



The  
Many  
Faces  
of  
God

Jaap Durand



# THE MANY FACES OF GOD

Highways and byways on the route towards an  
orthodox image of God in the history of Christianity  
from the first to the seventeenth century

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*Dedicated to my lifelong friend, Jaap Furstenberg,  
without whose encouragement this book would  
not have been published.*

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# 1 GOD HAS MANY FACES

During the winter semester of 1932-3 and the summer semester of 1933 Karl Barth gave a course in which he examined first the background and then the history of Protestant theology from the time of Schleiermacher. The lectures were published in German and the first complete translation in English appeared in 1952 entitled *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Despite the fact that the main part of his book deals with 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologians starting with Schleiermacher, Barth gives us an extensive analysis of the Protestant theological scene of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the background to his primary story. For good reason: the 18<sup>th</sup> century represents one of the most significant turning points in the history of Western theology.

The appearance of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and its concomitant new and modern theology was not as dramatic as the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, yet its consequences were just as far-reaching and perhaps more enduring, well into what today is called a post-modern world.

There is no part of theology in the broadest sense of the word that did not experience the lure of the Enlightenment, but to a very large extent it was theology in its most narrow sense as the *logos* about God, theology's presumptuous playing around with ideas and images of God, that was affected the most.

The true heirs of the Enlightenment, modern philosophers and theologians who work and think within a modern and post-modern paradigm, have brought about profound changes in the discourse about God. So much so that the changes which had taken place in the time of the Reformation pale in comparison. With good reason one can argue that the biggest caesura in the history of the doctrine of God appeared in the time of the Enlightenment.

Without downplaying the effects that the Reformation thinking on grace, salvation and faith would potentially have had on the idea of God, we are forced to admit that a fresh, new approach to the doctrine of God lasted for only a short spell during the time of the Reformation. Very soon Reformation theology reiterated the same concepts and ideas of God that had existed for centuries before the Reformation.

In the above sense we can call *orthodox* the idea of God that existed in the Protestant as well as Roman Catholic Churches up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



This orthodox view of God within Christendom has shown great tenacity despite all the efforts by modernist theologians to ridicule it, or even non-modernists to modernize it in such a way that it reflects more of the paradigms within which Christians today believe and worship.

Unfortunately many theologians today consider the orthodox idea of God something of the past - that is, at most a curiosity, something to take notice of but only in so far as a substantial renewal of the original is intended. However, any effort today to write about the contemporary theological scene within Christendom and with special reference to the doctrine of God will be totally inadequate and one-sided if the orthodox view in this regard is not fully taken into consideration. The orthodox view of God to which many Christians adhere is not some passé belief, but part of a doctrinal heritage and system that developed over centuries with many false starts, corrections, variants, emphases, ambivalences and even contradictions.

Arguably the orthodox Christian doctrine of God reached its pinnacle when, within Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, it was forced to give an account of itself against the subtle but virulent attacks of modernist thinkers, more often than not in their own midst. But behind them there was a long history to which they were able to refer.

The purpose of this book is to give an overview of this history without pretending to do the impossible, giving an exhaustive account of all the developments that took place over a period of seventeen centuries. This history takes us back to Greece and the Hellenistic world in the period before the advent of Christendom in the first century. The reason for going so far back in history is simple. Understanding the full development of the Greek-Hellenistic concept of God is essential, because the first meeting between the Christian faith and Greek philosophy and religion played a vital role in the initial phases of the evolution of the Christian idea of God. This history ends with the 17<sup>th</sup>-century appearance of pietist Puritanism in which the reformed Protestant idea of God reached a certain logical conclusion. By then Lutheran orthodoxy had already taken up a fixed position. For the Roman Catholic Church the culmination of any form of doctrinal debate on the doctrine of God had reached its culmination in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas, only to be confirmed by the Council of Trent during the period of the counter-Reformation.

This is not a straightforward history. It has its hills and valleys, its ups and downs. Trying to trace the route followed by Christian thinkers finally to reach a broad consensus on what an orthodox view of God should be, we are met with some startling surprises, even some unpleasant ones. We would have expected an uncomplicated and straight route along which the orthodox viewpoint at all times distinguished itself in its orthodoxy. This is not the case. We discover a

host of companions on the way: Gnosticism, intellectualism, Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, mysticism and rationalism, and a host of others, most of Greek-Hellenistic extraction. Moreover, we soon discover that, more often than we would like to acknowledge, non-theological factors played a big, sometimes even a decisive role, in the God debate over the centuries. The context in which this debate took place was determined by historical, political, cultural, social and psychological factors. No wonder the route twists and turns. No wonder it seems that God has many faces.

But despite everything that has been said, the same history witnesses to the fact that there had been one constancy throughout: the Christian belief that God revealed Himself in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The different faces of God could therefore have been the result of so many human understandings - within various contexts - of the nature of God's revelation.

There are those, of course, who would argue that God is essentially faceless, that the whole idea of revelation cannot be taken seriously and that this so-called constancy is no more than just another factor amongst many others in the ongoing saga of the Church's debate about the God with the many faces. Such a standpoint, however, will find serious opposition from the side of anyone who investigates the development of the Christian idea of God with an open mind. For those players on the stage of theological discourse the notion that God reveals Himself to his creatures had never been a serious problem. They firmly believed that Christianity, as a religion, stands and falls with the belief that God has made Himself known through Jesus Christ; that despite His transcendence, He removes the cover of his complete and divine otherness in Jesus Christ and discloses who He is and what He wants to be for us. In all the orthodox Christian writings, from the apostolic witness to the Christ event of the first century to the present day, the idea of revelation has never been in dispute. If the overarching constancy of this belief is not accepted, any investigation of centuries of Christian discourse about God and his nature is futile.

The belief in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, however, obviously did not make the course taken by Christian thinkers trouble free. Right from the beginning two fundamental problems presented themselves to the various theologians and writers, namely:

1. Is revelation an absolute necessity for the knowledge of God, or do we have some sort of mechanism which enables us to know at least something of God apart from his revelation?
2. If God revealed Himself to us, do we have the capacity to understand his revelation?

To these two problems we can add a third which was less obvious to the early generations of theologians and philosophers: despite the presence of a normative revelation, to what extent is our understanding of God influenced or even determined by the historical, cultural and social context within which we find ourselves?

The pages that follow will be an attempt to explain how these and related questions were addressed and answered, explicitly as well as implicitly, during the seventeen centuries that shaped the Christian orthodox view of God. This view, adhered to by many millions of Christians of different denominations and persuasions, is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite new and often exciting perspectives that have opened up since.

God does indeed have many faces, even within orthodox Christianity. But at the same time we must admit that the continuity in the orthodox idea of God is quite amazing.

# 2 THE FACE OF GOD AND THE GREEK AND LATIN FATHERS

## 2.1 THE MANY GODS AND THE ONE GOD: THE GREEK HERITAGE

The historical development of the Christian religion and its concept of God during the first centuries can only be understood as a continuing process of interpreting and translating its sources with a view to giving the world an ever more accurate understanding of their contents and claims. This process began when the apostles used Greek forms of literature and speech in addressing the Hellenized Jews to whom they turned first and whom they met in all the great cities of the Mediterranean world. Concomitantly the earliest oral and written reports of what Jesus had done and said were translated from the original Aramaic into Greek. The Christian literature that developed in this way was meant for Christians and those on the way to adopting the Christian religion as a result of the missionary work of the early Christians.

Despite the fact that the political control of the regions where the Christian faith started to take hold was in the hands of the Romans, the predominant culture and language of the Mediterranean world were Greek. It is therefore significant that in this period, while operating within the only intellectual culture in the world that had aimed at and achieved universality, the Christians laid claim to the universality of their own message and religion. This claim had been made by the Christian religion from the very beginning and was constantly maintained. The encounter with Greek culture was therefore a decisive one. The future of Christianity as a religion with universal claim depended on it. The visit of the apostle Paul to Athens, the intellectual and cultural centre of the classical Greek world, and his sermon about the unknown God on the Areopagus to an audience of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers mark the beginning of the spiritual struggle between Christianity and the classical world. Looking for common ground with the people whom he was addressing, without which no understanding was possible, the apostle chose the Greek philosophical tradition, which was the most representative part of that which was alive in Greek culture at the time.

A century later, about the middle of the second century, we find something similar. Christian writers addressed themselves to a non-Christian audience as the result of the cruel persecution to which followers of Christ were subjected everywhere in the Roman Empire. They were accused of cannibalism, of being atheists who did not worship the gods of the state, and of denying divine honour

to the Roman emperor himself, thus being politically subversive. Defending the Christian religion against these accusations, they again looked for common ground with the people they addressed if they wanted to reach an understanding. This attempt could be made only in the atmosphere of Greek intellectual culture, because they spoke, not to the illiterate masses, but to the educated few, including the rulers of the Roman Empire. Their defence of the Christian faith had to employ philosophical arguments throughout, gleaned from the cultural world they lived in. Besides, they themselves were Greeks or Greek speaking. It was only natural for them to think, pray, worship and proclaim the message of Jesus Christ in the language they knew and used. But language is more than a tool of communication. It reflects the way we experience life and the world around us. It was impossible for these Christian apologists not to understand and experience the gospel in a Greek way. But why was it necessary for them to approach rulers like Hadrian or Marcus Aurelius with Greek philosophical arguments?

We find the answer to this question in the development of a characteristic feature of Greek philosophy in Hellenistic times that had a very definite consequence for the belief in God amongst the more educated during this period. In order to understand this development, we must first take a look at the phenomenon of polytheism in the Greco-Roman world of early Christianity and then at the crusade of the Hellenistic philosophers against polytheism in the same period.

The polytheism of the traditional pagan Olympus is well-known. The Olympian gods were all anthropomorphic gods, i.e. gods who, although immortal, looked and acted like human beings. The minor gods, such as the demons, inhabited rivers, fountains, trees and mountains, while the major gods under the leadership of Zeus lived on Mount Olympus. In the *Iliad*, the epic poem of Homer, we read about these gods. The gods who appear together on Olympus in Homer and Hesiod were originally unrelated deities; some were deities of individual Greek city-states, others imported from abroad. In cult practice different states continued to favour different Olympians, although Athens worshipped all of them to some extent. Homer and Hesiod do not furnish us with a definitive list of Olympians, although some of the major deities like Zeus, Hera, Dionysus, Poseidon, Apollo and Athena are always included in the list of twelve which is usually associated with the major Olympians. They revealed themselves by means of oracles, interpreted by priests. The temple of Delphi, where the priestess of Apollo presided and exercised great political influence, is one example. The ruins of the temple where the Delphic oracles were pronounced can still be seen today.

The polytheism of the early Greeks, and also later of the Romans and other peoples who had fallen under the Roman rule, by definition made no claim to

universalism. The Greek city-states that founded colonies in the East and the West were accustomed to export their own deities and heroes at the same time, but they also adopted foreign cults, although their minor shrines usually gave way very soon to imposing Greek temples. In Hellenistic times, however, the Greek founders of new colonies and cities no longer came from specific city-states but from the whole Greek nation. Moreover, they now came into contact with peoples as civilized as themselves, who worshipped great and traditional deities with such impressive cults that the Greek gods could hardly replace them. The result was that the Greeks in a new colony worshipped their own deities without neglecting the deities of the indigenous peoples. In this way oriental cults had an excellent opportunity to make their influence felt in the Hellenistic world and even strengthen it as a result of international diplomatic relations, trade and cultural exchanges.

Egypt is perhaps our best example, where Osiris, represented by the bull, Apis, and his sister Isis were the easiest foreign deities for the Greeks to accept. They were, however, unwilling to adopt the Egyptian veneration of animals. Ptolemy I Soter therefore decided to create a new god, by fusing Osiris and Apis to form Serapis. Isis now became the consort of Serapis. As the queen of heaven, she is a pantheistic goddess who governs the elements, the stars and the planets. Until the end of the fourth century AD her influence over vegetative life, including the grain trade over land and sea, was venerated and used as propaganda against the Christians. The cult of Serapis established its centre in Alexandria, where a large temple was built in his honour, which the polytheist historian, Eunapius of Sardis, called a spectacle unique in the whole world. The last statue of the Greek artist, Bryaxis, portrayed the god as seated on a throne, his bearded face similar to those of Zeus, Hades and Asclepius.

The city of Alexandria played an important and universal role in the worship of the gods. This is a fact well worth noting, because there was also another side to Alexandria: it became a centre of learning and science in the early Hellenistic period. After a few generations of decline during the century preceding the birth of Christ, the Roman conquest brought the benefits of fresh life and a renewed interest in medicine, and grammatical and literary studies. Above all, philosophy took on a new lease of life. The reign of Cleopatra saw the establishment of the Alexandrian school of philosophy in the pre-Roman period, the so-called Neo-Sceptic school, which flourished in the second century of Roman rule with rough-and-ready philosophers standing at street-corners, in alleyways and at the entrances to the temples, mocking the established order, including the religious order of the day. The museum and the famous Alexandrian library continued to exist and the supply of teachers to ensure the continuation of the tradition of higher studies does not seem to have failed. But at the same time there was a steady exodus of Alexandrian scholars migrating to Rome, where they made

important contributions to the intellectual life there, philosophy included. Plotinus, for example, the third century's most original Platonist, was an Egyptian from Alexandria. Round about 242 AD he set off from Alexandria to visit the sages of Iran and India, and ended up in Rome, where he died in 269 AD.

Together with Alexandria Rome played a universal role in the continuing worship of the gods. Through the conquest of its armies Rome acquired many gods and accumulated countless sacred works of art. The role that the imperial cult played within the kaleidoscopic variety of gods must also be mentioned, because of the unifying purpose this was supposed to fulfil. In the third century AD the chaotic political situation in Rome and the lack of dynastic continuity, however, severely undermined the imperial cult's effectiveness. Attempts were made to revive the cult by positing a supreme god whose representative was supposed to be the emperor. Emperor Aurelian (270-275) used the cult of Sol, the Sun, to restore the cohesion of the Roman world. The idea was to counter-balance the earthly emperor with the heavenly mirror image. Sol was raised above the other gods as the divine protector of Aurelian, who himself became divine. Another example is Diocletian, emperor in Rome from 284-305, under whom the last great persecution of Christians took place and who assimilated himself to Jupiter. When Constantine the Great finally seized the imperial throne in 312, after he had conquered his rival Maxentius in the name of the Christian God, probably identifying Sol with the God preached by the Christians and becoming a Christian himself, the stage was already set for what Eusebius would formulate as: one God, one empire, one emperor. According to Eusebius, Constantine was already a passionate monotheist before his conversion, taking after his father Constantius Chlorus, of whose beliefs Constantine knew no more than that they centred on "the one supreme God".

Constantine supervised the suppression of polytheism. A revival of polytheism under Julian, the Apostate, a nephew of Constantine who ruled in Rome from 361 to 363, was of short duration. Julian fully understood the threat of the claim of universalism of the young Christian religion that flowed from the unicity of God. He therefore attempted to restructure polytheism along more universalist lines. The cult of the Sol, the Sun, again played a decisive role. In his case Sol was identified with Mithras, originally an Iranian god. But Julian ultimately failed. Polytheism was no longer a political and historical force.

But long before political developments contributed to the official decline of polytheism, there had been powers at work that threatened to bring to an end the public pursuit of the ancient rituals. This threat did not originate from the political manoeuvring in Rome or the monotheistic and universalistic claim of the Christian religion in the first place. The threat came from within, from the Hellenistic philosophy of the Greco-Roman world itself.

In contrast to the beliefs of the ordinary man and woman, the ancient Greek philosophers went in search of an idea of God that could satisfy the demands of the intellect. Disbelief in the gods of the old poets and the popular religion was there almost from the start. Xenophanes of Colophon, with his violent attacks against the gods of Homer and Hesiod, was the first Greek philosopher who explicitly drew the line of demarcation between popular and philosophical theology and, according to Justin, the Christian apologist, Socrates had already suffered the death of a martyr for his purer concept of the Divine. Various philosophical schools went in search of disciples recommending their philosophical knowledge as the only way to happiness. Central to all this was a philosophical concept of God so different from the gods of Olympus. In the Hellenistic age the philosophers virtually became missionaries in their eagerness to provide a spiritual shelter for their followers and to proclaim the one God against the many gods.

This whole trend is reflected in the Platonic Academy of the second century AD. The Academy stemmed from a great revival of Plato's philosophy all over the Hellenistic world as a result of a new vision of Plato as the supreme religious and theological authority. Plato's "ideas" were now interpreted as the thoughts of God, in order to give Platonic theology a more concrete form. We find this theory already in Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jew (25 BC - 39 AD) who, as a contemporary of Christ, tried to convince his fellow non-Jewish intellectuals in numerous works written in Greek that his Hebrew religion could be represented and understood in terms of Greek philosophy, and that the transcendent and monotheistic God they were searching for could be found in the Old Testament.

Philo's attempts to Hellenize the Jewish faith are significant. It shows that all understanding in religious matters in the Hellenistic world, even among non-Greek people, needed the intellectual medium of Greek thought and philosophy. By that time philosophy had for the Greeks themselves taken on the function of a natural theology, i.e. a theology that takes as its point of departure reality as we know and experience it, and from there tries to reach in a thought process the cause and origin of it all.

The interpretation of Christianity as another philosophy should not therefore surprise us. In his Dialogue Justin tells us that he had been drawn to Greek philosophies from his early youth, but none of them completely satisfied him, until he found his final answer in the Christian religion. But, in accepting the Christian faith, he still considered himself a Greek philosopher.

But what is the main thrust of Greek natural theology? The Greek philosophers asked what the true nature of God was, because they could not believe that God looked and acted like human beings, as was the case in the polytheistic religion of the day. Very soon they saw God as the ultimate beginning and origin of



everything that exists. God is the absolute Being that brings being into existence. God can, therefore, be known by us if we, starting from what we already know about the world around us, transcend it in our thinking and conclude that God, of necessity, must exist as the origin of it all. This type of natural theology can best be illustrated by looking at the way Aristotle dealt with the question of God's existence.

Aristotle was fascinated by the appearance of movement in the world around him. Anything that moves has been moved by something else and so we can go on, until we finally arrive at that something which started all movement without moving itself. This first immovable mover Aristotle called God. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Aristotle's God started the first movement by a conscious act of will and with a view to calling into being all of creation. No, in Aristotle's philosophy God only thinks about himself, God has only himself as the object of his own contemplation. In this timeless self-contemplation it is not possible for God to be concerned about the world. The mere fact of God's existence, however, set everything in motion; God's being there called forth the latent energy in nature and in the human race.

