that offers some justification for his rejection of the 'mysticism' label. For Barth seems to think that the full and bleak truth about the god-lessness of this world can only be faced in the light of divine revelation. Only through knowledge of the Christ event are we at all enabled to confront the radical dichotomy of God and world under the condition of sin. This is, for him, why Feuerbach and Nietzsche are, at the same time, right and wrong. They are right in that they see that a world without revelation is the world of nihilism, governed by the will to power; they are wrong not only by not accepting the truth of revelation, but also by failing to see that the full force of their own insights is inevitably missed in an atheistic perspective.

This is because the utter horror of a world without God cannot be borne by human beings on their own. It can only be perceived where there is at least a glimmer of hope, an indication that this separation may not be the final word. Much more than that is not offered to the reader of Barth's early works.

Barth's early position then is negative theology only in a limited sense. Barth agrees that language about God is ultimately impossible and to some extent uses negative predicates to press home this point. Yet his use of the tradition of negative theology is ultimately controlled by his response to modern challenges to theology. He felt that the force of the secular argument could only be countered by introducing a strict juxtaposition between natural theology and revelation. Natural theology was any attempt by human beings to ascend to the level of the divine. This, according to him, is bound to fail dramatically. Only God himself can give us a glimpse of his own being. Such a dichotomy, such an either-or is unheard of in pre-Kantian theology. The tradition of negative theology still presupposes what has often been called the 'great chain of being', a continuous hierarchy of visible and invisible beings connecting our own world with the abode of God. To know the latter was impossible because he existed at the far end of this chain, he was extremely far removed and therefore inaccessible. Barth, however, presupposes a world that is, to use the phrase famously coined by Max Weber, disenchanted. It contains nothing transcendent other than God, but he is precisely not part of the world of our experience. Within this worldview Barth's acceptance of the fundamental premise of negative theology, that we cannot know God, leads him to a radical dichotomy of natural theology vs. revelation.

2. Jean-Luc Marion's postmodern version of negative theology

The same difference comes out equally clearly, I think, in a more recent contribution to the debate about God. Jean-Luc Marion's book *God without being* is unashamedly Barthian, but unlike Barth Marion is quite happy to see himself in the tradition of

negative theology. We shall see, however, that in his case the same qualifications apply. Marion's background is, in many ways, very different to that of the early Barth. Not least is he a late 20th century figure writing against the backdrop of postmodernism. His work engages some of the leading philosophical thinkers within the postmodern movement, notably Jacques Derrida who has, however, politely declined Marion's theological interpretation of his ideas. As a matter of fact, Marion himself is overall more a philosopher than a theologian. The majority of his books is on strictly philosophical topics; he sees himself as contributing to the phenomenologist school that has its origins in the years after WWI and has over the past twenty five years seen an impressive revival in France and the US. Marion inhabits both these worlds and has held, for many years, university appointments on both sides of the Atlantic.

Marion's book is rather complex so for the purposes of this lecture I focus on what may be the most important strand for us. In many ways its centre is Marion's distinction between what he calls 'idol' and 'icon'. The two types of image, typical for the Hellenistic world on the one hand, Christian Byzantium on the other, become for him paradigmatic for two ways of interacting with the world and with God. The idol is essentially beautiful, and because of its beauty it attracts our vision. It becomes the focal point of all attention, the object of admiration and even of worship. This is not least because we rediscover ourselves in it; in this sense the idol is also reflecting back to ourselves who and what we are.

All this would not necessarily be bad; the problem of course is that the idol is supposed to be an image *of something else*; in reality it is anything but. To think therefore that idols are a way for us to approach anything beyond them, that they are signs pointing to reality transcending them, is a tragic mistake. Rather, they only reflect back to ourselves what we projected into them. At the same time, because of their beauty and attractiveness, they are constantly and inevitably mistaken for the reality they are supposed to represent – this is precisely why they become 'idols' in the pejorative sense

of Jewish-Christian parlance. They thus obscure in a systematic way the difference between themselves and the things they supposedly represent, they make it, as Marion puts it, *invisable*.

And yet, for Marion this is not really the 'fault' of those images but the problem lies with ourselves. Ultimately, idol production is something we do habitually because we are dominated by the will to power. Through our identification of idols, which are essentially our own projection, with reality we are able to govern it. By producing idols we take possession of the world around us and also, ultimately, of God.

Clearly, while Marion here speaks about images what he has in mind is not restricted to the realm of art. The most pervasive and the most dangerous idols certainly in our Western culture and, more specifically for philosophy and theology, are concepts, ideas. Like those artistic representations of the divine they are our own projections that allow domination of the world by subduing the unruly, unclassified plurality of things. It becomes obvious at this point how neatly Marion's typology fits in with some of the major strands of 19th and 20th century critique of religion. Feuerbach, after all, had argued specifically that God is merely a human projection and, we might say, in a Kantian epistemology he could actually never be anything else than that insofar as he is an object of knowledge. And for Nietzsche, the various gods of human culture are all essentially expressions of the will to power; notably, this rings true for the 'moral God' the production of *ressentiment* in Platonism and Christianity.

Marion (like Barth before him) would reply to each of those that they are fully right – and yet wrong. They are right in critiquing what passes for religion; they are right in rejecting traditional philosophical and theological notions of God by pointing out that they are quite different from what they pretend to be. Yet they are wrong in thinking that by showing this they have actually removed God – in a sense they have alerted Christians to something they ought to have known all along had they only read their

Bible – namely that these supposed gods are idols and that Christians are not allowed to worship idols.

Yet this is not all. For Christianity, according to Marion, has also developed a theological tradition that is not idolic and that needs to be defended in the face of the dominance of different traditions, but also now in the face of the radical critique of religion. This alternative tradition Marion finds ultimately in apophaticism and especially in the pseudo-Dionysius; yet it may be crucial that he refers to it primarily through another term taken from the realm of art – the icon. Unlike the idol, the icon is not 'beautiful' in an obvious sense, and it therefore does not in the same way attract and captivate our attention. Rather, its aim is it to become transparent for something else, to direct our attention to something that is beyond it, that is not contained in it. It does not make the invisible visible, for this is impossible, but gives room for our appreciation of something that is not contained in or represented by it.

We see that Marion, unlike Barth, is happy to be associated with the mystical tradition. Yet ultimately he is much closer to Barth than to those pre-modern theologians. Both presuppose the critical impetus of 19th century thought, from Kant to Nietzsche. Both therefore think of the world as *per se* devoid of transcendence. For both there is an alternative between a bottom-up and a top-down approach to God, which arguably it had not been previously. What we then find in the early Barth and now in Marion is a 20th century, modern version of the tradition of negative theology. Both emphasise God's transcendence as a means to escape the charge of anthropomorphism. Yet the question of their relation to the theological tradition is not the only one that is relevant. Equally important is the question of how satisfactory this line of defence is? True, it provides an argument against the charge that religion is merely anthropomorphic by urging that anthropomorphic images or concepts of God are fully objectionable from a theological point of view. Yet what is the next step? If there is no way to move from this 'negative' task towards an affirmative one, from a critique of inadequate notions of

God to an intellectual engagement with him, then this would only restate the case of the critics in different words. For is not ultimately the difference very small, between a denial of the existence of God and a defence of it which, however, excludes for all practical purposes the possibility of an experience of him? It is with this doubtful question that negative theology leaves us at this point.

Week 4: God and Existence

The first thing to be clarified in today's lecture is the meaning of its title. What could it mean to relate God and existence, and what sense does this make? Surely, theology is in any case about the 'existence' of God? Do we not, for example, speak about arguments for the existence of God?

It is indeed crucial for the line of thought to be introduced in this lecture that existence is precisely **not** understood in this general sense of simply 'being there'. In fact, it is often contrasted with being in the sense of 'essence' as for example in the theology of Paul Tillich about whom you will hear in a moment. What then is the meaning of 'existence' here? And why would it be interesting for theology to consider it?

A first and provisional answer to this question would be that the existence that is spoken of here is in the first place *human* existence. In many ways the starting point for much of the theological and philosophical argument that stands behind our question in today's lecture is the notion that the human being cannot be understood simply in terms of essence or nature. Why not? The reason is that asking what the human being is we ask at the same time who we are ourselves. The question thus is not only about an 'object', it is also about the subject of enquiry; ever since the mid-19th century various thinkers have urged that reflection about humanity must take this particular fact into account. Studying human nature, we simply cannot abstract from the fact that subject and object of this study are the same. That this is the case, we can simply see from the complicated picture that emerges once we canvass all the disciplines studying human nature: we might start, perhaps with biology and medicine, but would have to include at least the social sciences, history, philosophy, and arguably also theology. There seems to easy way to synthesise all their findings into a single and simple picture of what human beings are.

It is for this very reason, people have argued, that the special status of human nature for ourselves must be reflected on the most basic, ontological level. It would then,

strictly speaking, be misleading to speak of human 'nature' insofar as 'nature' is only one and possibly not the most important aspect of how we understand ourselves. The use of the term existence, in this situation, was introduced specifically to address this issue. It is then contrasted with 'essence', 'being', or 'nature' to emphasise the fundamental distinction between the way we understand *ourselves* and the way we understand the world around us.

This has profoundly influenced the interpretation of religion. The question may be framed thus. Do we come to appreciate what God is from reflecting on the course of nature? Or do we understand him from reflecting on human 'existence'? The former was largely taken for granted in 18th century 'natural theology' – just think of Paley. Ever since the 19th century the general tendency has moved in the latter direction, albeit with important differences and qualifications.

A powerful theological argument was based on the nature of the Christian message. It was noticed that it was essentially soteriological. In other words, if we are to describe the fundamental contents of the gospel then this would be that human beings who currently are removed from community with God, are restored into communion with him through the salvific action of his son, Jesus Christ. Yet this, it appears, is centrally a statement about human existence. Its two major elements: the 'fallen' human condition and the reality of its restoration are both – if one so wishes – 'anthropological' in character. Or, to employ the terminology I have just introduced, they are existential in character. Christianity's core message then would be concerned with human existence, and consequently its fundamental theological tenets ought to be articulated on this basis.

This of course raises the question what the relevance of the 'cosmological' elements of Christianity, notably its doctrine of creation, is? The answer would be that they are secondary, necessary only as an explanation for the physical possibility of salvation. Clearly, God's salvific promise needs an author who has the power to fulfil it.

The theme of God and existence in modern theology has arisen out of this particular constellation. It is based on a strongly soteriological conception of Christianity; consequently, its understanding of God must be a response to this question: who is God so he can make this promise of salvation?

An issue lurking in the background is the confrontation with scientific developments. Existentialist theologies seek to evade this confrontation by arguing that it is based on a misunderstanding of what religion seeks to accomplish. It simply does not aim at an account of the natural order, and could not therefore be fundamentally at odds with physical or biological theories about the world. Rather, it replies to human concerns about their own existence, and these 'existential' problems are not, in turn, addressed by scientific discoveries.

Apart from such contemporary concerns there are also more traditional motivations. It is no coincidence that most of the theologians falling under this heading come from the Lutheran tradition. Two elements are of importance here. One is Luther's strong soteriological focus. In his explanation of the First Commandment in his *Larger Catechism* he famously introduced the notion that whatever we trust in would properly be called our 'God':

'The confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust be right, then is your god also true; and, on the other hand, if your trust be false and wrong, then you have not the true God; for these two belong together faith and God. That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.'

