

THEOLOGY OF THE LOVE OF GOD

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Traces of Liberality

Series Foreword

The title of this series, *Traces of Liberality*, attempts to indicate the trajectory of a theological pilgrimage. The series brings together under one rubric a series of books, produced over a long period, which have sought to understand in different dimensions a Christian understanding of God as unconditional love, and to spell out the consequences for Christian action in society of that central conviction. The concern is for both God and for humanity, for *The God of Love and Human Dignity*, as the Festschrift produced by kind friends expresses it. It is intended to republish again my books as a connected enterprise under this title as and when this becomes possible, in the hope that readers may be encouraged to take up some of these themes for themselves and take them further. If anything of this ever occurs, the project will have been eminently worthwhile.

In *Exegesis and Method in Hilary of Poitiers* (1978) I examined the development of the commentary form in the Early Church, (a surprising lacuna in Patristic study) and its implications for the tradition of Biblical interpretation. This led to a reconsideration of the basis of Christian systematic theology as the unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ, which appeared as a monograph entitled *Theology of the Love of God* (1980). Here concepts of the love of God

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become the leitmotif for reappraisal of the relationship between creation and redemption.

Some wider implications were developed in relation to ecclesiology and to Christian ethics in two shorter studies in a less technical style, *The Church of God* (1984) and *Making Christian Decisions* (1985). Again the controlling theme of the love of God is the basis of a re-imagining of traditional dogmatic themes and their practical outputs in ethical decision making. The enterprise of rethinking systematic theology as a constructive hermeneutical envelope was developed on a larger scale in *God in Christian Perspective* (1994). The basic thrust here is the insistence that the Christian understanding of God is a multi-faceted model which draws on Christology and Trinity, faith and practice in community. The vision is widened through engagement with the emancipatory theologies, postmodernity, and political theory, while rethinking the underlying framework of the divine love, in *Generosity and the Christian Future* (1997), the Henson Lectures, 1995.

At this point I was concerned to make explicit a conscious situation of my work with the Scottish liberal-evangelical theological tradition, and was granted first access to the uncatalogued letters and papers of John Baillie. The result was a theological biography of the Baillie brothers, tracing the interaction of their theology within the culture in which they worked, and reassessing their key role in the development of modern Scottish theology (John and Donald Baillie, *Transatlantic Theology*, 2002).

Pursuing further this trajectory I came to understand an evangelical open theology as a contribution to human flourishing in a Christomorphic dialectical engagement with culture, local and cosmopolitan. The fruits of this investigation appear in *The Transformative Imagination—Rethinking Intercultural Theology* (2004). This comparative study of theology and culture, through the arts, the sciences, political and human rights issues leads to a reconception of the mystery of God in a postfoundational frame. The human rights section of this monograph was then developed, especially

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through a retrieval of the history of interpretation, through *Christ and Human Rights—The Transformative Engagement* (2006). There exists little explicit treatment of Christology in relation to rights. Examination of rights reveals tensions, ambiguities and conflicts, constructing a Christology which centres on a Christ of the vulnerable and the margins. The theme was developed in a more universal framework in *Hospitable God* (2009) with Allen Smith. A selection of essays with a full personal bibliography, *Traces of Liberality* (2005) echoes the series title.

Not included in the series are a version of the human rights study in succinct form in *Faith and Human Rights* (2008), co-authored with Richard Amesbury, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers* (2004) with Peter McEnhill, *Believing in The Text* (2004) with David Jasper, *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World*, Essays in honour of A. C. Cheyne (with S. J. Brown, 2000) and an edited group of essays by G. W. H. Lampe (1980).

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For Elizabeth

Introduction

Talk of God is notoriously complex, and talk of love notoriously sentimental. But it seems to me that there is still a great deal to be quarried from the implications for theology of the central Christian affirmation that God is in his essential nature love, love characterized precisely and uniquely in the self-giving of God to mankind in the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is a study in systematic theology. My primary concern is with the material content of doctrine. But the Christian gospel is intended to be made available and comprehensible not only to people who are already members of the churches but to all men. We live in a world of men of many faiths or none, in which, indeed, Christians themselves work and think in a number of overlapping intellectual communities. It follows that the theologian, in carrying further the long process of development of the implications of the substantive content of faith, will naturally seek at every turn to relate his work to the questions which men ask about themselves and their world from other perspectives. Whatever else it may be, the Christian gospel is not a secret lore but an open invitation.