Aristotle's great precursor, Plato, had a similar abstract and intellectualistic view of God. God is the one, indivisible and immutable spirit that is also the highest idea behind all that exist.

These two great philosophers of ancient Greece clearly had a deistic concept of God. Their God is someone who, in self-sufficient aloofness, transcends the creation he somehow brought into being and neither bothers about nor interferes with it. As the highest idea or the first immovable mover, God, for them, does not consciously relate to the world. He, therefore, does not and cannot reveal himself. Although we can conclude that he exists as the first cause of everything, we really know nothing more about him. He remains the incomprehensible and, in the last analysis, unknown God.

These and similar concepts were taken over and modified by the Stoic philosophers who were the most pertinent Greek thinkers in the time immediately preceding the birth of Christ. For them God is more than only a sort of architectonic idea behind existence. He is the indwelling *logos* (reason or intellect) in the world that arranges and structures everything according to a definite plan. In Stoicism we find the Hellenistic principle of immanence which makes the universe eternal, by one means or another deifying the natural order, and by seeing a spark of divinity in human beings tends to make them something more than creatures of God. This divine spark or seed, identified with reason, gives access to the divine order of the universe, from which the existence, the nature and the will of God can be known.

Stoicism therefore pointed to natural theology and, since reason was considered a universal attribute, it meant that all human beings have some natural understanding of God. The possibility of a religious syncretism was accordingly part and parcel of the Stoic intellectual world. The Stoics were commendably pious and spoke much about the gods and even about God, emphasizing divine providence and God's benevolence to the whole of humanity. The universal fatherhood of God formed an important part of their philosophical preaching. With it all they displayed a profound moral seriousness, stressing human moral responsibility. For them virtue consisted in following the dictates of reason, to which human passions were to be reduced by the will. The human spirit, by ridding itself of all emotions, can become part of the world of reason. The highest ideal is to become fully one with the *logos*.

The Stoics clearly had the same intellectualistic approach as Plato and Aristotle, but whereas the latter worked with a deistic notion of God, the Stoics ended in some form of pantheism. Pantheism literally means that all is God. He is the immanent force in creation to such an extent that everything reflects him. There is no need for such a God to reveal himself. He is already manifest in all the forces around us and in us. The idea of revelation is as foreign to pantheism as it is to deism.

## 2.2 GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND THE APOLOGIST KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The decisive meeting between Christianity and the Greek-Hellenistic world took place during the first two centuries after the birth of Christ, at a time when there was a revival of especially the ideas of Plato, which were taken up in a new philosophical system, the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and others. Plotinus was the most prominent of the Neo-Platonists and the Hellenistic philosopher who exercised the greatest influence on Christian thinkers in the third and fourth centuries. In his thinking the abstract and deistic character of the Hellenistic idea of God culminated in the notion that God is the unspeakable and unknowable One. In the last analysis God is incomprehensible.

The God of Greek philosophy was a deistic God, elevated so high above creation that communication with God, even knowledge about God, was impossible. The theologians of the new Christian religion found this idea of God very attractive. It was not only a useful ally against the crude and commonplace representation and description of God in the folk religion of their times, but also against the polytheism of the day. They felt that the Greek philosophical notion of God reflected the biblical message of the exaltation and sublimity of God high above the whole of creation. At the same time it confirmed that there is only one God.

We must keep in mind that the early Christian theologians were convinced that the God of the Holy Scriptures is the one and only true and universal God, not only the God of Israel, but the God of all peoples and nations, the God of the whole human race. How to proclaim this universal God in the Greco-Roman world was the problem that faced them. Being Greeks or Greek-speaking themselves, the answer to the problem was rather obvious: they could tell the people that they were proclaiming the God that the Greek philosophers were looking for without being able to give a name to Him or to explain who He really is. In this way they were in effect doing what the apostle Paul had done many years before at the Areopagus, when he told the people of Athens that he was informing them about the unknown God.

The first group of theologians who tried to mould the Christian message into the philosophical thought-patterns of their day is called the Apologists. The name given to them suggests that they tried to defend the Christian faith in a non-Christian world and that is, in fact, what they did. Being philosophers themselves, they were eager to present Christianity to the educated people as the highest and surest philosophy. Christianity, they said, is rational because it appeals to the common sense of all earnest, thinking and reasoning human beings. In fact, they continued, Christianity as a revelation coming from God is the verification and attestation of the rational religion that had been wanting hitherto and had been sought with such fervent desire. The Supreme Being of the philosophers is the God that revealed Himself through the Christian message. Christianity as an actual revelation brought the certainty they had been looking for.

The foregoing does not imply that the Apologists were uncritical of the philosophies of their times. In the second century Justin and Athenagoras thought very favourably of philosophy and philosophers, but in the succeeding times the judgment of Apologists such as Tatian and Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch, became ever harsher. Their criticism, however, was not directed against the underlying presuppositions as such of Greek philosophy - namely that it is possible for human reason to have a deductive knowledge of God on the basis of what it knows about the natural world - but against what they perceived as the incompleteness of that knowledge. Almost without exception the Apologists accepted that it was possible to reach a certain understanding of God's existence and nature without the assistance of some form of revelation from God's side. Certainly, none of them denied the necessity of revelation, but they all saw the revelation of Holy Scripture as a supplement to the knowledge gained by philosophy, the completion of the incomplete natural knowledge of God.

Most of the theologians of this period agreed that without revelation at least some knowledge of God could be gleaned from the world around us. The general conviction may be thus summarised: the knowledge of God that reason discovers

in creation is in itself true, although limited and incomplete and, therefore, in need of completion by the additional knowledge that only revelation from God's side can bring.

Did the theologians of the patristic period, however, accept that we have the capacity to understand the revelation of God in such a way that we have a complete knowledge of God, or did they concede that a lot about God will remain unknown, despite his revelation and despite everything the world around us tells us about Him? To enable us to give a proper answer to this question, we must return to our discussion of the natural theology that formed an inherent part of Greek philosophy.

As we have seen, the Greek philosophers considered it possible to affirm the existence of God as the First Cause and Origin of all, but they were also unanimous in stating clearly that a first cause cannot be defined or described, precisely because it is a first cause. Only those things caused by other things can be characterised. The Greeks, therefore, reached the dialectical conclusion that God as the first cause is also incomprehensible.

What does this really mean? How is it possible to know God and not to know Him at the same time? Does it mean that we are unable to make any statement about God apart from the fact that He exists as the Origin?

To these and other related questions the Greeks give a somewhat complicated, but still a very clear, answer: the world and nature tell us about the existence of God as the Origin, but to make any positive pronouncement about God on the basis of what we see and experience in the world and nature would be wrong, because then we attribute to God what can only be attributed to things which have a cause. By doing so, we make of God something that has a cause, and something that has a cause cannot be God. Being without a cause, God is completely unlike ourselves or the world we live in. When we speak about God we can only do so by denying that He is like anything else we know. Indeed, we do have knowledge of God, but it is negative knowledge and we can only talk about Him in a negative way.

This negative theology formed an intrinsic part of the natural theology of Greek philosophy. When the theologians of the early church used this kind of natural theology as a handy tool in the development of a Christian theology, they also took over the implicit acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of God. There were good reasons for doing so. In their negative theology, by stating the complete dissimilarity, the incomparability of God in relation to everything that is not God, the Greeks came closer to the Jewish-Christian message about God than in any other facet of their philosophy.

### 2.3 PLATONISM AND THE GOD OF THE MYSTICS

The patristic natural theology that we have discussed thus far has all the characteristics of an intellectual pursuit. It would, however, create a completely one-sided impression of what happened in the first few centuries if we do not appreciate that the Greek intellectualism which supplied the tools for the early development of Christian theology harboured within itself a strong mystical element. This is most evident in the works of Plotinus who, as we pointed out above, was one of the most influential philosophers at the time when the decisive meeting between Christianity and the Greek heritage took place.

Mysticism as a religious phenomenon can be characterized as a search for, and experience of, immediacy with God. Mystics are not content to know about God, they long for union with God. Nevertheless, how the mystics interpret the path and the goal of their quest depends on what they think about God, and that itself is influenced by what they experience. In the mystic the knowledge of God and the experience of God are indissolubly linked. This becomes clear in the type of Platonism of which Plotinus was the greatest exponent in the first three centuries after Christ.

Central to Platonism is its conviction of the essentially spiritual nature of a human being: by virtue of the spirituality of the human nature, participation in the realm of eternal truth, the realm of the divine, is possible. The soul properly belongs with God. Therefore the soul's search for God is conceived as a return, an ascent to God, thus realizing its own true nature.

In the philosophy of Plotinus the return of the soul to God fits into a hierarchical structure, a chain of being. The soul is the level of life as we know it, the realm of our senses and sense perceptions, of knowledge and reasoning. Beyond the soul there is the realm of the *nous* or intelligence, Plato's world of forms (the real world behind the world that we know and experience). Finally, beyond the realm of intelligence is the One. It is the source of all, it is beyond being. Nothing can be affirmed truly of the One. From the One everything emanates like warmth emanates from a fire, first the intelligence and then the soul. To this movement from the One corresponds the return to the One. The desire for unity with the One expresses itself in contemplation and results in the soul freeing itself from the body in order to return to the *nous*, and from the *nous* to the One. This return to the One must, however, not be compared with the climbing of a ladder. For Plotinus the higher plane is the more inward one. Ascent to the One is a process of withdrawal into oneself. As the soul ascends to the One, it enters more deeply into itself. Self-knowledge and experience of the ultimate are bound up together. But this experience is one-sided. Although everything emanates from the One, Plotinus takes it for granted that the One has no knowledge or awareness of anything below it. The awareness is on the side of the

soul, an awareness of union with the One. And this awareness is pure ecstasy, albeit a passing moment of rapture.

It was this mystical side of Neo-Platonism that, more than anything else, attracted some of the early Christian theologians. Amongst them was Origen (184-254) of Alexandria, who studied under the Neo-Platonist, Ammonius Saccas (as was the case with Plotinus), and must be considered the most important.

How can the mystical union with the incomprehensible One be reconciled with the Christian message that God revealed Himself in the incarnation of Jesus Christ? This is the question that Origen confronted. His answer to the question is a perfect example of how the Platonic philosophy of the day formed the framework within which the Christian idea of God and his revelation found expression.

The idea of the return of the soul to God is central to Origen's theology. Behind it lies his whole understanding of the world of spiritual beings and their destiny. Originally all spiritual beings were minds, all contemplating the eternal thoughts or ideas - the Platonic influence is unmistakable here - of the eternal and ultimate God. Most of these minds grew tired of this state of bliss. They fell and in falling became souls. As souls, they dwell in bodies which, as it were, arrest their fall and provide them with the opportunity to ascend again to contemplation of God. With this in view, the soul must pass progressively through a process first of learning virtue, next, renouncing the world and all that is in it, then ascending to contemplation of God.

Where does Christ come into all this?

The soul, according to Origen, responds to the coming of Christ in the incarnation by its conversion and baptism, thus starting the ascent to God. Soon the soul passes beyond faith in the incarnation in its ascent to God. Now the soul no longer contemplates the earthly work of Christ, but has moved into the realm of the ideas in God of which Christ as the Logos (Word) is the highest, all-embracing idea. Origen's mysticism centred on Christ is ultimately transcended by a mysticism centred on the eternal Word.

Origen's use of Scripture as a means to enter into communion with God must be seen within this framework. Origen's real concern was with the interpretation of Scripture. For him Scripture was the repository of all wisdom and truth about God. Understanding Scripture is not simply an academic exercise, but a religious experience of God. However, understanding Scripture means penetrating to the inner meaning behind its literal sense through allegory. This discovery of the inner meaning of Scripture comes to us from the Word in the form of a sudden awakening and illumination. A large part of the contemplation of God is the

discovery of the 'spiritual' meanings in Scripture. In this engagement we enter, according to Origen, more and more deeply into communion with God.

The synthesis that Origen achieved between Scriptures' testimony to God's revelation in Christ, on the one hand, and the mysticism of Platonism, on the other hand, is remarkable. In a certain sense the relationship between Greek natural theology and God's revelation in Christ, which we have dealt with above, is turned upside down. Most theologians of the early patristic period accepted that our natural, but limited and incomplete, knowledge of God needs the completion of the additional knowledge that comes to us by means of God's revelation. Origen, however, sees God's revelation in Christ as a preamble, a stage to pass through on the way to the mystical union with God and thus to the ultimate knowledge of God.

For Origen there is indeed the possibility of knowing God. Ignorance, darkness is a stage that is left behind in the soul's ascent to God. In God Himself there is no darkness. Knowing God in this context does not mean a knowledge about God that cancels out God's essential incomprehensibility, but knowledge of God which, for Origen, means being known by God, being transformed after his likeness, sharing in his divinity.

Although Origen was condemned in 400 AD (his doctrine of the fall of pre-existent souls was one of the reasons for his condemnation), his ideas of the spiritual life, contemplation and mystical union with God greatly influenced all future forms of mystical theology, more specifically the mystical theology and spirituality that developed within the monastic tradition.

The rise of monasticism in the fourth century is a sudden and startling development in the early church. The withdrawal of monks into the deserts of Egypt and Syria to devote themselves to prayer in a constant battle with the devil and the powers of darkness is, of course, in itself not without antecedents. The lifestyle of the Essenes, the Jewish ascetic sect that originated some two centuries before Christ and with which John the Baptist may have been associated, is one example. Moreover, the craving for solitude, in which the ascetic travels towards God through solitary self-mortification, usually in some wild and unpopulated place, is not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian tradition: early Buddhism has similar examples. Why the rise of monasticism, however, took place in this specific period in the life of the church is uncertain. Whatever the reasons for this phenomenon, the main characteristic of monastic life is a life devoted above all to prayer as the way to union of the soul with God.

For a thorough understanding of the mystical spirituality of early monasticism we must turn to Evagrius of Pontus (+399). Evagrius was a devotee of Origen's theology who participated in the lived tradition of the so-called desert fathers. Out of his own experience of hermitical life he worked out, within an Origenist

framework, a subtle and penetrating understanding of the monastic way of mystical prayer.

Evagrius distinguishes different levels of contemplation. The soul begins by contemplating the natural order of things, then (Origen's Platonism is here evident) it rises beyond this and discerns the principles which lie behind it. Since the universe is created by the Word of God, this is to enter into the mind of the Word. Finally there is the contemplation of the Holy Trinity. Here we move into the realm of prayer. For this state the soul must be stripped and naked, devoid of any thought that has to do with human passions. Evagrius calls this a state of apathy. The soul is not able to achieve this by itself. It is of grace, given by God and received by the soul. Prayer is, therefore, a communing of the mind with God and is effected by God's own condescension to the soul. Then the soul becomes a theologian, one who knows God and can speak about God. If you pray in truth, says Evagrius, you are a theologian.

Prayer is a state of knowledge. Although there is a boundless ignorance about God, this ignorance is continually yielding to knowledge in the communing of the mind with God. Although God remains essentially incomprehensible, there is always more to know of the infinity of God. In this respect Evagrius remains true to the Origenist tradition.

In the beginning of the sixth century a number of writings of an unknown author, possibly a Syrian monk, suddenly appeared. He was later known as Dionysius the Areopagite, because the writings were wrongly attributed to the Dionysius of Acts 17:34. What is certain, however, is the author's dependence on the writings of Proclus, a famous exponent of Plotinus' thoughts in the fifth century.

With him the mystical theology of the Greek fathers reached its conclusion. He moves away from the Origenist tradition in so far as he brings to fruition the idea of a negative theology that is dormant in any theology closely linked to Plotinus' mysticism in which God is depicted as the One who has no knowledge or awareness and of whom nothing can be confirmed.

Negative or apophetic mystical theology is a theology in which the soul flees from everything created and is united with the unknowable God in darkness. Dionysius distinguishes between such a negative theology and a symbolic theology, which are concerned with what we affirm about God. Neither of the two theologies, not even symbolic theology, is about how we can predicate qualities of God, but about how we can praise Him. The whole of creation has been brought into being by God to manifest his glory. Each creature, in fulfilling the role that God has assigned to it, responds to God in praise and worship. In this the creature affirms something about God. However, at the same time as we make affirmations about God, we must deny what we are affirming because, despite the fact that He is genuinely manifested in the world, God cannot be



known. The denial is, therefore, more fundamental than the affirmation. The reason is theological: God is unknowable in Himself. Thus symbolic theology points beyond itself to negative theology as the way of negation.

Both symbolic and negative theology are essentially mystical, for the end of both is assimilation to God, union with God. The soul starts off with love of God in his manifestations, but the more the soul knows and loves God in his manifestations, the more it longs for God in Himself. However, to reach God in Himself the soul must continuously negate these manifestations, thus moving through a sequence of hierarchies, where less and less can be expressed until ultimately the soul becomes completely speechless and is entirely united to the Inexpressible.

When speaking of the soul's ascent to God, Dionysius uses the analogy of Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai when he entered into "the thick darkness where God was" (Ex.20:21). Moses, he says, enters into the darkness of unknowing, a truly hidden darkness. Now, belonging wholly to that which is beyond all and united in passivity with Him who is completely unknowable, he knows by not knowing in a manner that transcends understanding. In the last analysis, the reality of the Divine is a language-defeating silence.

In his analogy of Moses' ascent to Yahweh on Mount Sinai, Dionysius follows the example of Gregory of Nyssa, described by some as the most Platonic of Christian Old Testament exegetes. In both Gregory and Dionysius the language and imagery strongly remind us of Plato's cave allegory of the philosopher's ascent to wisdom: the prisoner, released from the darkness in the cave and turned to face the light which throws the shadows in the cave, finds the excess of light a distress to his eyes which for a second time are plunged into darkness, now even deeper than the first. In both Plato's allegory and the Exodus story there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than the darkness of ignorance.

One of the most powerful effects of the Platonic' allegory on the mysticism of Dionysius is to be found in its resolute intellectualism. It is the ascent of the mind up the scale of negations which draws it into the cloud of unknowing, where it passes through to the darkness of union with the light, the knowing-unknowing vision of God.

Dionysius presents to us a mystical theology linked to a cosmology of hierarchical manifestations of God, all serving to express and effect the assimilation with God. Even the material and sensible are taken up in this hierarchical process. Hence Dionysius' sensitivity to the value of ritual and symbol, which represent the ever-climbing, unspeakable interpenetration of the divine and the human in the worship of God. In his own unique way Dionysius combines his mystical theology with the sacramental system of Byzantine theology.