Luther in the following is prepared to call money, but also 'skill, prudence, power, favour, friendship, and honour' 'gods'. The point for him of course is not that it makes no difference what your god is or that humans 'produce' all their gods; on the contrary, the meaning of the first commandment in a world where polytheism seems to have disappeared, is precisely to call Christians to put their trust in the one God and not in

his many substitutes. Yet what is interesting here is that the notion of God itself becomes a subjective and, we might say, almost existential notion – he is *defined* through the believer's attitude to him.

Let us look at a number of pivotal philosophical and theological figures in this particular strand of modern development. A first person who deserves our attention is the German-American theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich's main work, relevant for us here, is his three volume *Systematic Theology*, of which the second part (contained in the first volume) is about God.

Tillich states what we may call the existentialist imperative as clearly as we could want him to:

> Every being participates in the structure of being, but an existence alone is immediately aware of this structure. It belongs to the character of existence that man is estranged from nature, that he is unable to understand it as he can understand man. […]
>
> Man occupies a pre-eminent position in ontology, not as an outstanding object, but as that being who asks the ontological question and in whose self-awareness the ontological answer can be found. (ST I, 168).

It is for this reason that human 'existence' is specifically relevant for philosophy and theology. We have to be aware at this point, however, that existence has for Tillich a particular and in some ways an idiosyncratic meaning. To see this, it may be useful to start from his way of relating theology and philosophy. He thinks that these two disciplines do not have to collide once we understand that they fulfil different, but related purposes. He thinks that philosophy represents our own thinking interaction with the world. Where does this lead us? Tillich believes that, if our reflection is done properly, we end up with some ultimate *questions*. These questions concern the ultimate sources and purposes of our lives and of the world, and because of this we really need answers to them. Yet our own reflection cannot provide any ultimate answers.

Not that is if we exercise our intellect properly. This, for Tillich, is of vital and fundamental importance. Philosophy, he believes, comes down on either of two sides. It can either recognise the openness of these fundamental questions and the ensuing despair and even hopelessness, or it may pretend that human reflection leads ultimately to answers. Yet these answers are inevitably deceptive. They are deceptive, Tillich thinks, because philosophy could never develop them out of its own resources.

In reality, it is the task of religion and theology to provide these answers. This is how, in Tillich's view, the two disciplines are a match. Theology answers the questions philosophy formulates. For theology this has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, Tillich thinks, it makes theology realise how vital for it the dialogue with philosophy (and philosophy here broadly means any human reflection other than theology) is. For theology cannot fulfil its own task without being aware of the questions coming out of non-theological reflections. At the same time, theology must not fail to distinguish its own reflection from that of those other disciplines. Tillich believes that 19th c. liberal theology succumbed to the latter danger, whereas Barth's version of 'neo-orthodoxy' fell prey to the former. He calls his own theological method famously the method of correlation' as it sought to steer a middle course between these two, listening to every aspect of philosophical and cultural articulation of current human queries, but at the same time being confident about theology's potential of addressing them in a way quite unique to it.

For philosophy and theological appreciation of it, Tillich's approach again has an interesting and in some ways unexpected consequence. Traditionally, theologians would mostly have preferred to ally themselves with philosophers who seemed to arrive, from their own philosophical point of view, at answers actually or supposedly corresponding to some of the more fundamental tenets of the Christian faith: belief in God, morality, hope in human immortality etc. Tillich reverses this logic almost entirely. For him, there are in principle two types of philosophy. There is 'essentialism',

and there is 'existentialism'. Essentialism is every philosophy that pretends to be able to reach through its own reflection answers to humanity's most fundamental questions, whereas existentialism acknowledges that such answers are not to be found (by philosophy). From Tillich's point of view, theology must distance itself radically from the former, for they overstep the boundary between philosophy and theology, while the latter is the natural ally of theology.

In other words, the result we get is that a philosophy that ends in despair, doubt, and nihilism may for theology be much more valuable than a philosophy that from its own resources appears to bolster theological insights. We can see here an echo of Kant's famous phrase that he 'had to take away knowledge to make room for faith', but one can also see the ambiguous heritage of Hegelian 'essentialism' for theology. Tillich certainly believes that a philosophy depicting the world and ourselves as broken and fragmentary is ultimately the one theologians ought to interact with.

This view of the relationship between philosophy and theology is of course itself in an important sense theologically conditioned. Why is it that philosophy leaves ultimate questions open, but is always 'tempted' to answer them nonetheless? The reason is our own broken or, to use the more properly theological term, 'sinful' condition. This is where Tillich's specific version of existentialism comes in. For him, 'existence' as distinguished from 'essence' is *finite* existence. To say that human beings 'exists' is therefore saying in an important sense that they exist as separated from God, who is infinite being, being in itself or essence. And we can see therefore how philosophy's limitation as well as its desire to trespass this limitation are subtly connected to the Christian view of human sinfulness, which is exhibited specifically in their attempt to 'be like God'.

For Tillich, then, God is infinite being – we could see this as a very traditional way of speaking about God, but it should be clear at this point that and how this view of God is in fact soteriologically and existentially conditioned. Theology can never be detached

from the human predicament of finitude, which makes our interest in being start from what Tillich calls the 'shock of non-being'. In other words, thinking about being for us is never entirely detached from the insight that while we exist now there is the possibility (and this will be reality only a number of years from now) that we in fact *do not* exist (any more). Human beings are aware both of their own finitude then and of the principal possibility of being that is not estranged, but it is only in religion that they will actually be able to overcome this situation. God then is the foundation of this possibility, as he stands for pure being as the ground of all that 'exists', but understanding this for us is as much a problem as it is a promise. It is a problem because we realise alongside that we **are not** reconciled with him, that we are mortal. It is a promise because we are to believe that our history will eventually lead us to a unity with this fount of our own being and an overcoming of the tension between essence and existence.

To what extent is the existential approach an answer to the modern challenges to thinking about God? Let us address this question after looking at some further developments in the same direction.

The other classical 20th century theologian to be considered here is Rudolf Bultmann. In spite of many similarities that connect his theology to that of Tillich, there are substantial differences as well. Not least, his work has always been primarily that of an exegete, a New Testament scholar. The theological question of how we can think and speak about God in our time has therefore always for him been asked in the context of his probing attempts at understanding what the NT says and how this can be 'translated' into modernity.

Like Barth, Bultmann started from Kantian presuppositions. Human beings by themselves cannot know anything about God. Theology is therefore confronted by the paradox of its existence: that it seems to be charged with a task it cannot fulfil. You may remember that Barth took precisely this starting point. Yet he believed that

theology had to accept the paradox contained therein and to try to work on the basis of its recognition. Bultmann drew the opposite conclusion. He felt that, certainly for theology as an intellectual endeavour and an academic discipline the impossibility to think God meant exactly that. Theology as God-talk could not be justified. Would this then be the end of the story; did theology simply have to dig its own grave and give up its own identity?

While Bultmann was convinced that theology could only remain credible if it had the courage to reform itself radically, he did not, however, think this meant its demise. For according to him the impossibility of speaking about God left still open the possibility of studying him in his effects on the world. He did not think such an indirect approach to knowledge about God was equally ruled out by epistemological limitations. What effects did he have in mind? Once again, we find in Bultmann the idea of God's action on humanity, and this is the primary reason why we have to speak about him at this point of our series of lectures; it is this starting point that makes him a theological existentialist.

For Bultmann this idea was fascinating because it seemed to correspond with a hermeneutical tool he had developed for the theological study of the New Testament. For there a similar problem seemed to exist. Somehow the dilemma of NT scholarship seemed to be this. Either scholars accepted the rules of historical scholarship with the consequence that their exegesis effectively ceased to be theological. Or they took the theological task of the NT scholar seriously, but then all too often their work did not correspond to the demands of historical and philological research. Bultmann believed there was a way out of this dilemma. What did the theologian expect to find in the NT? Was it direct evidence of God's revelation? What would this be? Anything we may find in a historical text would most certainly be something different or could be explained in a different way. Bultmann's suggestion therefore was to look at the effect the preaching of Jesus had on those who heard him and thus to gauge the source of

that proclamation on the basis of its results. How could this be done? Bultmann assumed that the NT gave evidence for these effects in two ways: on the one hand directly through many stories reflecting the transforming power of Jesus' ministry. This seemed perhaps the more obvious trace to pursue. Yet there was another aspect to be considered as well. It is clear that the NT writings have been produced by believers. This is sometimes seen as a problem because these authors would have been biased in their account of those events. Yet if we seek to discover traces of the transforming influence of Jesus' ministry on those who heard him directly or indirectly, the faith of those writers may not necessarily be a bad thing for it would once again allow us a glimpse of what happened to those who were originally affected by Jesus' preaching.

These two ideas, one at first sight theological, the other exegetical are for Bultmann only two sides of the same coin. For the theological reason why we study the NT is, of course, that it represents the Word of God, thus the exegetical problem is – for the Christian theologian – tantamount to the problem of speaking about God generally. Any problem with the latter must be a problem with the former as well. At the same time, the theologian who considers his task as thinking or speaking about God will, if he or she is Christian, probably turn to the Bible as the basis of divine revelation. Thus, a hermeneutical approach that can show how the Bible may be said to reveal God's Word to us, is of fundamental importance for the theologian.

Thus for Bultmann all boils down to the task of deciphering in the NT the transforming effect of God on human beings and to show how and to what extent this tells us something about God. This shows us the extent of his theological 'existentialism' – the transformation of human existence under the influence of God's revelation is the very key to an understanding of God. What then is this transformation?

The Bible and the Christian tradition describes this in terms of sinfulness and salvation, but Bultmann believed that these terms will not speak to people here and now unless

we are able to explain more specifically what they mean. It is at this point where he adopts the results of the philosophy of existence developed by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger had, in his early book *Being and Time* suggested an analysis of human existence that emphasised in particular the importance of mortality. (Remember here Tillich's notion about the shock of non-being – he had read Heidegger as well as Bultmann!). Our whole existence is determined by the fact that we know about death, which therefore hangs like a shadow over our lives in general and threatens to destroy their meaning. We are naturally scared ('to death') by our inevitable fate and respond by either suppressing it or by becoming depressed; the task however would be, according to Heidegger, to use this knowledge in a way that allows us to transform our lives into a new and fuller meaningfulness, a meaningfulness that is informed by our knowledge that our time is limited. We can achieve this by facing death, by approaching it in our imagination and then, still in our own imagination, returning to our current situation. We would thus have 'measured' our own time and could hope, on this basis, to enable ourselves to live a more proper existence.