In the first chapter, on theology and the God who loves, I look at some of the structuring elements of theology in selected areas of interpretation of the biblical narratives – talk of God's faithfulness in the Old Testament, New Testament accounts of God's engagement with human experience of life and death through Jesus, later work on the difficult but central notion of God taking death overcome into his own future activity as the triune God.

A chapter on the fundamental issue of love as a focus in theology leads to a consideration of faith, hope and love in

Christian tradition. There is an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the kind of theological integration pursued in the programme of love as focus, with comparative reference to aspects of the recent Continental work done on hope by Moltmann and Pannenberg and by Ebeling on faith. The development of the tradition on God's love is traced through a small group of selected themes, first in the patristic, medieval and reformation periods, and then in modern treatments.

Chapter six provides a transitional section in which the problems of the complexity of the human condition, to which the Gospel is addressed and for which theology is to be made comprehensible, are explored. Discussion of some perennial metaphysical and epistemological problems of Christian belief leads to grounds for a critical theology of love. The second half of the book, in the following seven chapters, represents an attempt to spell out in the exposition of doctrine some of the consequences of the concentration on God's love. Recommendations on specific features of the divine love, e.g. the relation of self-giving to self-affirmation and the results of ascribing this character to God as creator and redeemer, are applied to problems concerning the nature of God's agency, and to the development of Christology, as well as to the trinitarian problem and the question of the relation of theology to history. It is not claimed that definitive solutions have been achieved in a field involving a number of essentially contested concepts. But it is claimed that sufficient evidence has been produced to indicate that concentration on the love of God is a continuing source of fruitful development in the shaping of Christian doctrine, and that, applied to currently intractable problems, this approach enables us to take up the force of often unpalatable alternatives without masking the difficulties. The programme is then spelled out in a reconsideration of the doctrines of God, creation and redemption. Close attention is paid throughout to the analysis of different sorts of theological practice. I have long believed that

it is in constructive dialogue with others that the ongoing work of the subject is most likely to be advanced.

It goes without saying that the reflections in this book owe much to the countless discussions of the love of God to be found in the history of Christian thought. In particular I want to mention two books which seem to me to be central to the subject. These are Daniel Day Williams' *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* and John McIntyre's *On the Love of God*. There is doubtless much more to be quarried than I have found. I hope to have been able at least to suggest that the theme is well worth pursuing further.

In writing this volume I have been indebted, consciously and unconsciously, to a great many people. Parts of this work, in various guises, have been tried out at various times in various places: I am particularly grateful for the comments of the members, past and present, of the graduate Christology seminar in this University. Anthony Baxter, Brian Hebblethwaite and Bill Shaw have produced invaluable comments on the manuscript. To all these people, and to my colleagues here and in Glasgow, especially Professor A. D. Galloway, my warm thanks are due. Lady Collins has supported me with endless patience and wise encouragement. I am grateful to Hazel and Gerald Hedge for the meticulous typing of this and my last book. My greatest debt is acknowledged in the dedication of this work to my wife.

George Newlands
Cambridge, March 1979

Chapter 1

Theology and the God who Loves

1

The belief that God is love is a central feature of the Christian gospel and a continuing source of strength and inspiration, often in the most trying of circumstances, to millions of people. This belief is not confined to Christians, though in the Christian tradition it has certain distinctive characteristics. At the same time, the statement that God is love is one of the most well worn cliches of recent times, often a platitude uttered as a substitute for any sort of constructive proposal in a particular situation.

In the past the response to inappropriate interpretations of theological affirmations has been to set the text in context, to tell the story of God's love as spelled out definitively in the biblical narratives, in the events to which they testified and in the doctrines which incorporated the results of reflection upon these narratives in the Christian tradition.

The urgent problems which press upon the theologian's task in the modern world have meant that this approach will not do any more. At least, it will not do by itself and as it was once conceived. For the Christian tradition is anything but self-explanatory to the majority of the world's population, which lives in societies that are either increasingly secularized or likely to become so in the near future. Familiarity with Christian life and worship is becoming the exception rather than the rule. Despite occasional phases of interest in

religion of various sorts, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of our planet as created and nourished by the personal God of Christian faith. Indeed the ever-growing dimensions of the problems of poverty, hunger and man's inhumanity to man appear to make the classical ideas of God morally intolerable. It has sometimes been thought that if there is a God, responsible for such a world as ours, he must be a monster, and is certainly not to be worshipped. But in fact, the evidence suggests beyond all reasonable doubt that there is no such God. Atheism, practical or theoretical, has perhaps always been with us, but in our time the dimensions of the problem for the Christian have changed dramatically.