The influence of Dionysius on Eastern Orthodox spiritual and mystical theology can hardly be overestimated, despite the fact that he has never enjoyed the prestige in the Greek Church that he was once accorded in the Latin Church. In the Greek tradition Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor rank above the Pseudo-Dionysius, but we must bear in mind that there is a close link between the three. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the three “Cappadocian Fathers” -better known for his contribution to the development of Trinitarian orthodoxy than for this mystical theology - influenced the Areopagite in a profound way, as we have seen, while Maximus is best known as a commentator on Dionysius.

Even in the Latin Church, the impact of Dionysius was slow to make its presence felt. One of the reasons is that he was not translated into intelligible Latin until the ninth century. This was done by John Scotus Erigena, to whom we shall return at a later stage.

With Dionysius we have reached the end of the development of the mystical theology of the Greek Fathers. Before we close this section, however, we must turn to the outstanding example of mystical theology amongst the Latin Fathers, Augustine of Hippo (354-450). There are good reasons for looking at Augustine as distinct from the Greek Fathers. Whereas the mystical theology of the Greek Fathers to a great extent determined the path along which the spirituality of the Eastern Church would eventually develop, Augustine, the greatest of all the Latin Fathers, decisively influenced the theology and spirituality of the Church in the West.

When we compare Augustine with the Greek Fathers we find a number of common features. Firstly, the ascetic ideals of the desert fathers found a deep resonance in the guilt-ridden heart of the young Augustine. When, after his baptism in 387, he returned to Africa, he established a monastery at Tagaste. Secondly, the influence of Plotinus in Augustine’s mystical writings, such as his *Confessiones*, is just as apparent, if not more so, than amongst the Greek Fathers.

We should, however, not be misled by these similarities. There are certain characteristics in Augustine’s mystical theology that distinguish him from trends in the East. He combines mysticism and monasticism in such a way that he succeeds in refuting the idea that monastic mysticism is a reaction against ecclesiasticism. He reconciles a profound personal relationship with God and a deeply conservative attitude towards the Church and its authority. Furthermore, in Augustine we find an almost unparalleled example of introspective self-scrutiny, whereas the mystical theology of the Eastern Fathers has a typical Greek atmosphere of intellectual objectivity and intellectualism, as we have observed in the teachings of the Pseudo-Dionysius. Finally, and more importantly, central to Augustine’s mystical theology is his doctrine of the

Mediator: only through the incarnation of the Word is the possibility of union with God opened to us. The revelation of God in the incarnation of Christ and his work on earth is not a phase the soul passes through in the quest for God as, for instance, we find in Origen.

Augustine has drunk deep of Plotinus. There is no doubt about it. Right at the beginning of the *Confessiones* we find the guiding principle of Augustine's mystical theology: "You have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in You". The heart's longing for God is a longing to return to the One who made it. There is a profound sense of restlessness, of being called by something, or rather Somebody, that lies beyond all created things.

In the mystical ascent to God there is the possibility of a fleeting, transitory experience of rapture or ecstasy, a foretaste of the joys of heaven, of the beatific vision in unity with God.

Plato had distinguished between the changing world that we experience through the senses, and the real spiritual world that we apprehend with the mind. He had a longing to escape from the shadows of the cave to the pure light of the sun of the intelligible world. Plotinus sees this real world as the interior world. As the soul ascends to the One, it enters more deeply into itself. This Augustine takes up. The place, where both he, Augustine, and God are to be found is in the depths of his own interiority: "But You were more inward than my own inwardness". This search for God in the inwardness of his own being is, however, initiated by God Himself. The discovery of God is in truth a rediscovery of God, the return to something already somehow known, to a knowledge somehow present within the searching itself. Augustine speaks in this regard of the memory (*memoria*). What does he mean by that?

Augustine had toyed with the Neo-Platonic ideas of remembering (*anamnesis*): the theory according to which all knowledge is a form of remembering of that which once, before birth, we fully knew, but in the cataclysm of birth, had been caused to forget. Augustine soon abandoned this idea of a pre-natal existence of the soul, but he held on to the Platonic idea of knowledge as a form of recognition, thereby emphasizing the initiative of God in the imparting of knowledge.

The primary agent in Augustine's seeking is not Augustine but God. It is because God is seeking out Augustine that Augustine seeks God. Thus it is that God is not to be sought outside of the self, for God is already there within, eternally more intimate to me than I am to myself. It is I who am outside myself: "but see, You were within (me) and I was outside (myself); it was there that I sought You". But it is from the God within that the power comes which draws me back into myself, and so to God. The self is not God, nor does it contain God. And yet, drawn by God it strains beyond itself to God.

The inwardness of God does not preclude Augustine from also using the metaphor of the ascent of the soul to God. God is not only the God within, but also the eternal light of Truth, who is above. The two metaphors of inwardness and ascent themselves intersect at the point where God and the self intersect, so that which is most interior to me is also that which is above and beyond me.

In the last analysis, Augustine reaches beyond Plotinus, and even fundamentally breaks with him. In Augustine's hands the longing for God is transformed from a human restlessness to our response to the incredible love and condescension of God. It is the movement of the Holy Spirit Himself in our hearts. Driven by its desire for God, the soul at last recognises God, not as one who can be found, but as one who discloses Himself in the soul. This disclosure of God through His Spirit is indissolubly linked with Christ, the Mediator and incarnate Word of God. Without God's condescension to us in the Christ event, we will either – in Augustine's view – be provoked to despair by our awareness of sin, or seek to ascend to God under the inspiration of pride and fail.

The incredible love and condescension of God in Christ call forth, in return, our love of God. Love is the final result of God's disclosure of Himself in the soul. For Augustine love determines the orbit into which human beings gravitate. Some rotate around themselves through self-love (*amor sui*), others around God through the love of God (*amor Dei*). Augustine's mysticism is permeated with the concept of love and in the final analysis determined by it.

When we look back at the way we have come in describing the mystical theology of the early church, we discover that, as in the case of the natural theology of the Apologists, we have here a dual source of knowledge of God. On the one hand, there is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but on the other hand, there is the natural tendency of the soul to return to the One from whence it had come. In its self-knowledge the soul reaches into itself and already touches God. God's revelation in the incarnate Word starts and assists this return of the soul to God. In this sense revelation is absolutely essential, but the question is whether it remains essential right up to the final beatific vision? Origen, for one, sees revelation as a phase that the soul passes through on its way to union with God. Augustine is definitely not of the same opinion. But even with him the danger lurks that at some stage God's revelation is left behind in the contemplation of the soul of God in Himself. The Platonist background of his theology makes this danger very real.

The consequence of a theology that deals with a dual source of knowledge of God is more often than not a speculative theology that has the tendency to go beyond the revelation in Christ and to deal with God in Himself. It is immaterial whether the second source of knowledge is natural reason or the mind's (soul's) spiritual affinity to God. In the section that follows we shall explore what effect

both the natural theology and the mystical theology of the early Fathers had on their view of the nature of God.

## 2.4 THE NATURE OF GOD

We have seen that negative theology formed an intrinsic part of the natural theology of Greek philosophy. The Greek Fathers did not hesitate to make use of this kind of theology. For them it signalled the complete inability of all kinds of human theologies to define God in any way. In the last analysis God is incomprehensible, inaccessible to the human intellect, dissimilar to anything that is not God. This position is confirmed in a mystical theology which denies its own affirmations about God when the soul finally is united with the unknowable God in darkness.

The Apologists had already tried to describe God's nature by way of denials. Athenagoras from Athens in the second half of the second century expresses allegiance to "one God, the uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassable, incomprehensible, uncontainable ...clothed in light and beauty and spirit and power indescribable...". Theophilus, bishop of Antioch in more or less the same period speaks in a similar fashion: "in glory He is uncontainable, in greatness incomprehensible, in height inconceivable, in might incomparable, in wisdom without peer, in goodness inimitable, in well-doing indescribable...". The list of negatives is long. God is not only incomprehensible, but He is also invisible, impassable, uncontainable, inconceivable, indescribable, incomparable, indivisible, indestructible, inimitable and immutable.

It is unnecessary to analyse and discuss each and everyone of these negative attributes of God. A few selected examples will be sufficient to give a proper insight into the way in which patristic thought dealt with the doctrine of God.

The incomprehensibility of God ranks foremost. As a matter of fact, it is the overarching concept that to a large extent defines all else that is said about God. Whatever we say about God, including the negations, is but an inadequate approximation of the incomprehensible.

The idea of the incomprehensibility of God is the direct consequence of the Greek Fathers' natural theology. Affirming the existence of God as the First Cause leads to the dialectical conclusion that the First Cause is incomprehensible, precisely because it is a first cause. This is stated clearly by Hippolytus, presbyter in Rome in the beginning of the third century, when he says that the primary originating principle is both indefinable and incomprehensible.

As the First Cause God is infinitely greater than the creation. Incomprehensibility is associated with infinity, as when the same Hippolytus refers to the

incomprehensible as possessing neither beginning nor end. But infinitude, as well as being incomprehensible quantitatively, is also incomprehensible intellectually. The idea expresses something that in the full sense lies beyond the measure of the human mind. God's wisdom ranges far beyond anything that human wisdom can encompass, just as His creative power infinitely transcends all human endeavours and achievements. He is incomprehensible in the magnitude of His deeds, observes Clement of Rome: "By His most all-magnitudinous might He established the heavens, and by His incomprehensible wisdom He set them in order". But He is not only incomprehensible in the greatness of His works of creation. He is incomprehensible in Himself. He is beyond place and time and description and understanding (Clement of Alexandria).

From his incomprehensibility follows that God is incomparable, inimitable, inconceivable and indescribable. The ascription of form and figure to the being of God is denied by all the Greek Fathers. They are well aware that the Bible refers to the form (*morfe*) of God (for example, in Phil. 2:6), but they argue that the word 'form' should be understood in a sense that is applicable to God alone. Configuration implies existence in physical space. In relation to God it means the limitation of the Infinite, which is impossible. The Infinite cannot be subject to diagrammatic boundaries. The Immaterial must be approached immaterially. Chrysostom, accordingly, argues that when the Epistle to the Hebrews says that Christ sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, the Bible does not confine God to a place, nor does it configure or materialise Him, but merely indicates the identity of Christ's glory with that of the Father. The Greek Fathers, it is clear, fully acknowledge that we can only speak about God in a metaphorical sense.

The tension between the philosophical heritage shared by the Greek Fathers, on the one hand, and the metaphorical and anthropomorphic language of the Bible in its speaking of God, on the other hand, can best be described with reference to the concept of the impassability of God. The great difficulty the Greek Fathers had in transplanting the biblical message onto Greek soil is most aptly illustrated by the idea that God is impassable (*apatheis*), incapable of being swayed by passion. Here, as nowhere else, the inherent strain between a negative theology and the uninhibited affirmative biblical language about God become unmistakably apparent.

The idea of divine impassability is very much Stoic in origin. Stoicism, which held sway from approximately the third century before Christ until the end of the second century after Christ, preferably described the divine in terms of the world reason or *logos* as the regulating and harmonising principle in nature. The human mind participating in this world reason was expected to strive towards the deepest possible union with the divine nature. This could only be achieved by the human mind if and when it had reached a state of apathy (*apatheia*). The

ethical ideal of Stoic apathy was soon transposed onto the Greek idea of God. God became the immutable and impassable Being.

Although the Christian theologians of the first centuries distanced themselves from Stoic pantheism, insisting for instance that God is uncontained spatially, Stoicism exercised no little influence on their theism. The ideas of the immutability and impassability of God soon became an inseparable part of the image they had of God. God is morally supreme, incapable of being influenced or diverted by forces and passions that are part of human life and this world.

The impassability and the concomitant immutability of God is a recurring theme amongst the Greek Fathers. God, says Clement, is changeless and impassable, without anger and without desire. We hear the same from Methodius, who defends the position that the act of creation did not bring about any change in the being of God Himself. This, however, does not mean that God is inactive or uninterested, or that He insulates Himself in his transcendence from his creation like Aristotle's First Mover. They rather emphasise that God's will is determined from within instead of being swayed from outside. If it were possible that God's will could be influenced by the needs and the claims of his creation, He would forfeit his absoluteness; He would be dependent on the universe that He Himself had created.

The language of the Bible, more specifically the language of the Old Testament, is of course very different. Not only is God portrayed in very human terms as someone who knows love, anger, sorrow and even affliction, but He is also a God who reacts to the deeds of His creatures. No Jew would ever have imagined that these metaphors could be taken literally. The Greek Fathers by contrast were dealing with people trained in a Greek tradition, accustomed to physical representations of divine forms. They, therefore, strongly felt the need to make it very clear that the humanlike descriptions of God and his actions were to be interpreted in a spiritual sense. Quite remarkably they also recognized that attributing moral qualities to God could more easily lead to misconceptions than would be the case with physical characteristics. The latter could more easily be recognised as anthropomorphisms. Clement of Alexandria makes this very clear when he expressly denies the ascription of mental variations to God, such as emotions of joy or pity or grief; to ascribe such passions to the impassable God is inadmissible.

More than anybody else Clement struggled with the notion of the incomprehensibility of God, on the one hand, and the biblical anthropomorphic language, on the other. The incomprehensible God cannot be described as He really is, but only as human beings are capable of hearing within the limitations of their creaturely existence. The language of the prophets is, therefore, a saving concession to the weakness of human understanding. Let no one suppose,

argues Clement, that when the Bible mentions hands and feet and mouth and eyes and exhibitions of wrath that these terms express passions of God. Each of these terms has its own meaning which should be explained in an allegorical fashion as the occasion arises. As we have seen in the exposition of Origen's mystical theology, this allegorical penetration into the inner spiritual meaning of Scripture comes to us from the eternal Word in the form of a sudden awakening and illumination that leads us more and more deeply into communion with God without, however, cancelling God's essential incomprehensibility.

In the final analysis the emphasis of the Greek Fathers on the impassability of God is but another way of saying that God is incomprehensible. After all, human comprehension is indissolubly part of the forces and passions that commonly hold sway in creation and among the human race.

The incarnation and the passion of Jesus Christ, of course, confronted the early Fathers with a problem unforeseen by the Greek philosophers in the latter's assertion of the impassability of God. The question was whether it could be said that the incarnate divine Logos suffered as the Logos, or that the passion of Jesus Christ was restricted to his human nature. In the first instance, the acceptance of the passion of the divine Logos, the impassability of God could hardly be sustained. In the second instance, the unity of the Person of Christ could be threatened.

Important Christological issues were at stake here in which, during the first two centuries, the Greek Fathers had to contend with the Gnostics who, in their efforts to mould the Christian gospel according to the religious philosophy of the Greeks, abandoned the Old Testament and its anthropomorphic image of God. As far as Christ is concerned, they had two alternative theories: firstly, the idea of a merely apparent humanity of Christ and, secondly, a distinction between Jesus who underwent the passion and the Christ who remained untouched thereby. Over against them Irenaeus, the great anti-Gnostic Father, emphasizes the unity of the Person of the incarnate Christ and the reality of his suffering. For him the invisible God became visible in Christ, the incomprehensible God comprehensible and the impassable God passable. But, and this must be emphasized, for Irenaeus this was a Christological issue. It never occurred to Irenaeus to look for any archetype of human passability in the divine nature.

Most of the Greek Fathers, in one way or the other, concurred with Irenaeus with respect to the impassability of God. The only real challenge during the first three centuries came from a group of theologians (of whom Praxeas, Noethus and Sabellius were the most prominent) who argued for a modalistic doctrine of the Trinity, namely the idea that God revealed Himself in three successive modes as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Son the Father became incarnate, suffered and died. Called patripassianism (*pater* = father; *passio* = passion), it was



strenuously opposed by inter alia Tertullian and later officially rejected by the early Church.

In the sixth century the idea of a suffering God resurfaced with the rise of the theopaschitism (*theos* = God; *paschein* = to suffer) of John Maxentius and others. The basic slogan associated with the movement was “one of the Trinity suffered” (*unus de trinitate passus est*). The formula can be interpreted in a perfectly orthodox sense, but there were fears that it could be misleading and confusing, endangering the impassability of God. The formula eventually fell into disuse.

In our discussion of the impassability of God we have stated that there is no sign that divine impassability was taught with any view to minimising the interest of God in his creation or his care or concern for the world that He had made. For the Greek Fathers the impassability of God is closely allied to that of his immutability. In a sense the former logically depends on the latter. The concept of impassability is part of the larger question of the divine self-consistency. God is, in the fullest sense, the same yesterday, today and for ever. God as the Absolute Being, says Eusebius, quoting from a statement derived from Plato’s *Republic*, is simple and unchangeable and in the self-same form; He neither voluntarily abandons his identity, nor is He compelled to do so by external influences. Clement speaks of the real God who continues in identity of righteous goodness, while Alexander of Alexandria refers to the ingenerate Father as immutable and invariable, always in the same identical mode of existence, and admitting neither progress nor diminution.

God’s creative activity does not affect his immutability. It is repeatedly asserted by the Fathers that God is the author not merely of matter but of design, and disposes all according to his will. The sculptor who designs can also change his design without it being necessary for himself to change. In this sense God is immutable. God alone, says Cyril of Alexandria, is immutable by nature. We, on the other hand, are subject to change.

The immutability of God is also closely linked with his indivisibility. In our exposition of the mystical theology of the Greek Fathers in their heavy dependence on the thought patterns of Plotinus, we have seen that God had originally often been described as ‘One’. Although this designation of God undoubtedly had been motivated by a firm resolve to reject claims of false gods, the Greek Fathers were nevertheless of the opinion that it also provided them with an indication of God’s essential nature, albeit in a negative sense. For them composite objects harbour the idea of transience. All around them they saw change and decay, because they lived in a world of composite construction, impermanent and liable to transformation and ultimate dissolution. For the Greek Fathers the philosophical principle in this regard was indisputable: the ground and author of the whole multiplicity of creation must be an ultimate

unity. Athenagoras states clearly that God is one, but unlike a human individual, who is created and corruptible, composite and divisible into parts, God is unbegotten and impassable and indivisible, and therefore not composed of parts. We find the same conviction expressed in the writings of Origen, Chrysostom and most other Greek theologians.

The incomprehensibility, impassability and immutability of God are the three negative attributes of God that most markedly shaped and influenced the Greek Fathers' image of God. But although they tended to use abstract forms with a negative meaning, their minds were nevertheless far from being bounded by merely negative conceptions. The negative forms are enriched with an infinite wealth of positive associations. The negative prefixes they used to describe the divine nature in the deepest sense testify to the divine freedom and independence which allow God to act according to his own nature and will. In this way they often made use of the philosophy of the day to repudiate misconceptions about the Christian God they were proclaiming. Stoic pantheism is a case in point. Stoicism exercised no little influence on Christian theism, but early Christianity had to reject decisively the idea that the world is necessary to God's own existence, or co-extensive with Him. Their conviction, for instance, that God is uncontained spatially conveys a very necessary warning against the pervasive pantheism of Stoic philosophy. Although, as we have seen, the early Fathers believed that the created universe implicitly reveals God through His works, they also insisted that He is infinitely greater than his creation.