We can see that this Heideggerian vision involved a certain heroic acceptance of the finitude and the ultimate nothingness of human existence. Only by recognising this nihilism could we actually hope to overcome the dominance of death over our lives. Bultmann did not share this perspective at all. Yet he thought that Heidegger's analysis of death's dominance over the self was remarkably similar to traditional Christian notions of human estrangement in sin. After all, the relation between sin and death is explicitly made in the Bible in various ways, and the notion that sin is fundamentally a force destroying the core of our personality is equally rooted in biblical thought. Thus, his argument is this. Heidegger correctly gives an account of the structures of human existence under the conditions of sin. For these to be overcome, however, Christianity offers a different solution, namely salvation through an encounter with the Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ which unlocks human existence from that fateful dominance by sin and mortality. Bultmann believed that the NT, specifically the

writings of Paul and the Gospel of John did indeed offer evidence for precisely this transformation. And it is this very element in the Bible that makes it irreplaceable even in today's world. While Bultmann was happy to concede that many of the more particular ideas the New Testament contained could hardly be accepted by people in the 20th century, he believed that in this narrative of salvation this text did actually reveal something about God and humanity that was immune to the challenges of modernity.

What then are we told here about God? In a sense, we might argue, very little. Yet Bultmann would argue that, given the impossibility of direct knowledge and the factual reality of human sinfulness it was in fact all we could ever expect and all there was needed. If it is true that the fundamental experience of a life-transforming faith was possible today much as it was 2,000 years ago, then this would give us incontestable evidence about the existence as well as the attributes of God.

Tillich and Bultmann offer very different version of the existentialist case for God-talk in the 20th century. Yet in their conjunction they demonstrate impressively how and why this seemed (and may still seem) a promising reply to modern challenges to the notion of God. The main point seems to be that it reduces the theological account of God to the core message of Christianity – the gospel of human salvation from the domination of sin. God is God insofar as he is the originator of this message. This appears to deflate quite a number of the criticisms made on the basis of the inadequacy of philosophical arguments for his existence, for example. Christian theology is closely tied here to the actual experience of this liberating message by believers then as now, and it seems that it is mainly this experience that is presupposed for these theologies to work.

The major difficulty seems to be Feuerbach's charge that religion is nothing but projection. It is difficult to see how a theology that bases itself robustly on individual experience can ultimately overcome this charge. Existentialism may then not be the

ultimate answer to modern challenges though it may contain elements that need to be preserved by any serious attempt at such an answer.

Week 5: God and History

The existentialist approach you heard about last week emphasised the individual aspect of human interaction with God: The reality of God is impressed upon the individual person when they reflect upon their lives and their boundaries. Yet in the biblical tradition, there is another important form of interaction between God and humanity, and this is history. Indeed one of the major unifying bonds between the Old and the New Testament is the narrative of a covenant between God and his people, and this covenant is acted out in history.

The historical dimension is perhaps difficult to ignore in the Old Testament where large parts are historical in character, but in the New Testament the same idea is equally strongly rooted. It is given, however, a particular twist in that the historical outlook prevalent in New Testament authors is largely eschatological. History then is interpreted in the light of its end. Is this then still history? The answer is that it might not have been, but then the envisaged apocalyptic final act did not occur after all, and this fact in itself became one of the first major stimulants of Christian theology. It needed explaining in what sense the Incarnation and, specifically, the resurrection could be an eschatological event while history still seemed to progress as it had ever done. It seemed, but in reality it had changed, or so Christians maintained. This precisely is the origin of Christian theology of history: a sustained effort at proving that God's eschatological intervention in the Incarnation had qualified the time in between that event and the second coming of Christ in a particular way. History thus became salvation history, a series of events capable but also in need of theological interpretation.

Two questions need to be addressed at this stage. First, what is the relation between this theology of history and thinking about God? Second, in what sense is it specifically a response to modern theology?

Answers to these two questions are related. If theology takes seriously the assumption that history has theological significance, this must have consequences for our understanding of God. To put it radically – if God is the Lord of history, then he must himself be, at least in some sense, historical. Of course not historical in the way his creation is historical, but he must *be* in such a way as to make an interaction with history meaningful. This of course is a line of thought suggested already by reflection on the Incarnation – God's own becoming part of history. Yet it is important to see that its significance extends way beyond the mere possibility of his sharing for a space of 30 years the confines of human existence.

This is the question – the relationship between God and history; and this very question resonates quite strongly with some of the modern challenges to which thinking about God has responded over the past 200 years. The reason is that one of the most decisive paradigm shifts in modernity has been the rise of historicism that is the increasing awareness of historicity as a category for human existence quite generally. It became clear from the late 18th century onwards that everything in our culture is at least in some sense historical – language, art, and philosophy no less than political systems, law or religion. They all are to some extent a product of their own time and, as *their own time* is a product of the preceding time and influences its future, they are part of the historical development of humanity. I called it a paradigm shift as this insight gave birth academically to a plethora of new disciplines as everything from grammar to political science to philosophy and theology could and should now be studied in the light of this new insight.

From its very beginning this new development has been Janus faced. We often tend to associate with the term historicism the word relativism, and of course it has had this tendency. For theology, in particular, it has been said that the history of doctrine is at the same time its critique, which was meant to express the uneasiness created by the recognition that teachings that seemed to derive at least part of their justification from

their quasi ahistorical constancy were inevitably shattered by the recognition that they had, in fact, been substantially changed over the centuries. Equally, historical study of the Bible has undoubtedly shaken the naïve assumption that things simply happened the way they were (supposedly) reported in those stories.

Yet it would be utterly wrong to see the attraction of historical thinking only or primarily in this negative, destructive, critical aspect. Rather, the latter was I think a side-effect of a much more positive hope and expectation which fuelled scholarly and general interest in history in its various forms. The major motivation for the new, intense interest in history from the late 18th century was the expectation that from historical study exciting and important insights could be gleaned into the ways of human affairs in general. Historical study seemed to unlock hidden treasures that seemed to have been buried in dusty archives kept for utterly different purposes. Yet these treasures fascinated not only in their variety, but also in their potential interrelatedness. There seemed to be a possibility of deciphering some deeply hidden mysteries of human nature by finding the rules underlying its historical development.

This optimism of course was not utterly new, but was inherited in many ways from theologies of history that had been developed for centuries in an attempt (as I said a little earlier) to understand God's intention with the world in its historical dimension. It is here where modern historicism and theological interest in human history intersect; in fact it has often been argued by the critics of the great philosophies of history from Hegel via Marx to Auguste Comte that they betray the stamp of their theological origin much more than they are willing to admit. In other words the argument is that secular attempts to explain the meaning of history as a development towards a particular goal such as the total realisation of freedom or a society of equals is merely a secularised version of Christian theological interpretations of history leading towards the eschatological goal of the Kingdom of God.

This argument has sometimes been used to criticise any attempt at understanding history in such a way (in other words the theological background of those philosophical theories has been used to delegitimate them), but the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, probably the most influential late 20th century representative of theology of history uses this observation in a very different way. He claims that modernity depends so heavily on the assumption that there is meaning in history that it must take seriously the theological roots of this idea. Thus, once again, we arrive at a theological model that is a conscious response to the challenges of modernity and again – as in the case of Tillich – it is meant to be apologetic.

Let us take a closer look at Pannenberg's view of the relationship of theology and history. For him, there is an important convergence between modern developments and biblical teaching. In modernity he sees a general reinterpretation of the doctrine of revelation. 18th century philosophical and historical insights make the older notion of revelation as revelation of particular truths essentially implausible – we can think here again of Kant, but historical criticism played a role as well. Instead, Pannenberg argues, there emerges a growing consensus that revelation strictly speaking means nothing other than God's own self-revelation. All the debates about relevance and limits of revelation that have existed since that time, he claims, have been predicated already on the underlying identification of revelation in this particular sense. (And certainly this is true for perhaps the most notorious proponent of revelation in modern theology, Karl Barth).

So the question is where does this self-revelation take place? One important strand of modern theology, not least Karl Barth but not only he, identifies this place with the word of God. In Barth this word is ultimately Jesus Christ himself, but generally it is fair to say that the idea of God's revelation through his word has been popular with Protestants not least because it seemed to chime with their Biblicism.

Yet Pannenberg begs to differ. He thinks that the Bible tells a different story. According to him, God's self-revelation happens not directly through any 'word', but indirectly through his historical actions. These historical actions are not isolated events in the history of humankind, such as miracles, but they are ultimately identical with the entirety of human history. Thus Pannenberg's thesis is that God's revelation *is* the whole of human history. Consequently, God can be known only from the end point of this history, but at the same time it would be true that, once this point has been reached, we would know him fully.

At this point one could be forgiven for asking what the gain for theology from such a theory could possibly be. Someone might argue that, granted even that we accept the premise that God will be fully revealed at the end of history, what help is this given that we are not yet there? This is where Pannenberg plays what arguably is his trump card. For his claim is that for Christian theology the resurrection of Christ is nothing other than an anticipation of the actual end of time. It therefore offers the theologian an opportunity to look at history *as if* he or she were already standing at its end; and it is in precisely this sense that we can call it in a qualified sense God's revelation. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ insofar as he has, in him, anticipated the end of time and thus offered an opportunity, but also created a challenge for Christian theology to decipher his own full revelation in the fullness of time.

There are a number of obvious gains from that interpretation. Pannenberg is able to see God's revelation in Christ in relation to his involvement in and commitment to human history before and after him, but he is still able to maintain a unique importance for the Christ event.

Further, Pannenberg feels he can at take up one of the most influential challenges to traditional religion, historicism. His view allows him on the one hand to take historical insights seriously (after all history is God's revelation), on the other hand to critique secular interpretations of historicism. His argument, rather, is that if modernity takes its

own historicism seriously, it must understand that it needs a theological foundation to make it work in the first place.

Yet we must not overlook that this involves a challenge for theology too. For Pannenberg's theologian who works on the basis of the assumption that in Christ the end of history has been anticipated will still constantly need to correct his own findings in the light of new developments. Theology thus becomes very much a kind of work in progress – as it has indeed been understood for much of the past two centuries; Pannenberg could thus claim that his theology offers an explanation and a justification for a practice that is current anyway.

Third, he seems to have found a strong answer to the perennial dilemma of Christian eschatology – how can we relate the eschatological interpretation of the Christ event to the ongoing history of the world around us. Pannenberg appears to be able to give equal weight to both these facts by calling history in its entirety God's full revelation, the Christ event its anticipation.

Once again, before looking at the downsides let's consider two more influential (and in some ways very different) versions of the same type. One is the French philosopher-cum-theologian Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). He was one of the principal exponents of Thomism in the twentieth century and an influential interpreter of the thought of St Thomas Aquinas. During his study of philosophy and the natural sciences in Paris he was influenced first by Spinoza, then by H. Bergson. In 1901 he met the Russian-Ukrainian Raissa Oumansoff. They both felt the lack of spirituality in French society and decided to commit suicide within a year unless they discovered some way out of that malaise. From the fact that they got married in 1904 it is clear how that experiment ended. From the beginning of WW II Maritain staid in America, first at Toronto, then at Princeton and Columbia (until 1960 when he eventually returned to France). He was instrumental in drawing up the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights for the UN (1948) and served for his country as ambassador to the Vatican (1945-48).