It is in this context that I want to reconsider a number of central issues in Christian doctrine, through a critical analysis of the basic affirmation that God is love. God is not an object in the world of objects. This has radical consequences for all aspects of theological explanation. Explanation in theology cannot be quite the same as explanation in carpentry.¹ But assertions without explanation remain incomprehensible. In any Christian theology there will remain large elements of residual mystery in speaking about the transcendent God. But we have a duty to explain as clearly as possible wherein the mystery lies. In a previous age theologians sometimes appeared to know too much about the personal details of the life of God. Today perhaps we theologians tend to identify with the agnosticism of the age and assure the reader that we are all in the same boat, and that none of us can say anything about God any more. But we should no doubt be rather at a loss if the same attitude to apparently intractable problems were taken by colleagues in other fields, say in the life sciences. We have to begin where we are.

2

Concentration on a single theme in theology is fraught with risks, but all intellectual activity is fraught with risks and

makes progress by trial and error. Much theology, especially in the last two hundred years, since the Enlightenment, has been done with the aid of single motifs and concepts. These have been used to integrate discussion of a number of topics, in place of the older method of working through a number of traditional *loci* of doctrinal affirmations usually derived from the Apostles' Creed, or other creeds or confessional statements of the Churches. Naturally the choice of central motif has important consequences for the results obtained. These consequences are sometimes intended, sometimes unintended, and exhibit desirable and undesirable effects, depending on the criteria of assessment used.²

It is not necessary to entertain a strict view of 'the' one correct approach to doctrine in order to see that a great deal of talk of God has love has been superficial. There is a diffuseness, a sentimentality, a 'soft-centre' quality about much writing on the subject. Love as a major theme is absent, at least explicitly, from most of the best of recent Continental theology, though it has been prominent in much ephemeral production. Writers on the subject are not unaware of the difficulty. But still there is confusion of the particular issues of theology, the metaphysical, historical and moral issues, in a miasma of mind-blowing 'agapeomorphism'.³

Talk of God is complex and there are perhaps almost as many concepts of God as there are users of the term 'God'. I want to show that exploration of the theme of God's love for us may help us to understand better a number of aspects of God-talk. As I understand the matter, the problems involved here are not necessarily greater than those connected with *any* sort of talk about the God of Christian faith. In so far as it is possible to speak of an essence of Christianity, it seems to me that the love of God is after all the essence or even the quintessence of Christianity.⁴

Theology as a discipline is today, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in a somewhat untidy state. It would greatly sharpen up the issue for discussion if I were to assert that the only correct perspective from which to view the

subject is as a theology of the love of God. The prospect is tempting. Writers on doctrine are rather given to producing large volumes without ever employing the word 'perhaps'. But clearly *the* way of speaking of God is reserved for the eschatological future. In this life our theologies are irrevocably pluralist. This does *not* mean that we cannot make recommendations about what are likely to be true and untrue propositions, or that there can be no criteria upon which to judge truth claims. We shall consider later the precise contribution of cultural relativity and of various sorts of relativism to theology. But it does mean that we cannot look at the issues from God's point of view.

I shall argue that there is indeed a way from God to man and from man to God, the way of Christ, well characterized by Karl Barth in his treatment of the journey of the prodigal son. Failure to give adequate weight to the substantive content of the Christian faith produces dismally tedious theology. But though faith is not without conceptual content, the way is, as I understand it, a way of effective and decisive salvation rather than definitive explanation. Barth could see this point, in theory if not always in practice. 'Dogma is an eschatological idea, to which each particular dogmatic statement is only an approximation, which can neither anticipate nor conceal it. . . . This door especially must not be bolted.' How it is possible without undue incoherence to argue for the reality of salvation while maintaining considerable epistemological scepticism will be considered in later chapters. I have long been struck by the aptness to our quest for dogmatic definition of Wittgenstein's comments on pontificals and highways.⁵

'A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*. The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddled. Here again we get the same thing as in set theory; the form of the expression we use seems to have been designed for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees the whole of each of those infinite series and he sees into human con-

sciousness. For us, of course, these forms of expression are like pontificals which we may put on, but cannot do much with, since we lack the effective power that would give these vestments meaning and purpose.