Early Christianity sought both to establish and safeguard the supremacy of God in ways appropriate to a people trained to think in the schools of Greek philosophy. God was firmly held to transcend this world, not only in a philosophical, but also in a moral sense. In this way they presented the truth of the spiritual nature and moral holiness of God, which had been taught by the Hebrew prophets as an attribute of his divinity.

Yet the Greek Fathers' rejection of Stoic pantheism by no means implies that they viewed God's relation with the world as one of Epicurean remoteness. They were eclectic in their choice of philosophies, at all times looking for philosophical ideas that could express the essence of Scriptural teaching. Thus, denying that God is extended in the physical universe in any material sense, they affirmed that He pervades it as the control and guide of its existence. The divine presence everywhere and always pervades, as it sustains, the universe.

Although the Greek Fathers were careful in their choice of philosophical concepts as vehicles for their theological reflections, they faced the ever-present danger of creating a complicated philosophical image of God that obscured the simple apostolic message of a God of love who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The greatest danger of all was that, despite the wealth of positive

associations that accompanied the negative images of God, the overwhelmingly negative approach to the nature of God in both the natural and the mystical theologies of the first few centuries could jeopardise the whole notion of revelation.

If the concept of revelation is taken seriously, it is impossible to accept that God can only be known in a negative way. After all, revelation means the uncovering of something or someone. Revelation by definition means that positive things can be said about God. If after his revelation God remains incomprehensible, He might as well not have bothered to reveal Himself. At this point it becomes clear how difficult it was for the early Christian theologians to blend the Christian message with Greek philosophy. However, instead of rejecting the natural theology of Greek philosophy, they allowed the two thought-patterns to co-exist side by side in their theology. On the one hand, they affirmed the incomprehensibility of God as belonging to his very nature. On the other hand, they confessed that God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. But if God was essentially incomprehensible, how can we be sure that the revelation in Christ really tells us the truth about God? Is it not possible that behind the revelation there lurks a God that differs in essence from the One we meet in the revelation brought about by the Christ event?

Any attempt on the part of patristic theology to fully synthesise Greek natural theology and the gospel message would have resulted in a very serious weakening of the trustworthiness of the biblical revelation. Fortunately most of the theologians from this period resisted such attempts. For them Jesus Christ was never seen as a mere illustration of, or a supplement to, one or the other philosophical concept of God, but as God's ultimate revelation and self-explanation. This is the reason why, during the whole period up to the end of the fourth century AD, the main focus of theological discourse was directed towards establishing, once and for all, the Godhead of Christ. If Christ was God Himself - God from God as the Synod of Nicaea declared in 325 AD - the reliability of the revelation in Him was put beyond doubt.

### 2.5 THE GODHEAD OF CHRIST AND THE TRINITY

Referring to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the New Testament displays an understanding of God which is not the product of theological reflection. It is rather a more unreflective and spontaneous response to Jesus' claim of Divine Sonship and the experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit as the confirmation of that claim. This new language of the Christian faith, however, could not escape theoretical and theological reflection, because it was spoken against the background of the Old Testament's message that God is one.

After all, how can a triadic statement about God be reconciled with this most basic of assertions about Him?

For the early Christian Church such a clarification of their faith was even more urgent in the missionary situation in which they found themselves. The Christian faith inherited from Israel the assertion that there is one God - "there is one God and Father of all" (Eph 4,6). Confronted with the pagan polytheism of the Greek world, they continued to proclaim the one Christian God. In this they gladly made use of the monotheism of Greek philosophy. They considered the Greek philosophical notion of God an ally, because it not only reflected the divine transcendence and sublimity of God high above the whole of creation, but it also confirmed that there is only one God. How could they then say that God is both one and three? If there is one God and this one God is the Father, how can the Son and the Holy Spirit also be truly God?

It should be noted that the idea of the Holy Spirit in the triadic formula of the New Testament did not create any serious problems for the early Christian theologians of the first four centuries. Already by the second century references to the Holy Spirit had become more and more infrequent. They simply took it for granted that, since the Spirit is the Spirit of God, the matter is obvious and requires little further argument. The status of Jesus Christ as the Son, however, was by far the more difficult problem to solve.

From the earliest moment of theological reflection the divinity of Jesus Christ is assumed. The expression 'the one God' as referring to the Father continues, but the title 'God' is now much more frequently used of Christ. The problem the Fathers had to solve is not whether He is God, but how, within the monotheistic system they inherited from the Old Testament, preserved in the New Testament, and pertinaciously defended against the heathen, it is still possible to maintain the unity of God, while insisting on the deity of one who is distinct from God the Father.

### 2.5.1 The Logos Theology of the Apologists

The evidence for the acceptance of the deity of Jesus Christ in the first two centuries is overwhelming. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch who was martyred in Rome in approximately 115 AD, led the way, referring to "our God, Jesus the Christ, conceived by Mary", asserting the unity of the will of the Father "and Jesus Christ our God", and, quite remarkably, asking to be permitted "to be an imitator of the passion of my God". So strong is the emphasis on the deity of Christ that, perhaps unintended, God is made the subject of Jesus' suffering on the cross. We find similar expressions in the writings of Tatian, who speaks of the God that has suffered, and Melito, who says that God suffered at the hands of Israel.

Despite protests here and there, the tradition remained firm. The theological problem, however, became more pressing: how to maintain the deity of Christ and the oneness of God at the same time. The Apologists of the second century were the first to seriously address this problem. Characteristically they turned to Greek philosophy to provide them with the necessary theoretical framework. They found it in the idea of the *logos* as used in the Stoic and Platonic philosophies of this period.

As we saw in 2.1, Stoicism was a materialist, pantheist philosophy which understood the universe to consist of a shapeless substance, brought to order and harmony by the indwelling principle of rationality, called the *logos*, or rather the *logos spermatikos*, the seminal or pervasive *logos*. This *logos spermatikos* attained its highest form in the rational soul of the human being.

Platonic philosophy also made use of the *logos* concept, but in contrast to its role in Stoic pantheism, it had become part of the more theistic and religious direction into which the Platonism of this period had developed. Plato's utterly transcendent Supreme Being has now become more like God in that it relates to the world of our sense experience through his *logos* or his mind as his intermediary. As in Stoicism, this *logos* of God also pervades all reality and finds its highest expression in the human mind.

The identification of Jesus Christ with the Logos of Greek philosophy by the Apologists should not come as a surprise to us. Not only were they convinced that the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel allowed them to do so, but they also had before them the example of Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher of the first century AD, who in his pioneering efforts to accommodate the world of biblical language and thought, on the one hand, and Hellenistic philosophy, on the other, identified the *logos* of philosophy with the Word of God. Although Philo spoke about the *logos* in very personal terms, he never saw it as a personal being distinct and separate from God. The Apologists, however, did not hesitate to identify Jesus Christ with the Logos of God, yet distinct from God the Father. But if the Son is the Logos of God, Himself also truly called God, but yet distinct from God, how can one still speak of one God?

To answer this difficult question the Apologists invoked a blend of Stoic and Platonic *logos* philosophy. From Stoicism they borrowed the distinction between the immanent word (*logos endiathetos*) and the expressed word (*logos prophorikos*). This distinction is then applied to the Son as the Logos. The Logos always existed in and with God the Father as God's immanent word or mind. The Logos was therefore with God and God Himself from the beginning. When God decided to create - the influence of Platonic philosophy now becomes evident - He uttered or expressed this immanent word. The immanent word thus became the expressed word, existing alongside God, but still being God. Though two

distinct and successive stages of existence are attributed to the Logos, it is the very same Logos that subsists in both. The identity and continuity of the Logos are emphasised and any idea that generation of the Logos meant separation from God is fully rejected.

Justin is a good example of the Apologists' thinking in this regard. He describes the Logos as the Father's intelligent or rational thought that became flesh in Jesus Christ. In his Dialogue with Trypho he makes it clear that the incarnated Logos is distinct from the Father, not only in name, as the light from the sun, but numerically as well. The Father generates Him by an act of his will in order to create and reveal through Him. He is thus God's "offspring" and his "sole-begotten", but not separated from Him.

Like Justin, so Tatian and Theophilus of Antioch see the Logos as the Father's instrument in creating and governing the universe and in making the human being in God's image, and like Justin, so Theophilus emphasises that the emission of the Logos from the Father does not mean separation. God, says Theophilus, in bringing forth his Logos did not thereby empty Himself of his Word, but having begotten Him consorts with Him always.

The philosophical categories of Stoicism used by the Apologists unfortunately opened up the possibility of misunderstanding their intentions, namely that the Son is a lesser God, subordinate to the Father. Justin and Theophilus mark the generation of the Logos as a "beginning" and Tatian entertains the idea that at the creation the immanent Logos sprang forth from the Father (all perfectly good Stoic terminology) as "the first-begotten work of the Father." It is generally accepted that what the Apologists mean by "beginning" and "first" is that the Logos is the origin of creation through whom all things were made, and not that the Logos is itself a creature. But by insisting that the generation of the Logos has been the result of a free decision and wilful act on the part of God the Father, they create the impression that the Logos only became a distinct personal being from that moment onwards. But prior to this moment, as the immanent Logos or Word, was the Logos then also a subsistent being distinct from the Father, or was He simply an attribute of God?

The Apologists unfortunately fail to clarify the status of the immanent Logos and their insistence that the Logos only becomes the Son of God from the moment of his coming forth conveys the impression that He only becomes a personal being, distinct from the Father, from that moment onwards. The Logos of the Apologists existed before the creation, but there was a time when He did not subsist as a personal being. The inevitable conclusion is that the Son has a lesser status than the Father. The Stoic distinction between the immanent and expressed word when applied to the Son lends itself to a subordinationist interpretation, in a way perhaps not intended by the Apologists.

The subordinationist tendency of the Apologists unfortunately not only reflects the inadequacy of Stoic philosophy as a vehicle of Christian theology, but also the deistic one-sided emphasis on the absolute transcendence of God of Greek philosophy as a whole. The Apologists found it difficult to accept the idea that God Himself, through the incarnation, could become part of the world. They therefore try to bridge the gap between a transcendent God and the world by putting the Logos as an intermediary being between Him and his creation. But by doing so they jeopardise the reliability of the revelation in Jesus Christ as the Logos become flesh. With such an intermediary being is it possible to speak about the self-revelation of God? Does God not, in the last analysis, remain an unknown God, lurking somewhere behind the revelation in the flesh of the Logos?

Nevertheless, the Apologists represent the first step forward in the development of the Christian doctrine of a triune God by emphasising that the Logos is a Person in a unique relationship to the Person of God the Father. In this emphasis on the personal subsistence of the Logos we also find the first indication of a willingness to distance themselves from their Greek philosophical heritage, if necessary.

The Apologists are less expressive on the Person of the Holy Spirit than on the Father and the Son. They see Him as the prophetic Spirit, someone who comes to dwell in the souls of the believers. Athenagoras calls Him an outpouring of God and, together with a number of other Apologists, liken the Spirit to a ray of sun going forth from the Father and returning to Him. The debate on the status of the Holy Spirit as a personal being was still to come.

### 2.5.2 Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Third Century

The generation of Christian writers who immediately succeeded the Apologists in the first half of the third century inherited the theological position of the Apologists and accepted it in general terms. By now, however, the theological context within which they found themselves, had changed. A series of erroneous teachings had come to the fore, forcing them to deal with these heresies in no uncertain terms. Although some of these theologians also wrote apologies for the Christian religion, they saw their main task as being of an anti-heretical nature, exposing the erroneous teachings for the heresies which they were.

The roots of some of the heresies which had become prominent in this period go back to the first century and can even be found contested in some form or the other in the New Testament. Dormant in the first century, they announced themselves with great vigour in the second and early third centuries. We refer in this regard to Gnosticism, an umbrella term embracing many diverse types of speculative religious philosophies that had their origins in the postulate of an absolute dualism between spirit and matter, the first representing good and the

second evil. For the Gnostic the spirit or the human soul is a captive of the material world due to a series of descents from the Supreme Being or Pleroma (the All-Embracing Fullness) involving a descending series of lesser divine-like beings called aeons. Release for the soul from its material captivity can only come about by an esoteric *gnosis* (knowledge) of its situation and how it all transpired. Some sort of divine emanation or saviour conveys this knowledge.

In the various forms of Christian Gnosticism attempts were made to accommodate the religious philosophy of the Gnostics within the framework of the Christian gospel. Here Christ is portrayed as the divine Saviour emanating from God, who descended upon the man Jesus either at his birth or baptism, and from whom He departed before his passion and death. This type of view of Christ is called docetism, the denial of Christ's true humanity. The Gnostic portrayal of a non-incarnate Christ who was a divine emanation or aeon inferior to the Supreme God inevitably infiltrated the early Church and exposed the early theology of the Fathers to the danger of subordinationism.

Subordinationism is a form of thought which asserts that there is one Supreme Being or God. At the same time, however, it accepts the existence of many or few lesser divine figures who serve to mediate between God and this world. To a certain extent this idea represents religious philosophy's answer to the heavy Greek emphasis on the transcendence of God.

We have come across the same tendency towards subordinationism in the theology of the Apologists, but theirs was of a different nature. In their attempts to explain the status of Christ as the Logos of God, they used Stoic philosophical categories which made them vulnerable to subordinationist misinterpretations. In later orthodox theology these problems were gradually sorted out. Subordinationism of Gnostic origin, however, was far more dangerous and had to be strenuously resisted. The name that immediately presents itself to us in this regard is that of Irenaeus.

Irenaeus of Lyons (d.c.200) is arguably the most important Church Father of the first three centuries of Christianity and a central figure of Christian orthodoxy during this period. His writings, widely available both in the original Greek and very early Latin translations, were immensely influential in the whole Church. Far more than the Apologists, he gives more attention to the role of not only the Son, but also the Holy Spirit. He wishes to instruct the Church and, especially in his *Against the Heresies*, he warns against the distortions of the gospel by the Gnostics.

The basic themes of his theology Irenaeus develops from concepts already used by the Apologists. He describes Christ as the Logos of God who is the Son of God, the agent through whom God the Father created, who spoke through the prophets and finally became incarnate in Jesus Christ. However, in a most



significant development, he moves away from the Apologists' use of the Stoic distinction between God's immanent and external word. He finds the usage of the Stoic terminology and concept prejudicial to the cause of Christian orthodoxy in its battle against Gnosticism. The idea that the Logos was generated by the Father with a view to his creating activity can, in Irenaeus' opinion, easily lead to the Gnostic thought that the Logos is an aeon, emanating from God, and therefore a lesser God. He rejects any suggestion that the Logos had a beginning and insists that the Logos always was the Son of God and did not become such only at the moment of utterance. The Son always co-existed with the Father. He belongs to the eternal being of God. The Father is God, and the Son is God, he says in his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, for whatever is begotten of God is God. And in *Against the Heresies* we hear that Christ is in Himself in his own right God and Lord.

The way in which Irenaeus tried to safeguard the deity of Christ against the Gnostic heresy is one of his very important contributions to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early Church. The most striking feature of Irenaeus' theology of the Triad, however, lies in his view on the Holy Spirit.

We have already noted the scarcity of material on the Spirit in the theology of the Apologists. The rising influence of the Gnostic sects changed all this. Characteristic of the early (and later) Christian sects, a lot of emphasis was laid upon the Holy Spirit and his workings in the life of an individual. They, the Gnostics, considered themselves to be the true flock, because they alone possessed the true saving knowledge, bestowed upon them by the Holy Spirit. They were the true spirituals as opposed to the ordinary everyday Christians. This development forced Irenaeus to give more attention to the role and status of the Holy Spirit. The way in which he did this is quite remarkable: against the danger of the subjectivist and individualistic concept of the work of the Holy Spirit as manifested in particularly the Gnostic sect of the Valentinians, Irenaeus looked upon the Spirit within the context of God's history of salvation. The life-giving fruits of the work of Christ are conveyed to the Church by the Holy Spirit. He calls the Spirit the Spirit of the Father, who through baptism leads the Church to the life of God and renews it into the newness of Christ.

This emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit within the history of salvation is typical of Irenaeus. It forms part of his view of the "economy" of God. With this concept Irenaeus describes the activity of God in creation and in salvation history. The word "economy" originates from Irenaeus. Derived from the two Greek words *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (law) the idea of the "economy" of God can loosely be described as "the administration of the house" of God, "house" meaning in this instance God's creation and "administration" the way in which God not only maintains his creation, but also and above all saves it through the activities of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in salvation history. In a passage in

his *Against the Heresies* he describes these activities of the Spirit and the Son in salvation history as the preparation of human beings by the Spirit to be led by the Son to the Father, who bestows upon them eternal life. Emphasising the economy of salvation history, Irenaeus' theology is less speculative than that of his predecessors, but it is important to note that he fully realises that the distinctions of the Triad as revealed in the economy of salvation history must somehow represent distinctions in the being of the one God Himself.

How does he understand the latter distinction? Remarkably, Irenaeus refuses to speculate. The only thing he knows is that it would be wrong to think about this distinction in the subordinationistic way of the Gnostics, as if the Son and the Spirit should be seen as emanations from the Father, like sparks from the fire. But when someone asked Irenaeus what then - with reference to the Son - the nature of the eternal generation is, he answered bluntly that it is something indescribable. In the final analysis God is incomprehensible and so are the distinctions within the one God.

The approach of Irenaeus to the mystery of the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is often referred to as an economic trinitarianism. The main emphasis falls upon the distinctions between them in the economy of salvation and there is an obvious reluctance to speculate on how these distinctions within the divine nature must be understood. This economic trinitarianism became a mark of orthodoxy in the third century, considered a firm bastion against the subordinationist heresy of the Gnostics. This, however, did not satisfy Origen of Alexandria, the most original theologian of this period. As a dedicated Neo-Platonist who had no reluctance to speculate, he effectively abandoned the economic approach and tried to clarify the triadic distinctions within the eternal being of God.

Origen undoubtedly did not intend to diverge from the orthodox position in its emphasis on the divine equality of the Triad. He wanted to remain true to the rule of faith as he had learnt it in the church of Alexandria. He even rejected the applicability to the Trinity of the Stoic distinction of the immanent and expressed Word, which in the past had led so easily to a subordinationist view of the Son. But the favourite Platonist image that he used for the generation of the Son from the Father, namely that of light proceeding from the sun, created the impression that he was in fact a subordinationist. This impression is strengthened by passages in which he expressly speaks about the subordination of the Son to the Father. On the other hand, he is just as emphatic as Irenaeus about the eternal generation and distinct existence of the Son. A simple, succinct formula from his *On First Principles* says that there never was when He was not. In describing how the unbegotten Father becomes Father of the only-begotten Son, he writes about an eternal and everlasting begetting, as brightness is begotten of light.