Fundamentally, Maritain approached history as a philosopher. He was, however, critical of philosophies of history that are non- or even anti-Christian (Hegel; Comte). For him, Christian theology provides vital clues for an appropriate interpretation of history. The major starting points are:

A) the theological distinctions between the various 'states' of human nature ('pure nature'; 'fallen nature'; 'redeemed nature') of which the first is, according to him, no empirical fact

B) the theological notion of various 'states' in human development. These are, on the basis of Pauline thought, 'state of nature'; 'state of the Ancient Law'; 'state of the New Law'

For M. this effectively means that the Bible furnishes us with a framework for an understanding of the world as developing towards an established goal. According to him there are four 'laws' determining human development:

Passage from 'magical' to 'rational': according to M. it is evident and necessary for humankind to move from a stage where consciousness is dominated by imagination to one dominated by reason. But this does not mean that the 'religious' insights of the earlier phase are altogether irrelevant and to be abandoned (as, e.g., Comte thinks). Rather, we should understand that human nature remains the same while it passes through these states. The 'science' of the 'primitive' man is *a kind of science*, just different from ours. Similarly, his religion is just less developed than ours, but not something categorically different.

Development of moral consciousness. M. sees this as in many ways the most obvious 'law' of historical development. He stresses that this is not tantamount to seeing a development in moral behaviour – he is far from claiming any such thing. But it is

clear, according to him, that things are now no longer acceptable (even though they may still happen) which used to be (torture, e.g.).

Passage from 'sacral' to 'secular' societies. M. clearly subscribes to the secularisation thesis. He sees this as a necessary process (in line with the theological stages!), and only complains that in the process of Western secularisation God has been altogether abandoned which resulted in totalitarianism (Russia). Interestingly, he raises the question of similar developments in other religions, notably Islam (p. 256 in McIntire)

Finally, in a way strikingly similar to Bonhoeffer, he describes and affirms the 'coming of age of the people' as a 'universal law'. This makes him view the spread of democracy as a phenomenon essentially in line with Christianity. While it can be said to happen according to the 'order of nature', it actually happened only 'under the action of the Gospel leaven and by virtue of the Christian inspiration making its way in the depths of secular consciousness' (258)

In a sense Maritain's argument is much more straightforward than Pannenberg's and arguably helps us see the problems with this entire tendency more clearly. For Maritain seems to offer little more than the liberal idea of human progressivism on the basis of theological insights. In other words, he reiterates a narrative that has often been claimed, but equally been rejected, over the last two or three hundred years, and his major concern is that the Christian foundation of this narrative should not be overlooked. The question, however, is whether this narrative does continue to convince and, if so, whether it is true that Christianity is as much needed for it as Maritain claims. For, could one not argue that the very possibility that this narrative could be offered without any reference to the Christian roots of these ideas proves him wrong? Of course not in the sense that he may be right historically, but it would seem much more important for his argument that he is also able to show that today this programme needs its theological underpinning in order to convince and to work. Yet this is rather doubtful. It seems at this point possible to perceive a more fundamental

problem of this *kind* of approach to theology. I think that both Pannenberg and Maritain share in a particular ambiguity that makes their theological apologetics quite possibly less effective than they would want them to be. The problem is that if it is claimed that Christianity supports a particular view of history and that this view is also rational, then there seems little justification for denying a secular interpretation of these insights. It may still be true that Christianity has historically speaking unlocked the book of history, but this *historical* fact becomes increasingly irrelevant if it is also true that it now lies open for all to read. If historians do not heed Pannenberg's claim that they have to be theologians in order to understand their own claims, is there an umpire to which he can appeal for unfair play? What he needed, surely, would be evidence that neglect of his insights has disastrous consequences within the secular study of history or culture more generally. Yet very little of this has been forthcoming.

Perhaps the underlying crux is that while both Pannenberg and Maritain stress the importance of theological input in the interpretation of history, one could argue (and certainly in a lecture such as ours this is apposite) that ultimately their focus on history as a topic for theology leads them simply back to where they started. Does history really reveal something about God or, indeed, God? Or does not the claim ultimately move very easily from the notion that revelation is history to the deceptively similar one that history is revelation?

Let me briefly (thought this succinctness is slightly unfair) touch at this point on a further variation of our theme, which has however some notable differences. This is liberation theology. Gustavo Guttierez' seminal book has a special section entitled 'History is one' in which he too argues, as the heading suggests, for a theological interpretation of history. His starting point, however, is markedly different from both Pannenberg and Maritain. Once again, the section heading may be a useful guidance. History is one – this is said against a tendency Gutierrez observes in traditional theology to separate secular history and salvation history. This separation, he thinks,

has led to the Church's neglect for the worldly aspects of the Christian message, notably the twin themes of justice and liberation:

> [We] affirm that, in fact, there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, "juxtaposed" or "closely linked." Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness.' (GG, *A Theology of Liberation*, 86)

The thrust of Gutierrez' argument then is directed against the assumption that developments in human history are neutral to theological interpretation – this is where he agrees with the two authors we have looked at earlier. Yet his interest is not a justification of historical developments in the light of divine providence nor a historical theodicy proving that history ultimately gives evidence for the greatness of God's plan with his world, but to sharpen the eyes of the Church to the reality of ungodliness, of injustice, of bondage in the world around it and to impress upon Christians the task to make themselves part of those forces that work to change it. Hence his concept of a 'theology of liberation'. Or to express the same idea in more abstract language, the goal of his argument is not in the realm of theory or speculation, but in the realm of human practice; the theologian is not interest in history in order to offer his own reading of it, but in order to become engaged and commit himself to its transformation into the Kingdom of God.

The difference then is precisely the famous transformation from theory into practice which Marx called for as the perfection of Hegelian philosophy – the philosopher's task, in his view, was not to be seen in an ever more perfect interpretation of the world, but in its practical transformation. Pannenberg and Maritain are not Hegel, and Guttierez is not Marx, but there is in principle the same difference underlying both these disjunctions.

How then is Guttierez' version of a theology of history, which we may call a practical theology of history then a way of thinking about God? The answer to this question leads us, once again, back to Kant who had argued that while theoretical knowledge

and philosophical speculation could not lead us to any substantial notion of God, we would become aware of him while we engage in the right kind of practice. For Kant this was ethical practice, life according to the categorical imperative. For Marx it is revolutionary praxis. For Guttierez it is neither one nor the other simply speaking though Christian practice may embrace both of those at times. Ultimately, Christians are called to make themselves part of God's liberating plan with humanity, and it is in this way – and only in this way – that they can hope to find out who He is.

It is well known how the Catholic Church has responded to liberation theology. In a nutshell, it has been rejected on the grounds that, while the Christian message naturally implied the goals propagated by liberation theologians, it must not be reduced to it. The Kingdom of God ultimately is not brought about by human action but by God's own intervention in the course of history.

The observer cannot fail to marvel at the self-righteousness implied in this judgment coming as it does from of an institution that has, in Latin America, rather consistently and notoriously failed to emphasise this conjunction and been content to condone or actively support a social and economic order based on extreme injustice. Still, the question that is raised here is pertinent, and it is in many ways the same question that we raised with regard to the two other versions of theology of history: how can such an identification of divine revelation with history, in whatever intention it is undertaken, be prevented from making God once again a mere projection of one's own ideas and ideals – however worthy these may be? How can it, at the same time, be prevented from the danger of 'baptising' certain historical developments by giving them a theological interpretation, while it may be more appropriate to argue for their relative justifications and failures in a secular context?

Ultimately, Christians cannot avoid seeing history as the unfolding of God's plan, but they should guard themselves against reducing God's plan to whatever they understand of their own histories.

Week 6: God and Language

I started the last couple of lectures with elaborate explanations of the meaning and the relevance of the topic. This seems less necessary today. That theology as the task of thinking and speaking about God is closely connected with our understanding of language, its character, and its limitations seems as obvious as it has been traditional. Christian theologians have always understood that their attempts to articulate insights relating to the being of God risk missing their topic simply due to their need to use language that is primarily geared for an orientation within the world of our everyday experience and will thus inevitably create complications if applied to a reality that is supposed to be utterly different from that world.

The church fathers were quite aware of the fact that talking about the intratrinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son they could not fail to evoke unsuitable associations whatever biblical or philosophical terminology they employed for it. And during the scholastic period, theories about analogical or univocal application of predicates to God were equally fuelled by the awareness of a linguistic barrier to any theology proper.

If we then look at the influence of modern views on language on 20th century thinking about God, we must not make the mistake of assuming that theology was, all of a sudden, confronted with a problem it had never been aware of before. The opposite is the case; and one might even surmise that historically a number of the more recent philosophical or linguistic theories owe some debt precisely to theological musings developed to investigate how language could ever adequately express truth about the supernatural.

Yet this is not to say that theological thinking about God has not been influenced in its turn by non-theological debates about language. This would seem all the more unlikely given the enormous prevalence of these debates throughout the 20th century. There was a point, towards the end of that century, when it appeared as if language would

ultimately emerge as the one major philosophical concern of the century. I don't know whether this is the result historians of philosophy will arrive at 100 years from now, but there can be but little doubt that language has been a dominant theme in (very broadly) philosophical scholarship during that time.

What has made it so pervasive is not least that two very different philosophical traditions seemed to converge on the importance of an understanding of language for any philosophical thought. There is on the one hand, and this may be what most of you are familiar with in the first instance, the tradition of analytic philosophy, which in many ways goes back to the groundbreaking work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's contribution to our understanding of language is complex even if we confine ourselves here to its consequences for theology. At the very least we have to look separately at the two versions of his own philosophy, which Wittgenstein has produced. These are mainly contained on the one hand in his early *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in his posthumously edited *Philosophical Investigations* on the other.

It is useful to note beforehand that both these philosophies share one major motive, and this is hostility towards traditional metaphysics. Wittgenstein believed throughout his career that many traditional philosophical problems were in fact pseudo-problems, which could be exposed and disposed of by linguistic analysis. There can be no doubt that much of traditional theology falls in the category of such pseudo-problem, and thus whatever gain theology may make from considering Wittgenstein's philosophy, it must not be ignored that the structure is once again that of a challenge to traditionally accepted ways of talking about God to which theology needs to respond.

Both the analysis of the problem and the remedy offered against it, differs between the early and the late Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus*, which shows Wittgenstein as part of the logical positivism of the so-called Vienna Circle, is predicated on the assumption that philosophy has the task of sanitising language. Language can only express a very limited number of statements about the world, essentially those that can empirically be

verified. It is therefore necessary for philosophy to develop an artificial language that avoids all the pitfalls ordinary language leads us into due to its use of idiomatic and metaphorical expressions.

Does this leave any room for theology? In one sense it doesn't, and most philosophers belonging to the Vienna Circle saw critique of religious belief as one of their foremost tasks. Wittgenstein's position, however, is slightly more complicated. For in a famous statement towards the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein introduces the concept of the mystical:

> 6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.

In other words, while Wittgenstein clearly is adamant in the *Tractatus* to argue for an understanding of language that excludes the expression of anything beyond the empirical realm, he is quite conscious of the fact that such a move disqualifies the philosopher from an actual critique of religion insofar as the possibility of the reality claimed within religion simply is beyond the limits of the language he has adopted. This is in fact very much like the consequence of Kant's position in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Yet Wittgenstein goes to some extent beyond a position of mere agnosticism in regard to non-empirical reality. In the passage I quoted he seems willing to accept that there may be reasons for making the acceptance of such reality plausible albeit not speakable. 'They manifest themselves.' Once again we may find ourselves reminded of Kant's reintroduction of theism via practical reason – Wittgenstein's position certainly seems to suggest a kind of experience that could be claimed for religion (if we are allowed to substitute this term for his 'mystical').