'In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by side-roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed.'

Talk of God as love can be diffuse. If we are to avoid unclarity, then we must neither be afraid of using the word nor be bewitched by language as a substitute for substantive content. It is possible to say a great deal about humanity without using the word humanity, as say in some of Solzhenitsin's novels. The same is true of love. There are no magic words in theology, and no forbidden words: all depends on how they are used.

3

God, I want to suggest, is the one who loves, *par excellence*, whose nature it is to love. To understand God's nature as love is a major clue to learning how to use the word 'God', and to understanding the meaning of salvation. I shall set down at this point a brief, programmatic statement of the understanding of love that I shall be attempting to explain in detail in the succeeding chapters.

The first ground upon which I should want to argue that God is love is an interpretation of the biblical narrative. This is not yet, of course, an assertion that the Bible has any sort of metaphysical or epistemological priority, or even that we always come to think of Christian faith through reading the Bible. We may, but the question of the logical and theological status of the Bible is anything but straightforward.

It is often said that in theology the choice of starting point is all important. Much more to the point, it seems to me, is the need to ensure that in the finished production all major

structuring elements are properly accounted for. I begin with the biblical material because, whatever construction one may later wish to put upon its logical status, this material embodies most of the structuring elements of the Christian tradition. What these elements are and why they should be retained is a matter which we shall have to go into in due course. I want to turn first to the substantive issues, for I believe that in theology as in other disciplines, methodological clarification may arise as much out of tackling the material content of the subject as from attention to method for its own sake.

Discovery of the implications of God understood as love through reflection on the biblical narratives, which are themselves a collection of widely varying and often conflicting records of different sorts of events, is by a slow and cumulative process. God in the Old Testament is conceived in an astonishing variety of imagery, but he remains always the creator and sustainer of his creation, acting in providence, always with his people, looking after them in their varied fortunes. All our own human experience, direct or indirect, is of service to us here in recognising the character of God's concern, even where this may go beyond our expectations. At the same time, thinking about God as a transcendent, personal being who creates the universe and acts in particular providence, suggests dimensions in God beyond those which are the subject of our direct experience.

Love is a term which people have imported as a kind of programmatic term to bring into shape and focus their understanding of God's activity and character. Its content is determined partly by our selection of particular parts of the Bible, the tradition and our own experience for concentrated reflection. But our understanding of love is defined too, by reference to what is taken to be the detailed particularity of the historical and the transhistorical activity of God.

The supreme ground in the Christian tradition for a theological assertion of the centrality of the love of God has

always been an interpretation of the New Testament record in terms of God's self-giving in the sacrifice of his son, and in Jesus' self-giving to God and mankind. Here is the true paradigmatic structure of God's nature. The basis for this interpretation is found in the force of the scriptural passages in themselves, underlined through reflection on God's concern for men over the centuries as these themes have informed Christian experience. God is identified with his creatures through his presence in Jesus, suffering, sharing in life and death, sharing Jesus' lot, somehow even taking death overcome into his own future activity as God.

Unity of love in this framework must be taken to be a more inclusive, not less inclusive category than unity of being. Such an interpretation of course goes well beyond the biblical imagery in seeking theoretical understanding. It raises difficult philosophical problems and requires discussion of the traditionally trinitarian implications of the Christian faith. Such language is anything but self-explanatory. But in seeking explanation we must be careful not to explain the core of faith away, into something quite different.

Jesus of Nazareth identified himself through his actions with the lives and concerns of the people he met. At the same time faith affirms that he was one with God in a way which does not lend itself to exhaustive description based upon empirical observation. The identification of God the creator with his creatures reaches a climax in the death of Jesus. Here the element of justice in God's love comes to the fore, the need to act in such a way that his love is made available to all men, however negative their reaction to God may be. This action involves tragedy, as often in human life, and the transcendence that may be involved in tragedy. But however evocative of our devotion, tragedy is not and cannot be the last word. In the resurrection the identification of the cross is carried through to restoration and renewal. Self-sacrifice is part of a larger and more comprehensive movement of self-giving which is grounded in and makes possible