The metaphors Origen uses, the light proceeding from the sun, or brightness from light, lead to a certain ambiguity. The eternal nature of the generation of the Son is thereby affirmed, but it remains doubtful if the Son is of the same divine nature as the Father. The Son is God, but his divinity is derived and not original. Origen, in fact, commenting on the opening verses of the Fourth Gospel, points out that God is there called 'the God' (*ho theos*) because, as God in Himself (*autotheos*), God's divinity is His own, not derived, whereas the Word (Logos) is simply called God (*theos*) because his divinity, though real and true, is derived from the supreme God.

Nevertheless, Origen confesses a Trinity. The term Trinity (*trias*) occurs a number of times in his writings. The Father generates the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. For the first time in a systematic exposition of the Christian doctrine the three members of the Trinity are described as three *hupostases*. In the later controversies surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity the term *hupostasis* (the singular of *hupostases*) would take on different meanings at different times, creating a lot of confusion. For Origen, however, within the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, it signifies the distinct and individual existence of the members of the Trinity. It corresponds to the word *persona* used by Tertullian in the Latin Church in the West, as we shall soon see.

It is noteworthy that Origen is less speculative about the status and the role of the Holy Spirit than about the Son. Apart from maintaining that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, most of his discussion of the Spirit is devoted to the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation history. The Spirit is the Spirit of the prophets and the apostles, the source of biblical inspiration and of the gifts that enrich the community of the faithful. Above all, the Spirit is the Spirit of sanctification. The influence of Irenaeus is clearly evident in this emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the economy of the history of salvation.

Origen was not declared a heretic because of his standpoint on the Holy Trinity. There were other reasons for the Church's eventual judgement of Origen. His suspected subordinationism was less obvious than that of others. But this did not prevent many calling him the forerunner of Arius, who eventually became the classic example of subordinationism.

Today Arius' name is a byword for heresy, but we should not underestimate the contribution of the Arian controversy in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. In quite a remarkable way Arius succeeded in bringing to the surface the irreconcilable tension between the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the Hellenistic philosophical framework used to express this faith, on the other. The intellectual climate in Alexandria, where the conflict broke out in the beginning of the fourth century between Arius and his bishop Alexander, had changed

significantly since Origen's day, and there was a growing conviction that the God of Plato could hardly be used to explain in theological terms the being and nature of the God of the Bible. Simultaneously a clear shift away from the speculative nature of Origen's theology in favour of an approach more in line with the soteriological emphasis of the economy of salvation history could be discerned.

In the first instance Arius breaks decisively with the Platonic scheme of emanation used by Origen. He makes it quite clear that origin from God means creation and nothing else. Only God exists eternally; everything else is created and has a beginning. The ambiguity of the status of the Son in Origen's theology therefore falls away. The terms: origin, procession, generation are simply theological synonyms for creation. The Son is a creature of God the Father. Arius wants to emphasise the essential difference between the unique God and all his creatures. There is no-one that can compare with Him. In a letter to Bishop Alexander he writes that God is the only one without beginning, the only unbegotten, the only eternal. But God is also the indivisible One. To give anybody else this status would mean dividing the invisible, thus negating the whole concept of God.

As a creature of God the Son has a beginning. There was a time when he was not, says Arius. He is infinitely inferior to God, but at the same time He is exalted above all other creatures. He is the first and pre-eminent of all God's creatures and the one through whom all else was made. The key passage to which Arius refers in this regard is the description of the divine wisdom in Proverbs, where it is stated explicitly that God had created Wisdom at the very beginning as the agent of creation

Apart from these theological considerations, Arius also has very clear soteriological reasons for his view on the status of Christ. Arius sees redemption in moral terms, as a breaking of the moral weakness and sin that prevents the human race from union with God. Christ as the incarnate Word of God is the one who achieved this union with God and in so doing makes it possible for all to share in this union. But since He succeeded in achieving this union with God, it speaks for itself that He could not have been one with God from the beginning. He had to be less than God. From the very beginning God had foreseen that, when the Word became human, He would obey Him perfectly and thus achieve union with Himself. So God conferred divinity upon Jesus and adopted Him as his Son.

Although Arius' God is close to the God of the Greek philosophers in his transcendence and remoteness, he (Arius) nevertheless steers away from the more speculative type of theology of Clement and Origen, his predecessors in Alexandria. His approach to the question of God belongs within, and is

determined by, the general framework of the economic trinitarianism of Irenaeus and the theological orthodoxy of the third century. This explains why Arius' view of the relationship between God and Jesus Christ was supported with a great deal of tenacity by a significant section within the Church even long after its rejection by the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Before we turn to this event, however, we must take a look at monarchianism or modalism, the opposite extreme to subordinationism, which took hold in the pre-Nicene period and that was just as emphatically rejected by the Council of Nicaea.

Whereas subordinationism represents a form of thought which asserts that there is one Supreme Being, but which can also accommodate one or more lesser divine figures with a view to mediating between the Supreme God and his creation, monarchianism's main emphasis is upon the oneness of God to the exclusion of any other divine being. The term monarchianism is derived from the two Greek words, *monos* (one) and *archei* (rule), literally meaning that only one (God) rules. The God of Israel, the true God, the Father of Jesus Christ alone is the creator and only ruler, the monarch, of all things.

Monarchianism came to the fore in the third century in reaction to the Logos theology of the Apologetes, which dominated the debate on the relationship between God and Jesus Christ. The idea of the personal subsistence of the Logos next to the Father created a serious theological problem for more than one thinker in the Church. They saw in it a serious threat to the oneness of God. At the same time they did not want to abandon the belief in the divinity of Christ, being Christianity's most central confession. But how is it possible to maintain both the oneness of God and the full divinity of Christ?

Two different answers to this question can be distinguished within monarchianism. The first, and less popular, answer is given by representatives of the so-called dynamic monarchianism. Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch and one of the most important of these representatives, maintains the oneness of God by denying the personal subsistence of the Logos. According to him, the Logos is the impersonal power (*dynamis*) of God who descended upon and operated in the human being Jesus. In Himself Jesus was nothing more than a mere human being, but He was filled with this power of God to such an extent that He was finally deified. Paul of Samosata speaks of the Holy Spirit in the same fashion. He is no more than an impersonal power of God. At the time Paul of Samosata's concept was seen as basically a Christological aberration, but the implications for an understanding of God are rather obvious. Despite the deification of Jesus, the concept of a Trinity is completely negated.

The denial of the idea of God as Triad became even more obvious in modalist monarchianism, the second and more well-known version of monarchianism. In this form of monarchianism we find a denial of any distinction between Father,

Son and Holy Spirit. These three names are seen as no more than just that: three different names for the one and same God, given Him by the Holy Scriptures according to the various modes in which He revealed Himself in the economy of the history of salvation (hence modalism).

The main proponents of modalism in the second and third centuries were Praxeas, Noetus and Sabellius. Of Noetus it is said that he identified Christ with the Father and that he even claimed that the Father had suffered and died on the cross. Hence also the name patripassianism given to Noetus' thoughts, derived from the Latin *pater* (father) and *passio* (suffering). Sabellius, however, is the major name in this regard. He makes use of the Stoic concept of categories according to which an entity or being, without changing in itself, can appear in different forms with the view to establishing different relationships. Applied to God this means that God can take on different appearances without any change to his own being. To explain these 'changes' in a God whose being is unchangeable Sabellius makes use of a Greek term *prosopon*, which means appearance or mask. In the creation God revealed Himself through the mask of the Father. In the incarnation the same God took on the mask of the Son. The true and full divinity of Christ can therefore be acknowledged. Finally, in the appearance of the Holy Spirit God makes Himself known as the regenerating and sanctifying Spirit.

Irenaeus was the main defender of orthodoxy against Gnosticism and subordinationism. In both instances Irenaeus dealt with these heresies from his standpoint that the mystery of the Trinity could not be unravelled in the way of philosophical speculation, but could only be approached from the 'economy' of God's actions in the history of salvation. The heresy of modalism, however, differed from subordinationism in that it was seemingly less speculative and honoured the 'economic' way of thinking. How to deal with this heresy while fully taking into account the 'economy' of salvation now became the big question for the defenders of the orthodox position.

It fell to Hippolytus in Rome and Tertullian, the lawyer from Carthage in North Africa, to find an answer to this question. As a new generation of theologians carrying on the work of Irenaeus, their appearance coincided with a progressive distinction between the Greek East and the Latin West. This geographical and linguistic distinction now began to determine for the first time two different contexts within which the history of Christian thought would develop in the future. Hippolytus still wrote in Greek, but Tertullian wrote most of his works in Latin. This language difference would cause quite a number of uncertainties and even bring about some confusion in the theological discussions on the Trinity.

Hippolytus in his *Against Noetus* and Tertullian in his *Against Praxeas* reject the modalist position and emphasise strongly the real distinction between Father,

Son and Holy Spirit by introducing the concept of 'person'. The one God consists of three Persons. Hippolytus uses the same Greek word *prosopon* that we find in the writings of Sabellius, but he does so in such a way that the three 'Persons' he speaks about cannot be interpreted in a modalist manner. *Prosopon* is a subsistent individuality. Tertullian's Latin translation of *prosopon* is *persona*, meaning approximately the same, perhaps with a stronger emphasis on the particularity of a distinctive individual. The term constitutes his rejection of the modalist position.

Tertullian does not deny the principle of the monarchy of the one God. Both he and Hippolytus accept the unity of God as a matter of course and do not get tired of stressing that God was alone before all things. There was nobody or nothing next to God from all eternity. He was alone, says Tertullian, in the sense that there was nothing external to Him. When He created He created from nothing. There is therefore between Him and his creation an absolute distinction. But, importantly, both Hippolytus and Tertullian maintain that God's eternal unity was always of a complex nature that harboured within itself the distinctions of God as the Father, his Word and his Spirit. These distinctions, however, only became 'real' and 'visible' when God, with a view to his creation, sent forth or generated the Word. Irenaeus had stated the distinctions of the divine Persons in terms of God's economy in creation and in the history of salvation. In this he had refused to speculate on how these distinctions function in the being of the one God Himself. Tertullian, however, seems to carry the economic approach to its logical conclusion in suggesting that the different economic functions produce the distinctions between the Persons. Whether Tertullian actually meant it this way is a matter of conjecture. Some interpreters even suggest that for Tertullian God has become a Trinity, that the divine unity has been distributed into a trio in the course of putting into effect the economies of creation and redemption. In all fairness to Tertullian it must be accepted that for him the Son of God and the Spirit of God who became 'visible' and explicit were eternally 'invisible' and implicit in the one God.

Whatever the case may be, he calls the Trinity a mystery of the economy (*sacramentum oeconomiae*) which arranges the oneness into threeness, setting forth three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The unity is not destroyed by the threeness but administered. The three Persons constitute, in his own words, 'the Trinity of one divinity'. The Son and the Spirit share in the substance of the Father. There is no division of the substance, only an extension.

Hippolytus, and especially Tertullian, follow in the footsteps of Irenaeus. But as had been the case with Irenaeus, they clearly struggled with the problem endemic to any economic trinitarianism, namely the status of the Word and the Spirit prior to their coming forth as distinct Persons in the economy of creation and redemption. Despite Irenaeus' rejection of the Stoic formula of the

immanent and expressed *logos*, it remained the silent and unspoken, but fundamentally inadequate, background of Christian reflection on the one God who revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Could the Church Councils of the fourth century speak a liberating word in this regard?

### 2.5.3 The Arian Controversy and the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople

When Arius raised explicitly the question of the status of the Son as the Logos of God, the great Trinitarian controversy broke out. His own position, although it contradicted that of most of the theologians within the economic tradition of Irenaeus, was by no means unique and in more than one respect he could call upon the example of the earlier Apologists and Origen. There was as yet no official orthodox position. But soon all this would change when his views brought Arius into conflict with Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, a conflict which soon led to his excommunication from the congregation of Alexandria and eventually his expulsion from Egypt. Arius did not take kindly to his expulsion and pleaded his cause to bishops in the Greek East outside Egypt. Soon he was able to count amongst his supporters powerful figures like Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea. The whole matter had now become a full-scale controversy that threatened to divide the Church in the East.

At this point Constantine, the Roman Emperor, intervened. After his somewhat controversial conversion and following the Edict of Tolerance in 313, which effectively terminated the persecution of Christians, Constantine came more and more to take up the cause of Christianity. When he became sole Emperor in 324, he considered it his responsibility to bring to an end the Arian conflict, fulfilling in this respect one of the functions originally entrusted to the Roman Emperors before him, namely being the High Priest, the Pontifex Maximus, of the Roman state religion. He called an assembly of the bishops of the Church to meet in Nicaea in 325 to try to resolve the whole issue.

At the Council of Nicaea Athanasius, a young deacon from Alexandria, who would later become the most renowned opponent of Arianism, made his first public appearance. It is uncertain to what extent Athanasius played a role in the final wording of the decision of Nicaea, which was issued in the form of a creed, but he later became such an able defender of the creed that history books often see him as the main orthodox force behind the decision.

Once Arius raised the fundamental question of the status of the Son, only two answers were really possible: either the Son was God Himself in the true sense of the word, or He was a creature of God, albeit the first and foremost of all creatures, as Arius emphasised. The intellectual climate had changed since Origen's days in Alexandria. There was no longer a place for all sorts of spiritual



intermediaries or aeons between God and creation. Either Christ, the Word, belonged to the divine realm of God, or He belonged to the created order. Arius placed Christ firmly in the created order, Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea unequivocally declared his divinity, removing any possibility of interpreting his divine nature in a subordinationist way. The relevant part of the statement of Nicaea is as follows:

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten generated from the Father, that is, from the being (*ousia*) of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things were made....”

The key word in this declaration is the term *homoousion*. Derived from two Greek words, the adjective *homos* (the same) and the noun *ousia* (substance), it had materialistic associations, literally meaning “of the same stuff or substance”. Two copper coins could be said to be *homoousion*, because both derived from the same substance. However, there is evidence that by the time the bishops met at Nicaea the word had already been used in a more philosophical and theological sense. In the context of the Creed of Nicaea it refers in an unmistakable way to the deity of the Son. He shares the same divine substance or being with the Father. The substance, that is, the deity, of the Father and the Son is one and the same.

Even before the Council of Nicaea Arius explicitly rejected the term as a possible way of defining the relationship of the Son with the Father. The “one in being with the Father” or “of the same substance as the Father” (both possible translations) effectively made any Arian interpretation of the Creed unsustainable. As far as the Church was concerned, the ghost of subordinationism was now finally laid and the divinity of the Christ once and for all unequivocally accepted. But was it? The events after Nicaea proved otherwise.

There are a number of reasons why the Arian controversy did not end with Nicaea. History books usually refer to an unfortunate partial change of heart of Constantine, who originally wholeheartedly supported the Nicene position, but at a later stage became more sympathetic towards the Arian and semi-Arian opponents of Athanasius. But this shift in the Emperor’s sympathies is only symptomatic of a deeper problem: the terms *ousia* and its derivative *homoousios* were foreign to the Scriptures and carried certain philosophical connotations that could easily lead to a misinterpretation of the original intention behind the use of the terms.

There was, for example, the accusation that the Nicene Creed led to the acceptance of more than one God. The Greek term *ousia* and its Latin equivalents *essentia* and *substantia* were deeply embedded in Aristotelian philosophy whereby a particular substance or being has certain attributes which participate in the substance. From this distinction between substance and attributes followed a second distinction with a more generic sense: on the one hand, there is the non-specific, indefinite category to which, on the other hand, a number of concrete, individual entities belong. For example: to the general category of human being belong individual persons, in that they share their common humanity. It was therefore possible that the *homoousios* of Nicaea could be interpreted in a generic sense that allowed the Deity to be seen as a category shared by the Father and the Son. This interpretation inevitably led to the accusation that the Council of Nicaea accepted the Son as a second God next to the Father.

Such an interpretation is clearly at variance with the intention of the Council. The Creed starts with the unambiguous confession of the one God, Maker of all things visible and invisible. Some of the supporters of Nicaea, however, were so anxious to avoid the accusation of two Gods that they went to the opposite extreme, interpreting the Creed in almost a modalist way. Marcellus of Ancyra was one of those. The result was that many were uncomfortable with the outcome of Nicaea's deliberations. They felt that the statement could easily be taken to mean that the Son was to be identified with the Father.

Lastly, the confusion surrounding the interpretation of the Nicene Creed was exacerbated by using the word *hupostasis* as an alternate for *ousia*, when the Creeds condemn those who declare that the Son of God is of a different substance/*hupostasis* or being/*ousia* than the Father. By this time many had already accepted Origen's terminology for describing the three members of the Trinity, namely as three *hupostases*, *hupostasis* signifying the distinct and individual existence of each of these three members. The Nicene usage of this term accordingly created a serious stumbling-block for them.

Athanasius experienced serious problems from two sides defending the Nicene Creed. On the one hand, as a result of Constantine's later lukewarm attitude towards Nicaea, Arianism reared its head strongly in the East. Constantius - one of Constantine's three sons, who eventually became sole Emperor - supported these Arians, who described the Son as *anomoios*, "unlike" the Father. On the other hand, a large number of bishops who were opposed to the Arians nevertheless objected that *homoousios* fused Father and Son into one numerically identical being, and so denying any real distinction between them. They preferred the term *homoiousios*, "of like substance" instead of "the same substance" of *homoousios*. The objection to this term, however, is that it makes the Father and the Son two separate divine beings, two Gods, even more clearly

than *homoousios* does. So Athanasius objected to *homoiousios*, insisting that the *homoousios* of Nicaea means numerically one and the same God without fusing the Father and the Son in a modalist fashion.

Despite the various and sometimes confusing terms used, the issue at stake was in itself very clear. As before Nicaea, there was no middle ground, no room for compromise. Either it was affirmed that the Son shares the same divine substance with the Father and that He therefore truly is God in the fullest sense of the word, or He is a creature. In the latter case the absolute unity and simplicity of God created no problem. In the former case there was indeed a logical problem, but this did not prevent Athanasius from defending it with a singular purposefulness. His reason for doing this was his firm conviction that the Son could do what He did, namely be the salvation of humankind, only because He was God Himself. If God Himself was not present in Jesus, we could not have been saved. For Athanasius the rather unbiblical philosophical language of Nicaea was a means of safeguarding the biblical truth concerning God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

For a long time in the East Athanasius stood alone in his defence of Nicaea, but when he was joined by a group of theologians from Caesarea in Cappadocia - known as the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa - the theological climate started to change in favour of Nicaea. Their writing were widely read and made a lasting impression. Basil of Caesarea, the oldest of the three, for instance, accepted that the Trinity could be spoken of in terms of one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis*. This removed the fear of many that *homoousios* of necessity implied modalism.