Yet whatever his own view in this regard may have been, the most important conclusion is that he certainly argued from the point of view of his analysis of language that we cannot speak about this. Famously, the final sentence of the *Tractatus* demands that 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.'

We have here then in an extreme version the traditional idea of negative theology. Except that, you may remember, that tradition was by and large willing to allow God-talk in a particularly qualified way – through the use of negatives and through their negation it was felt God's being could be approached even though the radical otherness of God meant that this could never be more than a feeble appropriation. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* would appear, then, from basis in the philosophy of language to arrive at conclusions very similar to those of a number of other post-Kantian thinkers, in theology and beyond, who all appear to draw on the tradition of the *via negativa*.

The question of course is whether the imperative of 'remaining silent' is conceivably realistic? It may sound paradoxical, but experience tells that to remain silent about anything is easier said than done. In fact, one may wonder whether the consequence from Wittgenstein's insight, provided one accepted it, would not be that one had to *learn* to be silent on things concerning God. One might argue that the meditative journey chartered in Ps.-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* has precisely this intent.

Be this as it may, Wittgenstein himself soon became disillusioned about the view of language underlying the *Tractatus*. One of the major reasons for that was that he increasingly became convinced that there was no way in which philosophy could replace ordinary language. The project described in the *Tractatus* rested on the assumption that philosophy would produce its own ideal language. Over time, Wittgenstein saw that as a blind alley. In order to achieve his idea of purging empty metaphysical notions by means of philosophy of language he now sought to provide an analysis of ordinary language. The result of this work led him to his famous insight that the meaning of language is identical with the forms of human interaction to which it is attached. In his own words: 'The meaning of a word is its use in a language'. In this way the question about the meaning of language is turned away entirely from the traditional assumption that words primarily refer to or denote objects. Instead Wittgenstein now argues that language is one with human practice.

It is in order to explain this surprising move that Wittgenstein introduces the idea of language-games. He never offers a definition for them, but it seems clear that they offer contexts of communication that allow us to make sense of what someone says.

I cannot here go into the details of this fascinating theory of language, but it should be clear at once that it must have a considerable influence on the way religious language and specifically language about God is understood. At first sight, the consequences would once again seem highly problematic. I said earlier that one of the recurrent features in Wittgenstein's early and late philosophy was his idea of exposing the emptiness of metaphysics. For the later Wittgenstein this project was carried out by arguing that traditional philosophy would take formulations out of their language-game context and ask questions about them which within that context could never have arisen and are, therefore, irrelevant.

Thus propositional dogmatics claiming to describe objective reality, for example through the use of metaphysical predicates for God, cannot be justified if one accepts the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. Yet perhaps theology is not utterly refuted here but rather rid of a burden? This would be the case if Wittgenstein would alert the theologian to the possibility that metaphysics encouraged a misinterpretation of the more foundational religious utterances about God. Perhaps, in other words, religious language is misunderstood if its meaning is sought primarily in reference to a transcendent reality, and it may be much more promising to understand it along the lines of a language-game?

Thinking about God along the lines of the later Wittgenstein then leads to a consciously non-realist version of theology. The most influential such version has been developed by the so-called Yale School of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. Lindbeck in particular argued in his landmark book *The Nature of Doctrine* that the correct understanding of the doctrines of the church was neither the orthodox, propositional assumption that they refer to a truth 'out there' nor the modern, subjectivist

interpretation that their truth lies in the subjective faith of the individual. Instead they describe something like a 'grammar of faith', rules accepted by the community of Christians for their internal communication about their common faith.

We can at once see why and how this is a modern response to the challenges to belief in God. Religious belief is here generally denied a realistic interpretation. The point then in talking about God is not at all whether such a thing exists, but whether communication along those lines makes sense within a particular historical, social and cultural context. If this were the case, the entire debate about theistic belief would be 'exposed' – very much in a Wittgensteinian manner – as a mere misunderstanding due to failure to appreciate the real meaning of religious language. The question of course is whether it *is* the case, and even whether such a theory can claim the support of the late Wittgenstein. For it seems clear that for quite a number of language-games external references are crucial – while talking about money only makes sense insofar people are part of a particular economic system where this is known and recognised, it is equally clear that the point of discourse about money is that one either has it or has it not. Similarly, it would seem difficult to deny that the reality of religion depends on the willingness to believe that faith in God is more than a social or cultural reality. The problem with Lindbeck's theory is that is can only work if believers don't know about it, and this for a theological theory simply is not good enough.

I had said initially that the prevalence of language as a philosophical topic in the 20th century resulted from the unexpected convergence between two very different traditions. We have looked at one, specifically at the earlier and the later Wittgenstein. The other of course is the continental development of hermeneutics.

Why did hermeneutics lead to a new understanding of language? Originally, hermeneutics was merely a tool within disciplines that needed to apply traditional texts in new situations, mainly theology and law. It addressed the question that came after

dogmatics: once we know what the ideal meaning of the text – be it a legal document or the Bible – is, how do we apply it correctly in a law case or in a sermon?

This was a limited and concrete task, but from the early 19th century hermeneutics was expanded to explain quite generally what it meant to understand any text within a situation that clearly was no longer the one in which the text had been penned. And from there it was only one step to expand the discipline even further by asking how it is possible that that great text around us, the world, makes any sense to us?

On the basis of this broadening of the hermeneutical horizon it was inevitable that language again became a focal point of philosophical enquiry. And as in the thought of Wittgenstein this particular way of looking at the working of language made more traditional assumptions seem problematic. Yet the difficulties with those traditional approaches arose less in relation to their supposed metaphysical abuse of language; it was more the limitation of language to a mere tool that seemed increasingly unhelpful for an understanding of what language really meant. Hermeneutics shaped the awareness that language was the gate connecting human beings with the world around them, and understanding what it was therefore became tantamount to understanding what human beings themselves are.

It is for this reason that 20th century interest in hermeneutics in both philosophy and theology is never far away from the concern with existence, which I discussed a few weeks ago. Hermeneutical theology, at least in one of its guises, was very much existential theology because of this intimate link between human abilities to interact with the world through their language and their basic identity as human beings.

I shall leave to one side here the existentialist hermeneutics of Bultmann and of the early Martin Heidegger, however. Instead I shall look at two major figures from the latter half of the 20th century who have contributed importantly to our understanding of language in relation to the theological task of speaking about God, Paul Ricoeur and Eberhard Jungel. While the former is a philosopher and the latter a theologian, both

share a number of fundamental interests relevant for our topic here. Not least, both have developed their views about religious language and its importance for theology from studying the Bible – Jungel's first works were exegetical in character, and Ricoeur has devoted specific work to the task of biblical interpretation.

Why is this relevant? Both, Ricoeur and Jungel start from an interest in the metaphorical language Jesus evidently uses in his parables. What does this practice tell us about his message, and how can a better understanding of language be of any use in that regard? The traditional view of the parables, developed essentially by Aristotle, was that metaphors are rhetorical figures. In other words, they do not contribute to our grasp of the matter, but embellish a given narrative. This they do by conjoining two seemingly unlike words, and this conjuncture makes sense because of a *tertium comparationis*, which is a quality that both have in common. So if we call Achilles a lion, we don't mean to say that he walks on four legs, has a fur and roars, but that he is particularly strong and brave. These qualities are, as it were, transferred from the lion onto Achilles (*metapherein*).

Note that according to this theory the metaphor does not add anything to our knowledge of either of the two objects. It does not tell us anything we don't know yet; this is why, according to Aristotle, it is a rhetorical device. Into the early 20th century Jesus' parables were essentially understood in this same way. Yet both Ricoeur and Jungel disagree. Both suspect that metaphors do much more than embellish speech, and both believe that their use in the New Testament is an important indicator of this fact. Let us look at Ricoeur first!

We have to remember that he writes as a philosopher. His interest is the interpretation of texts in general though he is quite willing to believe that the biblical texts are something special (and he was quite happy I think to be considered half a theologian). Still, for him the question is initially framed as a philosophical one: what does it mean to understand a text? Several possibilities seem to exist: it could simply mean to

decipher the words used in this text. Alternatively, one could seek to go behind it and understand the psyche of the author. Trying to understand the text would then, ultimately, be a psychological task of understanding the person who produced the text.

Yet Ricoeur thinks the latter is useless and the former at best a first step. Much more interesting, according to him, is the interaction that ensues from reading a text between the text and the reader. For the recipient, the text constitutes what he calls a 'text-world', which invites, but also challenges. It makes us desirous to become part of this world, but it is also clear that we need to change for this to happen. Ricoeur believes that quite generally for a text to become meaningful it needs this interaction with the reader, and this interaction involves a transformation of the person who exposes himself or herself to the text. This, however, means – and you may begin to see how this becomes theological – that texts that are read create new reality. A new world comes into being 'before the text' as Ricoeur says through the interaction between the text and its recipient; and the latter is actively involved in the realisation of this new reality.

What does this have to do with metaphor, and where does theology come in? Evidently, the moment the function of a text is seen in such a fundamentally 'creative' way, it seems attractive to ask whether not metaphor itself is more than merely a figure of speech. Much rather, it would appear to be a powerful tool precisely for the transformation of reality that is envisaged in every interaction between text and reader. And it seems to follow from there that in the special case of religious language that seeks to reveal an utterly new reality – the Kingdom of God which Jesus said had come near – metaphor will be of fundamental and crucial importance because of its ability to create new reality.

Interestingly, if we recall at this point some of the ideas of the later Wittgenstein about language we can see that they are not utterly different from what Ricoeur is after. For both see that language is about more than a reference to reality; it plays a role in a

communicative process. For Ricoeur this process is primarily the process between text and reader, but this can obviously be broadened to include other instances of communication. The major difference then seems to be that for Ricoeur the relationship between language and external reality is reintroduced with a remarkable twist. For it is no longer simply the case that language mirrors reality, but through its role in the communicative process language creates reality. This of course is well know to all of us as *fiction*, but Ricoeur would insist that this cannot be written of simply as an invention of some fantastical pseudo-reality, but it is the foundation ultimately, of God's eschatological revelation, and it is, not least, an explanation of why such a revelation could have been possible in a book in the first place.

Eberhard Jungel shares a number of insights with Ricoeur, but as a theologian asks directly what contribution the study of language can make to our understanding of God. His major work *God as the Mystery of the World* is ultimately nothing other than an attempt to answer this question. Put simply, his argument is that the metaphysical idea of God, which theology adapted for a long time and which tried to find God behind the world of our experience *had* to lead to the gradual disappearance of God as we have witnessed it over the past two hundred years. Thus, his argument is very much shaped by the main challenges of modernity – the subtitle of his book characterises it as the search for the foundations of a theology of the crucified in the debate between theism and atheism.

Jüngel thus traces the rise of atheism and tries to understand this development ultimately as arising from a misconception of what God is: God as actuality without potentiality; God as an unchangeable substance – all these and other traditional notions of God fail to conceptualise the God of whom the Christian faith speaks.