There were also political changes. Gratian, who became emperor in the West in 375, appointed Theodosius from Spain as emperor in the East. The Church in the West was always more favourably disposed towards Nicaea and, when Theodosius arrived in the East, he was already a convinced Nicene. Arian bishops were removed and replaced with those who, influenced mainly by the Cappadocian Fathers, became staunch supporters of the Nicene Creed. In 381 Theodosius called a council of all the bishops in the East. They met at Constantinople in the summer of that year and confirmed the Nicene Creed, its *homoousios* included, as the official doctrine of the Church. Theodosius followed with an imperial edict in this regard. By then the battle was already won in the West, where Damasus, bishop of Rome (366-384), saw to it that the Nicene Creed received official sanction in the West. Subsequently the Council of Constantinople was recognised by the whole Church in the East and the West.

It was only during the period between the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople that the confrontation with Arian subordinationism explicitly took on Trinitarian dimensions. The problem of the status of the Holy Spirit was

always there, implicit in all the theological discussions concerning the deity of Christ, but completely overshadowed by it. Nicaea's original creed, so far as it can be reconstructed from the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, ended abruptly with the statement: "And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit". It was an undeveloped creedal statement, because the status of the Holy Spirit was not the issue at Nicaea, although few doubted that the subordination of the Spirit to the Father and the Son had always been the logical implication of Arianism. In fact his divine status was denied by the Arians.

We first become aware of the explicit and calculated denial of the divinity of the Holy Spirit by the Arians in the writings of Athanasius, when he responds to Bishop Serapion of Thmuis concerning the teaching of certain so-called allegorists. They considered the Holy Spirit a creature of God, first in the rank of ministering angels, but definitely not of the same substance as God. In response Athanasius teaches the full divinity of the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son. He is of the same substance as the Father and the Son, or are we to conclude, he asks, that the Trinity is not a triad but a dyad, and after that the creation? Athanasius based his arguments, apart from many quotations from the Bible, mainly on the fact that the Holy Spirit exercises divine functions in His own Person in creation and sanctification. But in these functions it is always God Himself that acts. There is accordingly one divine activity in creation and redemption: the Father accomplishes everything through the Word in the Holy Spirit.

Athanasius is supported in his spirited defence of the divinity of the Holy Spirit by the Cappadocian trio. The doctrine of the Trinity of the Cappadocians is substantially the same as that of Athanasius. But their emphasis is different. Original in their contribution is the attention they give to the relations within the divine Triad. This led to the perhaps unjust accusation that they were practically tritheists. But this was definitely not their intention. They were firm in their belief in the unity of God, but they also felt the need to argue for the distinctiveness, and equality, of the three *hupostaseis* in the Godhead. This brought them close to speaking of the Trinity in generic terms; hence the accusation of tritheism.

The Cappadocians insisted that the three *hupostaseis* have individual characteristics that, however, do not abolish the unity of God. Basil of Caesarea starts off by saying that everything that belongs to the Father is seen in the Son, and everything that belongs to the Son belongs also to the Father, since the Son abides whole in the Father and again possesses the Father whole in Himself. But then there are certain characteristics to be noted for the sake of the clear distinction between the *hupostaseis*. They call these characteristics *idiotetes*, which is best translated as "particularities". The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, each has His own particularity. They consist of the Father being

ungenerated (*agennetos*) and the Son being generated (*gennetos*). The Holy Spirit's particularity is His procession (*ekporeusis*) from the Father through the Son. Basil shied away from using this last term concerning the Holy Spirit, because he felt that no word could really describe what happens here, but Gregory of Nazianzus had no hesitation in using it.

It is important to note that these particularities do not express the *ousia* or being of God. They are "modes of existence". The divine Persons do not differ in being or substance but in their modes of existence, and this difference in modes of existence does not destroy their unity in being.

On the face of it these distinctions could again lead to subordinationism. The Father affords a negative instance (ungenerated), as He does not come from any source, but exists underivatively: the Son comes to be derivatively, by generation from the Father, and the Holy Spirit by procession. But the Cappadocians make it very clear that these relations between the divine Persons have no temporal reference, but express eternal processes continually operative within the divine Being. The Father's mode of existence does not involve a temporal, but a logical priority, in that the two derivative modes of existence, those of the Son and the Holy Spirit, depend on it for their source. For the Cappadocians such priority does not involve superiority. For them it meant the end of subordinationism as well as modalism. There was no longer any question but that the Son and the Holy Spirit, each with his own particularity, are indeed equal to the Father, since each is a presentation of an identical divine Being. The Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity has been summed up in the phrase that God is one object in Himself and three objects to Himself.

At the Council of Constantinople the divinity of the Holy Spirit is clearly stated in line with the Cappadocian thinking. Constantinople's statement on the Holy Spirit is in truth a condensation of Basil of Caesarea's exposition in his work *On the Holy Spirit*. It reads:

"(We believe) in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets".

Remarkable in this statement on the Holy Spirit compared to statements on the Son is the avoidance of all use of technical philosophical terms which had proved such an obstacle to the reception of the Nicene Creed. The language is Scriptural as the Bible itself refers to the Spirit as Lord (2 Corinthians 3:17) and as the One who gives life (John 6:63). The reason for this difference in the style of wording must be sought in the fact that Constantinople did no more than to confirm, and therefore basically to repeat, what Nicaea confessed about the Son. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, Constantinople could use the simpler biblical language,

because by now the battle for the vindication of the theology of Nicaea had already been won.

The total focus of Nicaea lay in its unequivocal assertion of the divinity of the Son. Constantinople now adds to this an equal assertion of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. God is now seen to consist of one nature being possessed equally by the three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Greek theology in the East, hammered out between theologians well-versed in the nuances of Greek philosophical thought and terminology, soon found full acceptance in the West, where there were initially reservations about a language which speaks about three persons in relation to God. The Cappadocian way of dealing with the terms *ousia* and *hypostaseis* persuaded the more conservative West that it was possible to speak about God as one Being and three Persons without falling into the heresy of either subordinationism or tritheism. A consensus had finally been reached throughout the whole Church, in the East as well as in the West.

This consensus would, however, be shattered in the year 589, when the Church in the West at the Synod of Toledo added that the Holy Spirit not only proceeds from the Father, but also from the Son: the famous “and from the Son” (*filioque*). This development was directly influenced by Augustine. He proposed that the Holy Spirit could only be really distinguished from the Son, if we say that He proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father.

Throughout the Trinitarian controversy the Greek Fathers referred to the procession of the Holy Spirit as procession from the Father, through or in the Son. The Church in the East could therefore not accept the “and the Son”. In their opinion the Father is thereby derogated from being the sole principle in the Godhead, and that the West has deserted scriptural usage in confusing the Spirit’s temporal mission, that is, his being sent by the Son in time, with his eternal procession from the Father. But the reason for the new development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West goes much deeper than this perceived confusion. It signals a fundamental change in the approach to the mystery of the Trinity. Whereas the theologians in the East focused on the Father as origin and source, thereby trying to safeguard the unity of God, the West made its starting point the single divine Being and the relationships within that Being. Augustine brought about this change.

#### 2.5.4 The Legacy of Augustine and the Latin Tradition

We have already seen that Irenaeus approaches the mystery of the Trinity from the perspective of the “economy” of salvation history. He has no hesitation in pointing out that God’s acts of salvation clearly distinguish between the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and accordingly between the three themselves. But he refuses to speculate on how these distinctions also represent

distinctions in the eternal being of the one God Himself. Most of the other orthodox theologians of this period more or less followed him in this approach. By the beginning of the fourth century, with the rise of Arianism, it had become clear that the economic approach in its refusal to speculate about the eternal being of God could not refute the Arian claim. They therefore resorted to a more speculative philosophical approach, making use of the apparatus of Greek philosophical terminology, convinced that this method makes it possible to reflect the eternal side of God's economy. The statements of Nicaea and Constantinople testify to these efforts of Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Hilary of Poitiers and many others.

The dangers of an undisciplined speculative approach that is disconnected from God's revelation in the history of salvation are obvious. Augustine was well aware of this danger. Following in the footsteps of the Cappadocians, Augustine looks closely at the relationships within the one being of God, but always in such a way that the economy of salvation history comes into play. The structure of his *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity) tells the story.

*De Trinitate* is a document of impressive length, comprising 15 books, and written intermittently over 20 years. Augustine begins his great work with a statement confirming his full acceptance of the faith of Nicaea-Constantinople. He writes:

“...according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable quality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three Gods but one God; although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and therefore He who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself co-equal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity.”

The speculative language of Nicæan theology is, however, immediately followed by a succinct statement of the divine economy of the revelation of the divine Persons in salvation history:

“It was not, however, this same Trinity that was born of the Virgin Mary, crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, on the third day rose again and ascended into heaven, but the Son alone. Nor was it the same Trinity that came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, or came down on the day of Pentecost after the Lord's ascension..., but the Holy Spirit alone. Nor was it this same Trinity that spoke from heaven You are my Son, either at his baptism by

John or on the mountain when the three disciples were with Him,...  
but it was the Father's voice alone addressing the Son."

In the first book Augustine follows the latter economic approach. From the New Testament he tries to establish the total equality of the divine Persons, especially of the Father and the Son. Augustine holds that any passage that suggests that the Son is inferior to the Father, refers to the Son in his humanity. The consistent testimony of the New Testament that the Son and the Holy Spirit were manifested in the incarnation and at Pentecost because they had been sent by the Father, however, creates a serious problem. Being sent by someone normally implies inferiority. The being sent by the Father does not refer to the Son in his humanity. He is sent as God the Son. Likewise the Holy Spirit is sent as the third Person in the Trinity. It seems therefore that the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit could mean that they are less than the Father.

Augustine's response in this regard is twofold. In the first place he denies that being sent necessarily implies inferiority. But secondly, and more importantly, he emphasises that the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit follows upon their procession from the Father. The Son proceeds from the Father, i.e. He is begotten by the Father, from all eternity. Only then He is sent. His mission takes place in time; the procession is an eternal activity. The same applies to the Holy Spirit. The sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation history is therefore no indication of their being less than the Father, but the revelation in time and history of their eternal procession from the Father. They are not less than the Father, but co-eternal with Him, equal to Him.

Augustine is clearly concerned that the economic approach could lead to the misunderstanding that the Son and the Holy Spirit are less than the Father. This concern also comes to the fore when he emphatically denies that the Son is the visible member of the divine Triad. He does this in connection with the generally accepted idea that the appearances of God recorded in the Old Testament are so many missions of the Son. Having examined the relevant passages in the Old Testament in a meticulous way he concludes that the only thing we can say is that God made use of one or the other created effect to present Himself. The created effect represented God; it was not the divine Being Himself. The Son is therefore just as invisible and immaterial as the Father and the Holy Spirit. In the incarnation, however, the invisible God became visible in the mission and humanity of the Son and in the several manifestations of the Holy Spirit that accompanied it.

In the next phase of his *De Trinitate* Augustine tries to explain how the manifestations of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy of the history of salvation, all equal in their divinity, can be reconciled with the absolute simplicity of the divine Being. This is an answer impossible to glean



from the Scriptures. Augustine thus resorts to the more metaphysical and speculative language of the debate that led up to Nicaea and Constantinople.

We have seen that the Cappadocians made an original contribution to the debate on the Trinity by giving special attention to the relations within the divine Triad. The particularities attributed to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (unbegotten, begotten and procession) within these relationships refer, according to them, to modes of existence that do not destroy the unity in being. Augustine follows them in his contention that the difference in the manifestations of the three divine Persons in the economy of salvation does not refer to the divine essence, but to the relations between the Persons in the one God.

Taking his point of departure from the divine essence, Augustine acknowledges that all divine attributes are predicated of God absolutely, not relatively, and therefore belong to all three Persons equally. Scripture often attributes to one Person what is really common to all. But, he continues, there are also predications of God that are not predicated as substance but as relationships. When “begotten” is predicated of the Son, it is just another way of saying He is the Son. The Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father. As Father and Son they are really distinct. But as God, as good, wise and eternal, as Creator and Redeemer, each is one and the same God, in these respects not distinct from each other.

As far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, He too can only be really distinct from the other two Persons in terms of his relationships with them. Although the name Holy Spirit in itself does not signify a relationship, it is used in this way when we talk of the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. The relationship of the Spirit to the Father is that of procession as is evident from the New Testament that He proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). But what is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Son? For Augustine, as we have seen, mission in time reveals eternal procession. The sending of the Holy Spirit by the Son (John 15:26) reveals that He proceeds from the Son.

All these processions are eternal, because everything about God is eternal. They are wholly within God, belonging to the immanent divine reality.

The West subsequently followed Augustine in this regard and his clarification became a characteristic of Latin theology. In the *Filioque* it became part of Western dogma, as we have seen in the previous section.

It would be unfair to Augustine to suggest that he was unaware of the fact that he was using a terminology and a thought process that differed from the more uncomplicated language of the New Testament. His discomfort in this regard is highlighted by his open acknowledgement that he has problems with the term

“person” as applied to the distinctions in the Triad. Describing them as Persons might suggest that they belong to a particular class or species called “person”. But the three in God, understood as subsistent pure relations, are each of them unique and cannot form a member of a class or a species. But, argues Augustine, human language lacks preciseness and is inadequate in its description of the mystery of the Trinity:

“So we say three Persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence”.

Although Augustine tried to keep the economic and the more metaphysical approach to the doctrine of the Trinity in balance, subsequent developments in Western theology show that the former approach gradually almost disappeared in favour of the latter. This development had a further negative result. The doctrine of the Trinity began to take on the character of a metaphysical appendix to the doctrine of God with very little direct soteriological significance. Thus it happened that there developed a theological gap between God in Himself (*Deus apud se*) and God in his salvific relation towards us (*Deus erga nos*). This development would reach its peak in the metaphysical theology of Western scholasticism. But that was still a few centuries away.

# 3 THE FACE OF GOD AND THE CHURCH IN THE EAST

## 3.1 THE EMPIRE, CHRISTIAN AND ORTHODOX

Constantine the Great presents in more respects than one a turning-point in the history of early Christendom. Apart from ending the period of confrontation between Christianity and the Roman Empire, he oversaw the final resolution of the Arian controversy at the Synod of Nicaea, where it was confirmed that the deity of the Father and the Son is the same. Constantine also made a political decision that, in the long run, would change the shape of Christianity as an emerging world religion. He abandoned the ancient capital of Rome, and moved the centre of the political and cultural life of the Empire to the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium on the rivers of the Bosphorus. Officially called Constantinople after Constantine, it became the “New Rome”. Constantine was not insensible to the ambition of founding a city which might perpetuate the glory of his own name. Thus he bequeathed to his family the inheritance of the Roman Empire, a new capital and a new religion.

Constantinople appears to have been formed by nature for the centre and capital of a great monarchy. From seven hills the imperial city commanded the opposite shores of Europe and Asia; the climate was healthy and temperate, the soil fertile and the harbour secure. The corn of Egypt, and the gems and spices of India were brought by varying winds into the port of Constantinople, which had for many ages attracted the commerce of the ancient world. Constantinople became one of the world’s great cities and in its heyday in the tenth and eleventh centuries contained more than a million people from all over the Mediterranean.

Between the founding of the city of Constantinople in 324 and the division of Eastern and Western churches in 1054, the main trunk of Christianity gradually divided into two large branches, one centred on Rome in the West and the other on Constantinople in the East. When the Roman Empire fell in the West, the Byzantine Empire continued the imperial glory in the East mainly through the efforts of Justinian I, who reigned from 527 to 565. During his reign Italy, North Africa and part of Spain were brought back under Byzantine rule. At the same time he accelerated a movement which had begun under Constantine the Great, namely the domination of the Church by the Emperor. This control of the church by the emperor, also known as caesaropapism, would have significant influence on theological developments in the East, including the doctrine of God, as

became evident from the iconoclastic controversy to which we shall turn in due course. Imperial interventions in theological debates were not considered to be irregular at a time that the emperor was expected “to be versed in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity”. His opinion therefore carried considerable, sometimes decisive, weight in theological matters, although it was generally accepted that the emperor was meant to preserve, not to define, the Christian faith. It was accordingly not uncommon to find among bishops and monks opposition to emperors who were considered to be heretical. Hymns sung in the Church, for instance, praised those who disobeyed the emperor in religious matters, like Maximus the Confessor, who became a martyr under Constans, and the numerous monks who opposed the iconoclastic emperors of the eighth century.

One of the most significant contributions by the emperors towards the establishment of an empire which would be Christian as well as orthodox was a committed effort to eradicate what survived of paganism. Here again Justinian played a decisive role. What he was unable to accomplish by negotiation and persuasion, he tried to bring about by force. In its formal cults, paganism was clearly dying, but Justinian knew instinctively that the Greek philosophies of the pre-Christian era taught by non-Christians could, in the long run, undermine the Christian character of his empire. He closed the schools of philosophy in Athens and excluded both pagans and non-Orthodox Christians from the teaching profession. The imperial School of Constantinople, founded by Constantine, for instance, included pagan teachers for more than three centuries before they were forced out by Justinian.

Despite all Justinian’s efforts to eradicate what he considered the unholy spirit of Hellas, the Greek heritage that we dealt with in the previous chapter remained a spiritual force to be reckoned with. Although it was never officially admitted by the Church that Greek philosophy was entitled to shape the very content of theological ideas, Greek thought categories and distinctions lived on as tools for expressing the biblical revelation. As we saw in the previous chapter, the debate on the early Church’s understanding of the Christian faith that became codified at the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 with the final formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity often ran into great difficulties and many misunderstandings because of the use of technical philosophical terms. These difficulties continued to plague the main theological controversy of the following centuries, namely the question concerning the person and nature of Christ as both God and human, which led to the councils of Ephesus in 431, Chalcedon in 451 and Constantinople in 553 and 681. Conservative in form and intent, Eastern theology in the age of Justinian continually referred to tradition as its main source. In the Christological debates of this period the Trinitarian terminology of the three Cappadocians (see 2.5.3), who became the measure of orthodoxy in the Eastern Church, was therefore

transferred to the problem of the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ. The official codification of the Church's understanding of the Trinity and the person of Christ did therefore not take place without the intellectual philosophical tools of the day. The use of Greek concepts and terminology was, on the one hand, an unavoidable means of communication, but on the other hand, it sometimes could, and did, lead to misunderstandings and unnecessary mutual censure and even condemnation. At the same time it must be acknowledged that the Trinitarian terminology of the Cappadocian Fathers and its later Christological application clearly show that Greek philosophical concepts such as *ousia*, *hypostasis* or *physis* take on a new meaning when used out of the context of the Platonic or Aristotelian systems in which they have their origin.

For the reasons given, it would be wrong to refer to the codification of the Christian doctrine by the ecumenical councils as the supreme example of the ongoing influence of the spirit of Hellenism in the Eastern Church. Why is it then that, compared to the West, Byzantium is considered by some as the only genuine survival of the Hellenistic world? Why is it often stated that in Byzantium the tradition of Hellenistic culture was never broken? After all, the doctrinal theology underlying the ancient Church and the ecumenical councils is, in principle, identical with the Western Church.

In considering this question we must look elsewhere, not to doctrinal theology, but to the Byzantine spirituality that developed into the mysticism of sacramental life and manifested itself, above all, in Eastern monasticism and the liturgical and iconographical splendours of Byzantium. It is here that we discover a view and experience of God that are distinctively Eastern.

### 3.2 MONASTICISM AND PARTICIPATION IN GOD

In the Eastern Church monasticism became not one form of Christian life among others, but Christian life in its perfection, normative for everyone serious about his or her salvation. In the course of time the monks not only succeeded in imposing upon the ordinary people their penitential discipline and fast regulations, but also on the Church as a whole the order and contents of the liturgical prayers. Byzantine monasticism gradually became a body which felt responsibility for the content of faith and for the fate of the Church. At the same time, however, it did little to change the fundamentally pagan character of society, which continued the life of the ancient Hellenistic empires in a deteriorated form. Although some monastic centres were, to a certain degree, active in social upliftment, manuscript copying, learning and other practical concerns, the liturgical cycle remained the absolute centre of monastic life. The monk's cell was more remote from the folk life than the cell of a Western monk, which we shall deal with in the following chapter. It was generally accepted that

spiritual independence and even real holiness could only be achieved in seclusion from the world.

It does not come as a surprise that the most dynamic and creative part of Eastern theology found its mainspring within the monastic tradition. It is mainly here, within the confines of the monasteries, that Byzantine theology fully developed the Greek philosophical notion of “becoming God” (*theosis*). Despite the Greek origin of this concept and the background of a Neo-Platonic return to an impersonal One, the idea of “becoming God” in Byzantine monastic theology never really implied absorption into the essence of God. The total transcendence and inaccessibility of God’s essence remained inviolate. To become God meant to know God, to participate in his life. The possibility of such a union with God was brought about by the deification of Christ’s humanity according to its hypostatic unity with the Logos. In this way Byzantine theology made use of Hellenistic thought categories to convey the New Testament concepts of a life “in Christ” and “the communion of the Holy Spirit”. This was also the deepest intention of Athanasius when he wrote: “God became man, so that man may become God”, thereby expressing the fundamental statement of Alexandrian theology which would become dominant in the East.

The Neoplatonic mystical mould within which these ideas were cast by Byzantine theology is unmistakable despite the efforts to give it a Christological content. The mysticism of Clemens, Origen, Evagrius and, eventually, Pseudo-Dionysius through his commentator, Maximus the Confessor, became in one form or the other an indissoluble part of Eastern Orthodox theology, although both Origen and Evagrius were condemned as heretics.

The mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius found its way into Byzantine spirituality through Maximus the Confessor (580-662). His small treatise, *Mystagogia*, did more than anything else to give a standing to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, to which, however, Maximus gave a very personal interpretation.

In our short exposition of Dionysius’ thoughts we discovered the resolute intellectualism of his mysticism. It is the mind that in its ascent finally unites itself with the unknowable God in a knowing-unknowing vision of God. In Maximus’ treatise this dialectic of knowing and not-knowing God in the ascending intellect is clearly seen, although the negative side is less emphasised than in the writings of Dionysius. The intelligence, as Maximus interprets Dionysius, is impelled by wisdom to come to contemplation and by contemplation to knowledge, by knowledge to the unceasing knowledge and by this unceasing knowledge to truth, which is God. God is the truth towards which the intellect moves endlessly and incessantly. There is no end to this movement, for the greatness of God’s infinity knows no limitations and therefore we cannot come to any knowledge that would make us comprehend it according to its essence. The

unceasing movement of knowledge goes beyond all distinct knowledge. In it we lose ourselves beyond self in God. The divine transcendence appears as the bottomless abyss in which we find unfathomable life. This union with Him is also our deification, because it opens us at last unreservedly to God's divine action in us, dispossessing us of ourselves, so that God may be all in all.

Just as Dionysius distinguishes between a negative theology of an unknowable God and a symbolic theology of the hierarchy of God's manifestations, Maximus developed a liturgical symbolism in tandem with his idea of an unceasing movement of the intellect into God. The Church in which the sacred liturgy is to unfold is a manifestation of God and by celebrating the liturgy corporeally we are identified with the Church, which enables us to come, through the world of senses, to the intelligible world, and beyond that to God. In the liturgical action Christ is present, filling the action with the mystery of his Person as God and man, uniting in Himself the Creator and the creation.

The liturgical symbolism of Maximus later became a dominant factor in the monasticism that developed in and around Constantinople. The monks in the monastery of Alexander, on the Asiatic bank of the Bosphorus, for instance, kept up uninterrupted praise in the oratory by means of alternating choirs. Called *Acemetæ* (those who never go to bed), the monks were magnificently installed in the city itself by the consul Studios, from whom they received the new name of *Studites*. This community was to become the centre for the spread of a cenobitic life, in its essence liturgical and social, which in the years to come would characterise Byzantine spirituality.

The Studite experience of God very soon became markedly different from a heritage that emphasised the absolute transcendence of a God that could only be known in an endless movement of the mind. This heritage goes back beyond Pseudo-Dionysius to the intellectual mysticism of Evagrius, who worked out a specific understanding of the monastic way of mystical prayer. It was he who coined the phrase "prayer of the mind" which, according to him, means that the mind is in an essential union with God. Reinterpreted by Macarius of Egypt, his contemporary in the desert of Scete, Evagrius' spirituality became standard in the extreme Byzantine eremitism which found its base in a monastery on Mount Sinai, later called the Monastery of St Catherine.

At a very early date hermits from the Egyptian desert fled to the mountain, possibly to escape the persecutions raging against Christians in Egypt. These hermits - also frequently called "hesychasts" from the term *hesychia*, which means "silence" or "quietude" - living in solitary caves or huts were frequently exposed to onslaughts from desert nomads. In the years 527-535 a monastery was therefore built under Justinian. The monastery became, in fact, a fortress in which all the scattered hermits were gathered together. Not many years after

the founding of the monastery John Climacus became its abbot; he is the author of a famous book, *The Ladder of Paradise*, in which we find the details of the extreme forms of asceticism which John required from his monks. The Evagrian Origenist spiritualism of his thoughts is unmistakable and provides the ascetic counterpart of the mystique we find in Maximus' liturgical symbolism.

John Climacus adopts the theoretical framework of Evagrius, making the state of apathy (*apatheia*) the end and goal of ascesis that strives towards the communing of the mind with God. Ascesis tends to be perfected and transcended in contemplative prayer. In this process the soul is stripped of all human passion. Climacus calls it the death of the intellect, the voluntary death to this world through continual prayer which finally leads to God. This voluntary death is justified by the anticipated resurrection to which it leads, not the resurrection of the body at the end of time, but the spiritual regeneration and resurrection of dead souls, a resurrection identified with the higher form of continual prayer which the monk can and should attain.

Despite the monastic emphasis - in both the Studite and Sinaitic tradition - on the ultimate union of the soul (mind) with God in the process of deification, human destiny does not consist of an absorption into the essence of God. The transcendence of God's essence remains a fundamental premise of Byzantine spirituality. While united with God, we remain totally ourselves in our nature and activity, and become more authentically human. Our participation in God is therefore a conscious human experience of God.

The spirit of Sinai, characterised by the absolute transcendence of God as well as by the "hesychastic" and charismatic individuality of the monk, perpetually battered against the more institutionalised spirituality of the Studite tradition in the centuries to come. This tension between Sinai and Studios finds its most descriptive expression in Simeon (949-1022), called the "New Theologian" by his later admirers.

Simeon started his monastic life as a novice at the Studion after an overwhelming experience befell him one evening which prepared him for the transformation of his whole life: a divine light suddenly shone on him and it seemed to him that he himself had become light and left the world altogether. He later withdrew to the small community of St. Mammias, also in Constantinople, where he was soon elected abbot.

Simeon has often been classified as a major representative of the hesychast tradition in Byzantium, following in the footsteps of Evagrius and Macarius. For him Christianity consisted of a mystical, personal communion with God which finds its ultimate goal in the vision of God. This vision of God - here Simeon takes up the idea of John Climacus that asceticism is a voluntary death that leads to resurrection - is the spiritual regeneration and resurrection of dead souls, which



takes place every day, given by Christ by means of the Holy Spirit. Monastic life was therefore a life of wakefulness, a perpetual vigil and prayer which restores true consciousness. This consciousness was identified with the knowledge and the vision of God, the gnosis of the Trinity, which Evagrius opposed to *agnoia*, which in its turn represents hell.

Simeon often emphasises the suddenness of this transforming experience. It breaks upon us suddenly (*aiphnes*) and inexplicably, always taking us as it were unawares when it happens. It leads us to the presence of the King of kings where we see, however dimly, his glory. All bonds of fear at once fall off and the joy in us will become a fountain for ever gushing forth.

The luminous experience Simeon speaks of has nothing in common with any pantheistic ecstasy. It is not for him in any way an experience of absorption or fusion. In his *Hymns of Divine Love* he thanks God who has made Himself one Spirit with us, without confusion, movement or change and who, though He is God above all, has become all in all for us. God remains transcendent despite the knowledge and the vision that flow forth from this unity. In his preface to the *Hymns*, which is one passionate invocation to the Spirit, he calls the Spirit the “true light”, the “hidden mystery”, the “nameless treasure”, the “inexpressible reality”, the “person who flies from human comprehension”.

Simeon’s mysticism is not only expressly pneumatological, but also Christological. Through our meditation on Christ, he continues in his *Hymns*, we shall become the members of Christ, and Christ our member, and He will make all that is ugly and ill-shapen in us beautiful and noble, adorning it with the splendour and beauty of his Godhead. And we shall become gods and intimately united with God.

In the midst of the tradition-minded Byzantine society, Simeon stood as a unique case of personal mysticism, one who would inevitably come into conflict with the hierarchical establishment of his day. He clearly states that only in mystical experience, and in the outpouring of love that accompanies it, the reality of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist is accomplished in us; also, if one accepts the episcopate without having received the vision, one is nothing but an intruder. Because of the demands he imposed on his monks, his leadership at St Mammas came to an end. Exiled, then rehabilitated, Simeon spent his last years composing spiritual writings unique in their mystical originality and their influence on later Byzantine thought. In fact, he was canonized by the Byzantine Church and generations of Eastern Christians have seen in him the great mystic of the Middle Ages.

Simeon’s hesychastic and mystical orientation cannot be gainsaid, but at the same time it must be acknowledged that his monasticism, despite his conflict with the religious establishment, had been nourished by the Studite tradition

with its essentially ecclesiastical and hierarchical character. He, in return, left more than one indelible mark on one of the main products of Studios: the Byzantine liturgy with its sacramental nature and the iconography which was closely connected with its development. We must now turn to this facet of Eastern theology and what it teaches us about the Orthodox experience of God.

### 3.3 THE GOD OF SACRAMENTS AND ICONS

The Eastern liturgy is one of the most beautiful and original creations of Byzantine culture. The story goes that before Russia was officially converted to Christianity by the baptism of the Kievan Prince Vladimir and his subjects, he sent special envoys to observe the services of different religions. They found the Muslim cult ugly and the Roman Catholic not particularly attractive, but attending the service in the St Sophia church in Constantinople, they were overwhelmed and said that they did not know whether they were on earth or in heaven. Albeit a legend, it tells us something about Byzantinism and the Byzantine experience of God in the symbolism of liturgical splendour, because the expression “heaven upon earth” is one of the favoured Greek ways to describe the Church at worship.

The hesychast way of deification was not open to everybody. Mystical contemplation was for the few. The other way was through the liturgy as veiling under visible symbols the reality of divine worship. The heavenly transcendent God draws near to the earthly worshipper, yet remains hidden in the mystery of his sacramental presence.

It is not possible to define precisely how many liturgical acts and ceremonies were accepted in the early Eastern Church as sacraments or mysteries (*mysteria*). The Greek word *mysterion* refers to something hidden and incomprehensible and was originally used by the early Greek Fathers in the same way as, for instance, the apostle Paul when he referred to the hidden purposes of God now revealed in Christ. In this period the term was used primarily in the wider and general sense of “mystery of salvation”. Gradually the word, together with its equivalent *sacramentum* used in the Latin Church, became more or less a technical term for the celebrations established by Christ and his apostles which, through their visible elements, transmit the divine grace to the Christian in a mysterious way. This meaning we already find in John Chrysostom, who said that *mysterion* means not what we believe we see, but we see something and we believe something else.

In the Greek Church the mysteries and their accompanying rituals were extended in number and meaning. The number of the seven sacraments was first fixed by the Western Church in the twelfth century. The Greek Church never formally committed itself to any strict limit to the number of sacraments, although their

numbering by the Church in the West was eventually widely accepted among Eastern Christians. It has been suggested that this acceptance resulted not so much from the influence of Latin theology as from the peculiar Byzantine fascination with symbolic numbers, the number seven in particular. But Byzantine authors who accepted the limit of seven sacraments often came up with competing lists. In the Middle Ages Byzantine liturgical writers emphasized some major sacraments which had greater theological bearing, like baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. Of all the sacraments only baptism and the Eucharist, for example, are given full attention in John of Damascene's *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* in the eighth century. The other sacraments tended to merge with the undetermined mass of mysteries. Even every icon as an image of the divine world was a mystery in itself. Through sacraments and sacred objects the transcendent God of mystical contemplation becomes accessible, not only seen, but even smelled, tasted and kissed.

Orthodox theology ignores the Western distinction between sacraments and sacramentals, and we are therefore justified in speaking about Byzantine sacramentalism. Nevertheless, right from the beginning, there were a number of major sacraments. But even among these major sacraments one sacrament stands out as the core sacrament around which the Byzantine liturgy developed: the Eucharist. It is therefore not surprising that the celebration of Eucharist was the one liturgical act that more than anything else exemplified the Byzantine experience of God. The sacrament of the Eucharist also provided the one place where the two traditions in Byzantine spirituality, the hesychast and the cenobite, could meet.

From this perspective it is interesting to look at the role played by the Evagrian and Dionysian mystical theology in the early development of the Byzantine understanding of the Eucharist.

The patristic tradition understood the Eucharist as a mystery of true and real communion with Christ. For most of the Greek Fathers, John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa among others, the Eucharist was seen as a mystery of real participation in the glorified body of Christ that bestows immortality on the communicant. This Eucharistic realism, however, was soon replaced by a more symbolic interpretation of the meaning of the sacrament, in line with the Evagrian mystic understanding of religion as an ascent of the mind to God. The liturgical act thus became something to be contemplated, a symbol of the union of the mind with God and its participation in God.

Pseudo-Dionysius was by far the most influential of these mystic theologians in promoting a symbolic understanding of the Eucharist. The symbol reflects the intelligible reality to be contemplated and it is to this higher contemplation that the Areopagite calls his readers. It has been pointed out that Dionysius never

formally presents the Eucharist as a participation in the body and blood of Christ. His emphasis falls on the union of our minds with God and with Christ, a union symbolised by the Eucharistic rites.

Although Dionysian symbolism never succeeded in changing the Eucharistic rites themselves, its theological influence held sway for almost three centuries, as is evidenced by the fact that during the period that followed Pseudo-Dionysius the Eucharist was now referred to as an “image” or “symbol” by all orthodox theologians of consequence, most notably Maximus the Confessor. The eighth century, however, brought about a fundamental change, when the Church in the East was forced to give an account of itself and its use of the term “image” during the iconoclastic crisis. The iconoclastic controversy - to which we shall return when dealing with the influence of icons on the Eastern experience of God - called into question the whole idea of religious images, seeing in their use a danger of idolatry. The iconoclastic council of 754 declared the religious use of icons invalid, stating that the Eucharist was the only admissible image established by Christ Himself, when He presented the bread and the wine as his body and blood.

Those theologians who defended the use of images and icons for religious purposes now found themselves in a difficult position. If they accepted the Eucharist as an image, much could be said for the exclusive viewpoint of the iconoclasts, thereby endangering the use of other images. They avoided this danger in two ways. Firstly they moved away from the Dionysian terminology, thereby emphasizing the Christological character of the Eucharist as a participation in the body and blood of Christ and not as a participation in God in the Dionysian sense. Patriarch Nicephorus, for instance, strongly rejects the Origenist-Evagrian idea that the communicant participates in the essence of God. In the Eucharist participation takes place in the glorified humanity of Christ, which is not the essence of God. Secondly, he and his supporters emphasize the reality of what happens in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we have real communion with the still human, albeit glorified and life-giving, body of Christ. In this they clearly built upon the theological foundation laid by John Damascene, who strongly opposed the iconoclasts, but who died in 749, a few years before the iconoclast victory at the 754 Council of Hieria.

The Eucharist is, in the opinion of John of Damascus, like an incarnation ever renewed, the recapitulation of the drama of redemption. In the Eucharist the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, because of a union of the divinity of the Logos with the bread and the wine. In other words, God has joined His divinity to the elements, making them his body and blood. The bread is not bread only, but bread united with the divinity, and so with the wine. We therefore, says John of Damascus, become partakers of, and participate in, the divine nature when we receive the body of Christ and drink his blood.

In the final analysis, a participation in God takes place in the Eucharistic rite, but the focus is different from that of the mystics. It is not a participation in the “essence” of God itself, but a participation of the divine nature brought about by the mystery of the incarnation.

The Byzantines rejected the idea of the Eucharist as an image or a symbol, because for them the Eucharist remained essentially a mystery. Although the visible elements of bread and wine are present, the union of the divinity of the Logos with these elements is such an unfathomable mystery that it negates all physical vision. Vision comes through the icons. In the icons the figures of Christ and the saints are seen and venerated, opening up another way of experiencing God far removed from esoteric participation in God through contemplation by the mystic.