It is as the alternative to this story of decline that he brings in the role of metaphorical language, not least in the preaching of Jesus. Christ, he thinks, was sent as the Word of God, and this is expressed precisely in the words he spoke. The parables contain words

creative of a new reality, a reality that crucially involves the believer – we see how closely this meets with Ricoeur's ideas. And it is because of this 'coming of God into human language', which Jüngel thinks is ultimately what the Incarnation is all about, that the old problem of negative theology can be laid to rest.

His book contains a lengthy chapter on the tradition of the *via negativa* the upshot of which is that it is oblivious of the Christ event: is not the whole point of the Incarnation that God became human, and if this is the case who can it then still be appropriate for Christians to see him as remote and 'unspeakable'?

We see here, at the end of today's lecture, a conclusion arrived at that is diametrically opposed to that suggested by Wittgenstein's argument in the *Tractatus*. While the early Wittgenstein had permitted at the utmost an extreme version of negative theology, Jüngel seems quite sanguine about the use of language for God. Of course, both have very different views about what God is and of what it means to speak about him. For Jüngel, the point is to find God in the world, not in any shallow liberal way, but in the sense that the message of the gospel speaks of a transformation of this world through the good news of Christ's coming. God then is precisely not an object on the margins of our intellective capacities or altogether beyond their reach. The point is not so much an asceticism of language, but its ethical adaptation to the possibility that the world before us is capable of change in the light of God's revelation.

The question here may be what separates this from a liberal affirmation of the world as it is and its interpretation under the category of progress? Jüngel clearly does not want to go down this avenue, but in order to avoid it, does he not ultimately need the notion of God's transcendence and remoteness because without those the notion of God and that of the world will inevitably collapse into each other?

Week 7: God as Person and Trinity

The possibility that God is person has often been denied. It has been pointed out that the concept of person in order to make sense to us needs limitations which we wouldn't not willingly ascribe to God. Thus the early 19th century philosopher Johann Gottlob Fichte asks rhetorically:

> What then do you call 'personality' and 'consciousness'? Surely that which you have found within yourselves, those aspects of yourselves with which you have become familiar and to which you have assigned those terms. By paying even minimal attention to your construction of those concepts you learn that you cannot think those without limitation and finitude. Thus by using those predicates you make the divine being finite, a being like yourselves, and you have not, as you meant, thought God, but merely multiplied yourselves in and through your ideas. (*On the basis of our belief in a divine governance of the world*)

This argument must not be underestimated, especially not by those who have sympathies for the apophatic tradition. Some theologians seem to be led astray by enthusiasm about the personality of God forgetting all the problems about God-talk so carefully set out in their investigations about theological language. Clearly 'person' is a predicate as any other, and its application to the divine must be subjected to the same critical rules that are adopted with regard to language about God generally. God then clearly is not a person in the way human beings are personal.

This, however, does not yet answer or even address properly the question of what this means positively. The difficulties in conceptualising God in terms of personality do not automatically lead to the superiority of a notion of God conceived of in non-personal categories, such as nature, substance, force, or the All as each of those would be confronted in their turn by analogous conceptual and linguistic problems. Whatever the difficulties inherent in any conceptualisation of God and whatever the shortcomings of those attempts, somehow there must be a decision between a God who is nothing but a natural force and a God who is also showing properties that enable him to establish a specific kind of community with human beings.

It seems evident that for the God of the Jewish-Christian tradition personal elements are essential. The way the interaction between God and the world, humanity and

especially his people is depicted in Old and New Testament otherwise makes no sense. Central notions such as God's will to form a covenant with his people, his love of justice, his anger at trespassers of his commandments, his forbearance and forgiveness imply a certain personal element in him. It is certainly correct to say that the development of Christian theology is predicated on this assumption. God's creation of the world is *not* just an emanation of finite out of infinite being; his providence for his creation is *not* simply another word for fate. His contribution to salvation history is *not* just the unfolding of some divine inner dialectic.

This difference is often expressed by ascribing to God freedom. Quite rightly so as freedom is one of the central marks of personality. However, one must be careful here. We often describe someone's freedom by saying that that person could have acted otherwise. Yet it obviously makes little sense to say about God that he could have done otherwise than he did. In God there is no such thing as a difference between his being and his actions; there is no conceivable difference between knowledge, will, and power; he does not deliberate, indeed if we believe that in an important way he is beyond time he cannot be thought as looking back to something he did in the 'past' or be looking forward to something he may yet do in the future.

It is important to be very clear about these things from the outset because it is easy to paint a personal God in anthropomorphic colours, which then opens the whole concept up to the charges I described at the beginning of this lecture. A personal God is not a God who decides one thing today and another day tomorrow, who loves one person and hates another. 'Could' he not have created the world or saved humanity? This *may* be a way of expressing that he did this 'freely' and not because of some natural *need* to act in this and not in another way. Yet it is equally true that, in many ways, all we can say is that he has acted the way he has acted. As a matter of fact, it is vital for the Jewish-Christian tradition that God has not only acted the way he has

acted, but that his future actions will be in keeping with his past actions and with the promises he has made to believers in the past.

In a sense then one could say that ascribing freedom to God is important primarily for human attitudes to him. A personal God inspires an altogether different response from human beings than an impersonal divine being would. There is a reason for attitudes like faith, gratitude, admiration, but also inspiration for one's own perfection, which derives from the interpretation of divine actions as resulting from the free and personal actions of a God rather than being the natural modifications of divine substance.

It is for this reason that, broadly speaking, the strongest arguments for an idea of God as person have been developed where theology has been seen in close relationship with ethics. Pantheistic ideas are least attractive where human belief in God is seen in direct relation to human action. In his critique of the cosmological argument Kant maintains that even if the argument achieved its stated goal of proving the existence of a first cause (indeed he thought it did no such thing), this would still only prove the existence of a first cosmic principle whose identity with the Christian God was far from certain: why would a first principle of the universe be identical with the loving, caring, free God of the Jewish-Christian tradition, in other words with a personal God?

It is this precise reasoning that we find again in a major 20th century philosophical contribution to thinking about God, which is encountered in Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas was brought up with a traditional Jewish education in Lithuania, but lived in the West, primarily in France, since the 1920s. For a long time, his philosophical writing was developed without direct reference to questions about God even though one could see theological questions standing behind his metaphysical and ethical ideas. His most fundamental idea is developed in his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1960. There are two kinds of philosophy, one is trying to capture the entirety of the world into one system, one *totality*. This Levinas calls 'ontology' (and we may well recall here Tillich's concept of 'essentialism'!). This is

totalitarian because it claims that one's own thinking is able to contain the world around us. It therefore leaves no room for this world to be whatever *it* wants to be; it does, in particular, not leave room for the other, the person encountering us to be what *he* or *she* may be. What philosophy rather ought to do is recognise the other *as* the other, as precisely what we are not. This means for us to accept that out there is a world that challenges us precisely because we cannot command or contain it; we must work from the premise of the utter *otherness* of what encounters us.

This otherness of the world around us is, of course, especially pertinent in the case of other human beings or, to use the biblical term, in the case of our neighbour whom we are called to love. Fundamental for Levinas' philosophy is the assumption that the encounter with the other is a revelation as it exposes us radically to the reality of his difference and remoteness, but precisely because of this it then also strikes us through its nearness and similarity. In other words, when we meet another person *this* makes us understand the world as something that is both beyond our own understanding and control, but is yet related and in an important way *like* us:

> The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness (*Totality and Infinity*)

Distance and nearness, revelation and hiddenness are here coupled in a way quite reminiscent of the early, dialectical Karl Barth, a similarity that has often been pointed out and is all the more remarkable as there seems no easy common source to explain it (except perhaps that in a broad way they are both Kantians).

It is now important that for Levinas this metaphysics of alterity has immediate ethical consequences. For the way the other human person fulfils this revelatory role carries with it a moral obligation. The moment we are confronted with the 'face' of the other – a term central to Levinas' ethics – there is a demand to which we have to conform. We are called to act on his or her behalf. Levinas even uses a drastic metaphor and says we are 'taken hostage' by the face of the other.

This comes importantly before we deliberate about what our rights and duties are, in a sense even before our I is constituted. This is because of the fundamental function the encounter with the other has for our interaction with the world. It is metaphysically and epistemologically central and *therefore* the ethical imperative that comes with it is irreducible to any metaphysical or religious idea. It is itself foundational. Ethics therefore, for Levinas, is itself first philosophy:

It is from this angle that we can see how Levinas introduces the notion of God into his philosophy and what this means for this idea. In an important section of the last series of lectures he gave in Paris in 1976 he demands to 'think God on the basis of ethics'. Of course, God is not simply identical with the neighbour, but it is ultimately within this specific relationship that we understand what transcendence is and in what sense God can be radical otherness – Levinas interestingly takes up the ancient Platonic notion, central to the apophatic tradition, of God as beyond being. And yet, what he intends to say is very different from the ideas of negative theology. The kind of transcendence, which at the same time is absolute nearness, is not achieved through meditation and abstraction from the more specific categories in which we know and understand the world, but in the immediate encounter with the 'face' of the other. It is in this way that we can also understand how God is both utterly transcendent and at the same time not remote but close at hand.

Levinas does not work much with the category of person or personality, yet we can see that and how his approach to God necessitates his conceptualisation in quasi-personal categories. The point is that the idea of God is completely missed if it is approached on the basis of ontological, cosmological or natural terms. It is the encounter with our fellow human beings, our 'neighbours' and the ethical demands placed upon us in this encounter, which provide the paradigm within which we can successfully hope to understand God.

It is this basic assumption more than any particular philosophical or theological doctrine that links Emmanuel Levinas with another major Jewish thinker of the 20th century, Martin Buber (1878-1965). Buber is of interest to us as one of the founders of what became known as 'personalism'. This for him is fundamental for both our understanding of ourselves and of our notion of God. In his famous essay *I and Thou*, published in 1923, Buber argues that there are two fundamentally different ways in which we can approach and understand existence: as relationships between an I and an 'it' and as relationships between an 'I' and a 'thou' – another human person. It is the latter that defines meaningful existence. Buber contends that within these two paradigms – I-It and I-Thou – the meaning and self-understanding of the I itself changes:

> The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use). The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without any dependent genetive--i.e., without any "of" clause).

The I-Thou relationship for Buber is something special. It cannot be entered in on the basis of my own decision; it just happens. It may happen in the oddest of possible moments – when we sit side by side with a complete stranger, and it may not come to pass with someone we have known for a very long time. The important thing then is not that I-It refers to things whereas I-Thou refers to people, but that in the latter a particular bond exists between the two persons concerned:

> When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.
> He is no longer He or She, limited by other He's and She's, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighbourless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light.

We see, Buber's notion of personal encounter is in a sense much more positive than Levinas'; we might even call it romantic. The point about I-Thou relationships is that they transform our perception of and interaction with the world, they overcome our estrangement from the world, create a bond of unity between ourselves and those who

are included as a Thou. And this precisely is our path to God also who is nothing other than the 'eternal Thou':

> Some would deny any legitimate use of the word God because it has been misused so much. Certainly it is the most burdened of all human words. Precisely for that reason it is the most imperishable and unavoidable. And how much weight has all erroneous talk about God's nature and works (although there never has been nor can be any such talk that is not erroneous) compared with the one truth that all men who have addressed God really meant him? For whoever pronounces the word God and really means You, addresses, no matter what his delusion, the true You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other and to whom he stands in a relationship that includes all others.

Why is 'talk about God's nature and works' inevitably erroneous? The answer surely is that it is misleading because it defines God within an I-It relationship where God himself ultimately becomes an object of our thinking and understanding who is kept at arms' length, whereas any meaningful notion of God must see him as the extension of I-Thou relationships in this world. There is thus (and this is again similar to Levinas) a direct link between the existence of personal relationships between ourselves and other human beings and our ability to think or speak about God – though Buber might say that more important than speaking *about* God is speaking *to* him.

This connection between worldly I-Thou relationships and the human-divine relation is so close that Buber is even prepared to admit that those who shy away from using the name of God, but who know the reality of such relationships with their fellow human beings are actually quite close to a knowledge of God:

> But whoever abhors the name and fancies that he is godless--when he addresses with his whole devoted being the You of his life that cannot be restricted by any other, he addresses God.

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We have thus far looked at two highly influential 20th century interpretations of God within frameworks that make his personality – whether or not this term is used – central to his being. We can easily see that in both these cases, whatever their individual differences are, this is essentially because they situate the human relationship with God and thus our ability to think or speak about him, firmly within our interaction with

other human beings. The point of course is not to define human beings qua species as something totally different or distinct from other being in the universe, but to emphasise that our encounter with them holds the possibility of opening up or even revealing a unique quality about ourselves and about the world.

Within Christian theology the issue of God's personality is of course further complicated by the fact that it is bound up with Trinitarian doctrine. Ever since the fourth century that Christian Church has defined that God is one being or substance in three Persons. This has had several and rather diverse consequences. On the one hand, it has often been pointed out – and quite rightly – that this development in early Christian development of doctrine in a sense sparked off theological and non-theological interest in the concept of individuality and personality. Thus much of what we now find important about a notion such as personality has historically emerged in connection with doctrinal debates about the Persons of the Trinity or again the one Person of Christ, which supposedly existed in two natures, human and divine.

Christian theology has then contributed significantly to the conceptual development of the notion of personality. Yet this very development has also led to rather substantial complications. The Greek and Latin terms that were used for the 'Persons' of the Trinity in late antiquity correspond only vaguely with our own notions of person and of personality. Speaking about God within the traditional language of he trinitarian dogma thus risks damaging the notion that God is person – how could he after all if the Trinity is not one, but three Persons? It is for this reason that some major figures in 20th century theology, not least Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, have argued that the term Person ought not to be employed for the level of the hypostases' at all so that it is clear that 'God' is personal.

Yet I will use the remainder of this lecture to introduce a more recent contribution by an Eastern orthodox theologian who begs to differ. John Zizioulas' argument in his *Being as Communion* is that the introduction of trinitarian theology through the

Cappadocian theologians of the 4th century, chiefly Basil of Caesarea, meant a revolution in ontology precisely on account of its use of the concept of *hupostasis*. Up until then, he argues, Greek philosophy had always emphasised the universal at the cost of the particular. Being had always been, in the first place, general and universal being. Individual being had therefore been at worst fallen, improper being or even non-being, at best second-rate. There was no way, he claims, it could have been otherwise.

It is against this backdrop, then, that the achievement of the Cappadocians becomes strikingly evident. For their contribution to the history of both philosophy and theology is nothing less than the introduction of the opposite ontological assumption. Divine being (and thus arguably being generally) is grounded in the individual Person:

> Entities trace no longer their being to being itself – but to the person, to precisely that which *constitutes* being, that is, enables entities to be entities. In other words, from an adjunct to being (a kind of mask) the person becomes the being itself and is simultaneously – a most significant point – the *constitutive element* of beings.

This is because, according to them, the ground of divine being is the hypostasis of the Father:

> Among the Greek Fathers the unity of God, the one God, and the unity of the "principle" or "cause" of being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is *the Person of the Father.*

Zizioulas quite consciously uses not merely the term hypostasis or individual, but person. He is quite willing to claim that what the Greek fathers introduced was very much identical with our own modern concept of person. In particular he cites the idea of freedom; it is because the relationship between God and world and even the very being of God is based on the radical notion of God's free will. Being, Zizioulas declares, is seen as a 'product of freedom' by the Greek fathers.

He sums up his interpretation of Greek Patristic trinitarian theology by saying that what is important about it 'is that God "exists" on account of a person, the Father, and not on account of a substance.'

It is out of the free and creative personality of the Father that the being of the Trinity derives, and this being is necessarily communal. Why did these theologians discover this essential truth for the first time? Zizioulas thinks that this is because they were bishops and as such had an intimate understanding of the communal character of the church and its theological significance.

> The experience [of the *ecclesial being*] revealed something very important: the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life and life means *communion*.

We can here see where Zizioulas' book derives its title from: being is communion, and this is the communion of the church as much as it is ultimately the communion of the trinity. Yet as the intratrinitarian life can only flourish and be understood on the basis that it has its source and origin within the personal life of one, namely the Father, so the Church flourishes because it has its historical and theological source and origin within one person, Jesus Christ.

The church then models its earthly existence on the eternal life of the Trinity. It emphasises community over individuality and person over abstract concepts like substance or nature, and both of these decisions determine its institutional structure as much as its ethical orientation and, not least, its theological vision.

It is doubtful that Zizioulas is right in his historical claim that this 'ontological revolution' can be attributed to the Greek fathers; it is much more likely that his own thinking is influenced by 20th century personalists, such as Martin Buber. Yet this does not have to be a damning critique for we may be able to appreciate his contribution better if we contextualise him within the modern debate about God. What he seems to have contributed is a trinitarian perspective on the ongoing discussion about our relationship with God and the notion of person and personality. Does thinking God as Trinity help explain not only what these concepts mean, but also how they are related to notions of community and sociality? And how has the doctrine of the Trinity changed the ways in which people have thought about personality and community?

These are important questions arising from Zizioulas' book; they need further consideration.

Week 8: God and Salvation

The paper these lectures support is called God, Christ, and Salvation, but of these it seems that only the first two are actually addressed. You have heard eight lectures about 'God' and you are about to hear (I hope) eight lectures about Christology in Hilary Term. So what about salvation? Is this at all addressed, or is this as an issue simply relegated to the sidelines? This would be strange indeed given the centrality of this concept within Christianity and, consequently, within Christian theology.

One way of avoiding this difficulty is to show how salvation is actually woven into accounts given of God and into accounts given of the person of Jesus Christ. The latter in particular would appear evident. How could any Christology make sense if it doesn't explain how this particular individual can be the cause of human hopes for salvation? The same has, however, also be argued with regard to the doctrine of God. In particular where theologians have been wary of the confusion of the Christian God with the so-called God of the Philosophers (B Pascal) or the God of the metaphysical or the 'ontotheological' tradition they have emphasised the need to link Christian theology in every place to the underlying belief in salvation. The question then is not so much, 'Is there a God?' or, 'What are God's attributes?' but 'Who is the God who made a covenant with his people?' and, 'Who is the God who, in Jesus Christ, has revealed himself to enable salvation for all those who believe in him?'

These questions *can* of course be understood in a way that makes them not mutually exclusive, and generally speaking this view has been predominant while the existence of a supreme being was taken for granted by most. Thus in most medieval and early modern theologians the doctrine of God progresses from the former to the latter on the assumption that those express knowledge about God universal to all humanity while the latter draw on knowledge that was obtained only through the Christian revelation. The more recent history has been somewhat complex and cannot be recounted within a few words, but one may say that first the notion of revealed knowledge of God

became problematic leaving natural knowledge as the only reliable source of 'revelation'; in a second step the validity of such 'natural' knowledge of God was radically questioned. This then led to renewed interest in the God specific to the Christian message of faith in salvation through Jesus Christ.

This story by now is rather well known to you, and I merely allude to it here in order to emphasise once again to what an extent modern approaches to God are conditioned by the challenges to theistic belief that became prominent since the late 18th century. It is important to see that the nature of these responses could vary: while some would seek to withdraw to notions of God that could (seemingly or actually) be reconciled with modern criticism, others sought to defend specific Christian ideas about God in the teeth of this kind of criticism by maintaining that the criticism had been aimed at the wrong kind of target in the first place (even though they would concede that Christian theology had some responsibility for this mistake on account of its alliance with the metaphysical tradition.

What does this mean especially for the connection between the notions of God and salvation? The trajectory followed by theologians to be considered during today's lecture is broadly described thus: they argue that our concept of God is strictly based on an inference from the Christian experience of salvation. Theological God-talk then is not really interested in 'God' as he may (or may not) 'exist' or 'be', but in the God who exists or is 'for us'. *God for us* therefore is, quite aptly, the title of one of the most influential books devoted to this approach recently. That naïve reply to this will, I assume, inevitably be, 'How can God be there for us if we don't know whether he exists in the first place?' We shall see in more detail later how theologians respond to this question – in many ways the quality of their answer to it determines the quality of their theological attempt. However, quite generally it seems clear that the answer must be given along the following lines. Of course, the God who is there for us must also 'exist' in some absolute sense. Still, it makes for a substantial difference whether this

fact is, as it were, deduced from his attitude *to us* about which we are certain *prior to* any abstract theological or philosophical 'knowledge' about his existence *or* whether we start from an attempt to establish God's being hoping to move from there towards the assertion that this 'God' is also benevolent and in a loving, personal relation with human beings. The claim is that the latter is definitely impossible whereas the former is not. In other words, it is one thing to argue that the God on whom believers are willing to stake their present and future existence, in whose providential guidance they trust and in whose salvific will they have faith *must also* exist and be omnipotent, omniscient etc. (because otherwise all these assumptions could not be maintained), quite another thing to claim that the cosmological principle allegedly established through the cosmological argument is also the loving God of the Christian tradition. It appears then that thinking about God from a soteriological point of view avoids two major problems: it circumnavigates the failure of philosophical arguments for his 'existence' (insofar as this can be abstracted from religious experience of him), and it is firmly and solidly built on the fundamental assumptions of the Christian faith.

To gauge the extent to which this approach can or cannot stand in the face of modern challenges it is, however, important to see a further aspect here. Modern critique of theism targets, in one of its forms, specifically this type of theological argument. You may remember Feuerbach. He had argued that human beings project their own notion of perfection into an external being from whom they therefore expect the blessings which (Feuerbach thinks) they ought to work for themselves. The soteriological foundation of theology is therefore in itself in danger of falling into the trap of modernist critique where it argues that simply from the fact that human beings trust in God and put their hopes into him it follows that belief in God is reasonable. Feuerbach (as well as later psychological critique) replies to this that from a human 'need' for God his reality does not follow – for human beings may well dream up an answer to their needs and desires.

It is partly for this reason that some influential 20h century theologians – not least Karl Barth – have been extremely reluctant to sign up to a direct short circuiting of theology with soteriological hope. Once again, to gauge the extent to which attempts in this direction have been successful it will be important to see how they manage to avoid what one may call the 'Feuerbachian trap'.

Of the three theologians we will look at today two, Karl Rahner and Catherine Mowry Lacugna, have framed this soteriological approach to the doctrine of God consciously in trinitarian terms. This gives us yet another chance to catch a glimpse of what has often been called the 'trinitarian revival' in 20th century theology. Before I come to these two Catholic theologians, however, I suggest casting a brief glance at Dietrich Bonhoeffer, arguably one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, and his influence shows no sign of abating.

Bonhoeffer famously (and paradoxically) stated that a God who 'exists' does not 'exist'. This is perhaps the strongest version of the principle I have been expounding up until now. To see what Bonhoeffer means by it, we have to set it into the context of some of the novel ideas explored by him in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The challenge he seeks to address there is this, 'What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world?'

What does Bonhoeffer mean here by 'religionsless world'? This is not so easily decided; insofar as he seems to apply this to a process of secularisation and, on account of that, a gradual disappearance of 'religion' he may have been misled by some developments at his time, which later were not carried on in the same manner. Yet I think that for the core of Bonhoeffer's insight the questions of whether religion in the modern world has actually come to an end and, if so, what kind of 'religion' this would be, are of limited importance. For what Bonhoeffer wants to argue is in a sense independent of any such development. His point is that for Christians to approach God is to approach him through Jesus Christ. This means to see him in the context of salvation, but not so

much our own individual salvation, but the salvation of the other, the salvation of the world. To find God through the encounter with Jesus leads, according to Bonhoeffer, to paradoxical thinking. God must be sought where God seems absent – in the unassuming human person from Nazareth and today perhaps in the middle of a seemingly secular world.

Bonhoeffer thinks that the God of traditional religion – as much as the God of metaphysics or of philosophy – is ultimately a way for Christians to avoid facing the really difficult and challenging issue of relating to God in the world. Locating God somewhere in the transcendent realm, defining him in a way independent of our relationship with him is not merely failing to understand him but is failing to respond to his call. The task of the Christian is to follow Jesus, but to follow Jesus means to follow him into the world which – as the gospel of John calls it – 'did not know him'. This is not a pleasant endeavour, and it is therefore quite understandable that people try to avoid it. 'Religion' with its notion of divine remoteness is essentially one efficient and successful strategy for this Christian task, and it is for this reason that Bonhoeffer saw a glimmer of hope in a world that became 'religionless'.

It is, nevertheless, absolutely crucial to see that his ideas were utterly different from those of the 60s liberals who claimed to follow in his footsteps. They thought Christianity was liberated from its fetters by giving up on traditional, 'religious' ideas, which happened at their time anyway. They felt they could buy into a zeitgeist while rejecting its seemingly anti-Christian character. They essentially affirmed everything about post-WWII secularisation, but claimed that this was not opposed to Christianity, but its realisation.

We merely have to recall that Bonhoeffer wrote his lines in a prison cell at the height of World War II to realise that he clearly cannot have been enthusiastic about the direction of contemporary developments. The godless world he calls upon Christians to embrace really is a bleak reality, and serving the zeitgeist in his case surely would have

meant offering the comforting function of religion as an antidote against it. So the task of finding God in the world that does not seem to know him is, for Bonhoeffer, as difficult and paradoxical as it sounds. It is, once again, totally different from the identification of Christianity with historical or social progress. It is a way of understanding the call of Jesus to his followers that they must be prepared to 'take up the cross and follow' him (Mt 10, 38) based on the assumption that the world that rejected and crucified the Son of God cannot be expected to be a friendly place.

> [Religious man] must therefore live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. He must live a "secular" life, and thereby share in God's sufferings. He may live a "secular" life (as one who has been freed from false religious obligations and inhibitions). To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man--not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.

What does all this tell us about God? Is Bonhoeffer saying that Christianity must be prepared to give up God within a modern world that does not understand him any longer? It is easy to misunderstand him there. Christians must indeed be prepared to follow the path trod by Jesus to the point where he said, 'My God why hast thou forsaken me?' In this sense they must be prepared to give up God as a crutch to prop up their self-esteem or their orientation in the world or whatever other benefit bestowed by such a concept. They must be prepared to let go of the God of traditional religion.

Yet Bonhoeffer is confident that by accepting that practice they will discover God in a new and ultimately more meaningful sense. By sharing in the suffering of the world they will come to understand the God who because of his love for humanity shared in its suffering through his own Son. Thus the expectation is that this particular practice is opening up to human beings an understanding of God in Christ drawn from the notion, developed specifically in the gospel of John, that God reveals himself in and through the abasement of Jesus in his passion and in his death.

God then cannot be known independently of Jesus and this for Bonhoeffer means independent of his suffering and his death. God then cannot be known except through his relation to the world and more specifically *to us*. Yet this relationship is only experienced by joining in a practice that shows the same solidarity with a world estranged from God that God himself showed in the Incarnation and which is sharply to be distinguished from an acquiescence or even an enthusiasm for its godlessness.

When we move from here to Karl Rahner (1904-1984) approaches our problem from a very different angle. For him the problem of the relationship between God and salvation is closely connected with what he perceived of the eclipse of trinitarian theology. He starts his famous essay on the Trinity, published at the time of the 2nd Vatican Council in 1967, with the observation that while the Church has maintained the trinitarian formula developed by the Church Fathers and codified by the Ecumenical Councils, much of Catholic theology and much of modern Christian life has become in fact merely 'monotheistic'. The dogmatic tract *On the triune God* is isolated from the rest of dogmatics which start from the much more foundational considerations about the oneness of God, and it is this tenet which is then carried through in the treatises on Incarnation and salvation. It is, Rahner observes, essentially 'God' who becomes human, bestows grace upon believers etc.

Why is this the case? Well, one important reason Rahner believes is that Western trinitarian development has actually cut off the inner life of the Trinity from essential theological questions concerned with the history of salvation. This is (at least partly) due to the sharp differentiation between what has come to be called the immanent and the economic Trinity. What does this mean? At first sight, the differentiation is innocent enough and would seem almost inevitable. Once the complete equality between the divine Persons in the Trinity had been secured it was recognised as a danger that these Persons had, more traditionally been associated with various stages in the history of salvation: the Father with creation, the Son with Incarnation, the Spirit

with the Church. Such an identification could be seen as reintroducing a hierarchy (after all the Father comes first!), but it could also seem to amount to a separation between them in their respective activities in relation to the world.

To avoid these unwelcome conclusions, the distinction was introduced between the activities of the Trinitarian persons *in relation to the world* and their mutual interrelation, which is in a sense indifferent to the latter. All the traditional language about substance and Person, about the origin of the Son through generation and so forth was now restricted to this latter notion of the *immanent* Trinity, which was strictly separated from its function within the history of salvation (*economic*).

The formula developed on the basis of Augustine's trinitarian theology was that 'the works of the Trinity are divisible on the inside, but indivisible on the outside'. Yet this meant, according to Rahner, that any differentiation between the Persons was carried out in complete abstraction from human experience of God. Insofar as we are in relation to God in the history of salvation differences between the Persons are merely notional, not real. Yet this, Rahner argues, must mean that the Trinity itself becomes restricted to the abstract musings of theologians and separated from the spiritual life of the Church.

It is for this reason, then, that he introduced his most famous maxim into trinitarian theology that 'the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity'. The fundamental idea of this seems clear enough; against the long-standing tradition of separating off the inner life of the Trinity from its involvement in the history of salvation, Rahner maintains that whatever the Trinity is, is revealed in its interaction with the world, and whatever God reveals of his own trinitarian being in that history, this is his own being. Theology must (and can only) draw on the resources of salvation history for understanding God, and it is, consequently, from this source that it has to establish whatever trinitarian theology it could ever have.

What does this mean in practice? Crucially, Rahner believes we need to develop a trinitarian interpretation of the Christ event itself. This 'absolute self-communication of God to the world' according to Rahner 'symbolises' the Trinity. It reveals God as Father in his absoluteness, as Son as the principle active in history, as Spirit who has been given to us and is accepted by us.

It is in this way that Rahner thinks his fundamental axiom of the identity of immanent and economic Trinity will help re-establish trinitarian thinking at the very heart of theology. Once again, God's being is anchored in his salvific relationship with us.

Rahner's theology has received its fair share of criticism. It has been argued that it *reduces* God to a function of human religious experience. This is what I called earlier the 'Feuerbachian trap' in any such attempt. If God is essentially nothing but the fulfiller of our needs, desires and wishes, this may make him irreplaceable for us, but it doesn't prove his reality nor the justification of Christian faith.

It is, of course, often overlooked that Rahner's statement is not merely saying that the Trinity is nothing but the economic Trinity. He carefully formulates two symmetric statements: the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. He certainly attempts to identify the two, not reduce one to the other. His intention is to make God in his trinitarian being relevant again, not reducing the Trinity to a postulate of our human experience.

This Rahnerian intention has been emphatically affirmed and carried forward by the American feminist theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna in her 1991 book *God for us. The Trinity and Christian Life*. In many ways it may be fair to say that she is merely drawing out the consequences of Rahner's idea though with some modifications. She devotes much space to an exploration of Patristic trinitarian doctrine and attempts to show that the separation of immanent and economic Trinity really is the problematic Western heritage from Augustine. By contrast, the self-

communication of divine Persons encountered in the Cappadocians would give much more significance to trinitarian theology today.

LaCugna is quite explicit about a soteriological foundation of the Christian doctrine of God (which for her is trinitarian). Yet her ultimate objective lies elsewhere:

> The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life.
> Trinitarian theology could be described as par excellence a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood, and communion within the frame of God's self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit.

In other words, more than Rahner whose paradigm is ultimately Ignatian spirituality, LaCugna thinks of practice as the end of the Christian faith. This in a way links her with Bonhoeffer even though the latter did not develop the trinitarian aspect of his theology in the same way. Divine life is also our life, LaCugna states – once again the borderline between transcendence and immanence is intentionally blurred. Thinking God in a trinitarian way, for her more arguably than for others, really is tantamount to thinking him from a soteriological and practical point of view.

It is probably fair to say that much of the criticism directed at Rahner fits LaCugna's trinitarian theology much more than it does his. In order to explain how God can be the ground of Christian life she essentially reduces him to a dimension of the human experience of salvation. Admittedly, this explains how he can be 'useful' for our own lives and relevant to modern Christian existence, and this is no small thing. Yet there is very little safeguard in Lacugna's theory against the 'Feuerbachian trap' of a functional reduction of God.

Let me add a few words in conclusion of this series of lectures. They have given not much more than a glimpse of modern thinking about God. Much has remained unexplored – and I shall not give you a list of that for otherwise you might feel cheated!

And yet even this cursory exploration should have shown how much God is still on the modern mind. The fact that belief in him has been challenged has not eclipsed intellectual interest in him; on the contrary, it has if anything increased it.

At the same time, it has become clear to what an extent modern challenges have shaped debates and theories about God. And this not only in the sense that attempts to think and talk about God had to defend themselves against various forms of criticism directed against all such theories, but also in a more positive way. I think it would be a grave mistake to see modern theology essentially as a battle between forces inimical to religion and those who seek to defend it. Much of what has been said against traditional theology has resulted from sincere reflection on what the Christian God should be; and much of what has been written in defence of Christianity has been built on those reflections even if, in the final consequence, the conclusions inevitably differed. I should therefore, at the end of this term encourage seeing modern reflections on God neither as the last stand of confessional apologetics nor as a sell-out to modernist ideas, but as fruitful reflections on what is perhaps the greatest question ever to have occupied the minds of human beings.