The early Church avoided figural representation of Christ for various reasons. The second commandment (Exodus 20:4) forbade graven images and there was a strong desire to distance themselves from pagan rites with their rich religious imagery. In the catacombs Christ and the gospel stories were therefore portrayed by means of allegorical and symbolical representations, such as an anchor, fish or lamb.

Scriptures were not the only reason for the resistance against imagery. The Neo-Platonist influence within Origenistic mystical circles also played an important role. For these mystics the only true reality was that of the intellect. They were clearly influenced by Platonic spiritualism, which denied matter a permanent, God-created existence. Even Eusebius of Caesarea (265-339), the historian who maintained and extended the famous library of Origen, seemed to have succumbed to this form of intellectualism. When Constantia, sister of the Emperor Constantine, requested an image of Christ from him, he responded by saying that the concern for a material image of Christ was incompatible with the Christian faith, because the glorified Christ could only be contemplated “in the mind”.

Despite this evidence of resistance, it was clear by the fourth century that special material objects, such as the cross and other relics considered to be holy, were being venerated. At the same time there appeared large, monumental paintings of great historical cycles of events from the Old and New Testaments. Side by side with these historical representations symbols replacing the human image of God were used. But more was to come. From their pagan past, Greek-speaking Christians had inherited a taste for religious imagery and the adoption of elements of pagan art became not uncommon. Even symbols from pagan mythology were used, although they tried to fill them with a new content, just as the Greek Fathers used the instrument of Greek philosophy, adapting its understanding and language to Christian theology. Through the classical

traditions of Alexandrine art, which preserved Greek Hellenism in its purest form, Christian art became heir to the traditions of the ancient art of Greece. For fear of idolatry, however, tri-dimensional art forms practically disappeared in the East to be replaced by a new Christian two-dimensional version.

Among all the icons the icon of Christ was, of course, the most important, but also the most controversial. As early as the fourth century there were already indications that the themes of the Church art of that time frequently had a definite character of providing dogmatic answers to questions arising in the sphere of faith and reflected the dogmatic struggle of the Church with heresies. An example is the iconographical reaction to the Arian heresy which, condemned at the Synod of Nicaea, denied that Christ as the Logos shared the same substance or being with the Father. On either side of the image of the Saviour were placed Alpha and Omega. At a later stage the typical Byzantine icon of Christ became that of the Pantocrator, the Lord Omnipotent. It is the image of the glorified Christ regnant on his heavenly throne: the Godhead in all his glory and majesty. His divinity is without question. In fact, He bears the designation O OMEGA N around his head, the Septuaginta's Greek translation of the sacred tetragrammaton of the "I am" in Exodus 3:14, when God spoke to Moses (the Greek uses the participle).

It has been said that the Pantocrator iconographic type itself originated in the Zeus of Phidias after it had gone through various other stages in the pictorial arts: after the Good Shepherd (Hermes Cryophoros) came Christ as Asclepius, the Healer, and finally as Zeus, pagan art transformed to carry the Christian message. The severity of expression of the Pantocrator icon has led some researchers to the conclusion that it depicts Christ as the Judge, rather than Christ the Redeemer, and that this icon leads us to the very heart of Byzantine piety. It is the worship of the transcendent almighty God whom the sinful can only approach in awe.

The iconographic image of Christ, however, soon led to a serious controversy in the Eastern Church, the so-called iconoclastic crisis. Strong opposition to the use of icons started with Emperor Leo III (717-741) and was continued by Constantine V (741-775). The initial reason for their reaction against the use of icons was in a certain sense non-theological. It had to do with Arab conquest of Palestine, Syria and Egypt, and the inevitable confrontation of the Byzantine Empire, militarily as well as ideologically, with Islam. Islam constantly claimed to be the latest, and therefore the highest, revelation of the God of Abraham, and accused the Christian religion of polytheism in its acceptance of Christ as God next to the Father and consequently of the Trinity. The use of icons, in particular the icon of Christ, they forthwith condemned as idolatry.

The accusation of idolatry evoked a strong response from the two emperors who, together with other Eastern-born Christians, especially the Syrians and the Armenians, were much less inclined by their cultural past to the use of images. In 754 Constantine convened a council at Hieria, where he claimed the destruction of icons to be the logical consequence of the Christological debates of the previous centuries. If, on the one hand, the icon represents only the humanity of Christ, it means that the human and the divine in the person of Christ are separated, thus being guilty of the heresy of Nestorius, who was condemned at the Synod of Chalcedon in 451. If, on the other hand, the icon represents Christ as both human and divine, it means that his divinity is circumscribed by his humanity, which is impossible. It was furthermore argued that, as an image ought to be identified with its prototype, the supporters of the use of icons could easily fall into the trap of idolatry. The council finally decided that the Eucharist is the only image and symbol of Christ.

The main champion in this period for the continued use of icons was John of Damascus. He took his theological point of departure in the incarnation. Through the incarnation God changed the relationship between Himself and the world by assuming a material existence, participating in human flesh and blood.

The theological position taken up by John of Damascus prevailed at Constantinople in 787, considered by the Byzantine Church as the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The fact that the Son of God is representable according to his flesh assumed of the virgin is, in line with John of Damascus, contrasted by the Council with the impossibility of representing the Father, who is inconceivable and invisible. The Council therefore forbids the representation of the Father in icons. Depicting the Son, however, is permissible, not in his divine or human nature, but in his person in which both these natures are incomprehensibly combined. This is confirmed by Theodore the Studite (759-826), who emphasized that an image could only be the image of a person (*hupostasis*), for the image of nature is inconceivable.

The teaching on icons is given in concise form by the Council of Constantinople in the so-called *Kontakion of the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy*, established to commemorate the victory over iconoclasm.

The *Kontakion* is remarkable in that it addresses itself to “the Mother of God”: “The indefinable word of the Father made Himself definable, having taken flesh of you, O Mother of God, and having refashioned the soiled image to its former estate, has suffused it with divine beauty”. In this way the *Kontakion* represents a liturgical, prayerful expression of the teaching on the incarnation. The negation of the human image of the Saviour implies the negation of the motherhood of Mary. The affirmation of the Christ icon by contrast exacts the manifestation of the divine motherhood and her veneration as the indispensable

condition of the incarnation, the cause of the fact that God became representable. Thus God the Word, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, describable neither by word nor by image, assumes human nature, is born of the virgin; while remaining perfect God, becomes a perfect human being; becomes visible, tangible and therefore describable. This immutability of the divine incarnation is affirmed and demonstrated by the icon. Christ, the Logos, assumed all the characteristics of a human being, including describability, and his icon is a permanent witness of this.

From this background the patriarch Nicephorus and Theodore the Studite drew a theology of the visible creation as a symbol of the invisible, and of the incarnation as a manifestation of the divinity in humanity, which was to become the very soul of Byzantine liturgical celebration. From there comes a whole interpretation of the liturgy as veiling under visible symbols the reality of heavenly worship. The icons not only came systematically to cover the entire inner surface of the church, but were erected as well like a mystical screen between the sanctuary and the people.

Through its sacraments and icons the transcendental God indeed takes his abode in the temple and the Church becomes "heaven on earth".



# 4 THE FACE OF GOD IN EARLY MEDIEVAL MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

## 4.1 THE DARK AGES

The first ominous sign of the disintegration of the Roman Empire came as early as the year 410, when Alaric the Western Goth captured Rome and gave it to his army to loot. Romans said then that no enemy had entered the gates of Rome for eight hundred years, but after only a hundred years of Christian rule the city had fallen. The old pagan gods seemed to have protected Rome better than the God of the Christians. Augustine, in his book *The City of God*, answered that the Christian religion had at least brought a new humane factor to the horrors of war: Christians among the invading German barbarians (Latin: *barbari*; Greek: *barbaroi*, people whose language sounded like “bar-bar” to Roman ears) led women and children to the churches, where they were safe from attack.

Alaric withdrew, but a hundred years later the German barbarians were overrunning the whole of the Western Empire. The Vandals fought and pillaged their way through Gaul and Spain, and founded a kingdom on the North African coast. The Western Goths invaded southern Gaul and soon had spread over most of Spain as well. The Franks, who had been living on the banks of the Rhine, crossed the river and began to settle in the northern parts of Gaul. The Lombards overran Italy. Only the Empire in the East remained for the time being more or less intact, with Constantinople as the “new Rome” at its centre. Soon, however, they would also be exposed to the rise of Islam in the seventh century and the Arab invasions. When finally Emperor Leo stopped the advance of the Arab army onto Constantinople in 718 and drove them back over Asia Minor, the Arabs had overrun half of the territory which had once been the Christian Roman Empire. Spain would not return to Christian rule till 1034. For North Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Syria there would be no return.

The fragmentation of Europe, the disappearance of political and economic unity and control and the ever-widening rift between the Eastern Empire and the kingdoms in the West contributed to the chaos and the turmoil of this age. The dark ages had arrived in the West.

For a brief moment, during the reign of Charlemagne from 768 to 814, things changed for the better. He doubled the size of the kingdom, destroying the Lombard kingdom and setting Rome free in the process. He was also a good organiser and did much to improve the government of state and church, keeping a firm hand on both. He was, moreover, a patron of learning. But after his death

the darkness of ignorance again descended. Politically the tendency to split into small principalities now started to increase and paved the way for the feudal system.

With the absence of a strong ruler like Charlemagne the imperial theory of a united Christian world became less and less practicable, the possibility of extensive organisation vanished owing to a lack of means of communication and the circulation of wealth, and some system had to be devised to protect society from disintegration. Thus feudalism developed out of chaotic conditions. In theory the feudal idea was that the strong should extend protection over the weak in return for certain services, and that property was a trust to be exercised for the benefit of others. But few of these benefits materialised during the dark ages. Instead we find the development of a strong aristocracy which held down its vassals, and the tyrannous caprice of an individual lord. Although it was better than the anarchy that prevailed before its introduction, the feudal system made its own contribution to the darkness of the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Church in the West could not escape the influence of feudalism. Noble birth became more and more an essential qualification for high office in the Church. As the power of the bishops increased, they even tended to become independent rulers rather than pastors of their flocks. The princely prelates of Germany had already taken their place among the secular princes in the Western Empire, and the Pope in Rome had become a sovereign, who claimed to sit with the Emperor on the throne of the world.

In the chaos and turmoil of these times the monasteries of Western Europe gradually became beacons of light amid the darkness of the days of anarchy and disorder in a semi-barbarian world. What remained of ancient culture and spirituality was preserved within the walls of these monasteries by communities imbued with the ideals of monasticism. In due course they became an integral and important part of society. While kingdoms changed hands and great estates were broken up, the monasteries, self-supporting and self-sufficient, could often remain intact. They became a nucleus that could escape destruction when towns were destroyed. The dark ages would undoubtedly have witnessed the annihilation of letters and learning but for monastic Christianity, despite the boundless credulity and the modicum of knowledge, mostly incorrect, which passed for learning amongst the monks and clergy.

Within a context such as this it would have been almost impossible to find in the theological scene, more specifically in the concept of God, any indication of a development in line with the preceding centuries of Christian thought, but for the monastic tradition. The face of God would, inevitably, change for these people, living under radically changed circumstances.

We must keep in mind that, despite individual and regional differences between monasteries in Western Europe, they all had a common origin. It is this common origin that gave them a very specific kind of spirituality that would characterise the type of theology that would eventually emerge from European monasticism.

Our story goes back to the rise of Christian monasticism. From the deserts of Egypt and Syria the monastic life spread to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, thence over central and western Gaul. From western Gaul, like sparks of a fire, it passed to the Celtic regions of Cornwall and Wales. But most remarkable of all was the development in Ireland, where a monasticism of a type that was radically eremetical expanded rapidly in the latter half of the sixth century. Clearly modelled on the example of the Egyptian desert fathers, but with a Celtic spirit very different from the Coptic, monasticism became the ruling element in church and society. Peculiar to Celtic monasticism was its missionary zeal, a self-renunciation whereby which the monks took to foreign lands the Christian faith and monastic life, most notably Scotland, Brittany and central Europe as far east as Vienna. Meanwhile hermits and small monasteries were multiplying in Italy, all gradually accepting the Rule of Benedict of Nursia as the rule for daily life in the monasteries.

In the two centuries between the age of Benedict (c.550) and the rise of Charlemagne (770) the typical monastery in the West changed considerably and became a large complex, almost like a miniature civic centre with almonry, hospital, school and halls for meetings, besides a large church and the necessary accommodation for the monks. On the religious level there were also changes. The early desert fathers left behind them a highly developed urban society with a traditional piety and observance. In Europe, especially during the dark ages, the monastic life was, for both men and women, the only form of instructed, organised devotion. The monks gradually became a group of men interceding with God for the rest of the people living in ignorance and poverty. The cloister, with its facilities for writing, reading, painting and craft-work, became the centre of European religious and cultural life.

It must be recognised that faith at this time was based principally on ignorance and terror. The people of this age lived in perpetual uncertainty, and in constant fear of baleful forces beyond their control and comprehension. Their faith in God can be reduced virtually to a belief in the omnipotence of a distant God and a terror of his fearful arm. The art of the day reflected this religious attitude. Pre-Romanesque art presented an image of Christ that was sublime and aloof, exclusive of intimacy. Even on the cross the Saviour was represented until after the Carolingian era in a regal attitude and it was only towards the 13th century that the head came to be shown bowed in suffering.

God was so awesome that it was necessary to use human mediators to intercede for the ordinary people. This mediation was supplied mainly within the monastic tradition, not only through prayers and other forms of intercession, but also through a rapidly developing cult of relics. The people needed a supernatural presence they could touch and feel. The objects which had belonged to the saints were ideal for this purpose, and, better still, in bits of their flesh and bones their efficacy was enhanced. We find a proliferation of saints in this period and the cult of relics which had begun in the 3rd century expanded enormously. It acquired the character of fetishism, shrouded in the secret depths of a mystical religious experience.

### 4.2 THE MYSTICAL GOD OF MONASTICISM

One of the outstanding characteristics of mysticism is meditation or what is sometimes called “mental prayer”. Throughout the literature of the early Middle Ages there is a marked absence of reference to any set periods in the monasteries of the West for such an activity; in this there is a strong contrast with the documents of Egyptian and Syrian monasticism. The main emphasis falls upon vocal, liturgical prayers. It is clear from these writings that provision was made for a kind of meditative reading of the Bible and works of theology and spirituality. It can be accepted that these activities would often pass naturally into prayer.

Nevertheless, the multiplication of liturgical prayers would most certainly have had a certain effect in exalting the value of such prayers at the expense of private and silent, unspoken prayer. Reaction against this exclusively liturgical conception of monastic life, however, gradually led to a widespread movement towards solitude and a simplicity of life. Many became hermits in this period. Others turned for spiritual guidance to the contemplatives of the Eastern desert and the works of Pseudo-Dionysius.

In the writings of Odo of Cluny we have an indication of the monastic ideal of his day. The monks make “profession of a sublime resolve; their life with all its endeavour reaches beyond this world”. The ardent love of God leads through ascetic exercises far beyond the familiar realm of ordinary experience. In this way the summit of union with God is reached. Silence plays a pivotal role in this regard. Odo refers to days of complete silence as a participation in eternal silence, which means the innermost depths of the Godhead, of that infinite silence from which the Logos came forth. Even before the end of time the person of silence is drawn into the infinite depths of the eternal silence of God.

The turning towards the mystical writings of the Eastern desert and Pseudo-Dionysius also meant a revival of Hellenism. Irish monasticism played a crucial role in this regard. A Roman orthodoxy prevailed in Europe, but its domination

had not then extended to Ireland. That which still dominated Ireland was Alexandrian Hellenism. When Charlemagne started with his “School of the Palace”, his main source for scholars was the monasteries, especially of the British Isles and, above all, Ireland. In these monasteries the writings of the Fathers were studied, not only in Latin, but also in Greek. When the Anglo-Saxon scholar, Alcuin, after having for some time directed the Palace School, retired to the monastery of St Martin of Tours, he wrote to Charlemagne: “On my departure, I left Latins with you. I do not know who has replaced them with Egyptians”. That classification is at once ingenious and precise. The spiritual home of the Irish scholars was Egypt and the East.

The most significant scholar in the period before Charlemagne had been Bede “the Venerable”, who wrote works on grammar, biblical commentaries and homilies. But no thinker in the field of theology comparable to the patristic period emerged. Various controversies regarding specific points of Christian doctrine - Christology, predestination, the Eucharist, icons, etc - were dealt with, but any systematic and comprehensive theological endeavour from which a clear picture of the doctrine of God can be deduced was absent. The advent of the Irishman, John Scotus Erigena, to the court of Charles the Bald brought about a welcome change.

Born somewhere in Ireland between 800 and 815 AD, he was the one great thinker of the West in this dreary epoch. All his sympathies, as of so many of his countrymen, were with Egypt and the East. He was a Hellenist and his affinities were with the Neo-Platonists.

Charles the Bald instructed Erigena to translate the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. The influence of these works on the mind of the translator was enormous, though he was a Neo-Platonist before he knew anything about the Areopagite. A number of scholars maintain that Erigena derived all the Neo-Platonist substance of his philosophy from Augustine, but many of the characteristic features of his teaching can be traced back to Proclus, and in some respects his thought resembles Origen more than Augustine. But it was the Pseudo-Dionysius, and with him the Greek father, Maximus Confessor, that finally shaped Erigena’s philosophy and theology.

We have already pointed out that the mystical theology of the early centuries which finally culminated in the system of the Pseudo-Dionysius harboured within itself a very strong intellectual element. Greek intellectualism with its emphasis on the rational soul could easily be reconciled with the idea of the soul’s ultimate return to, and union with, God as the Supreme Intellect. In Erigena mysticism and intellectualism came to full fruition.

For Erigena true philosophy, the study of wisdom, is true religion, for philosophy does no more than to expound the precepts of true religion, according to which

human beings pursue from mystery to mystery the Sovereign and First Cause of all things, namely God. In this pursuit we are led by reason, Erigena insists. He does not deny the authority of Scripture, but points out that the authority of which the decrees are not approved by reason is an authority without value. In this regard he considers it essential to take account of the multiplicity of biblical languages and of the several levels at which Scripture speaks, for example, with reference to the biblical account of creation.

There is no conflict between the human intellect and Holy Scripture. But Scripture is difficult to understand. The intellect requires a light from God which will enable the human spirit to go beyond the moral and allegorical sense of the biblical word. Erigena calls this activity of the intellect a contemplative theology (*contemplatio theologica*).

In essence Erigena distinguishes between three levels of knowledge. On the first level we have knowledge by sense. The soul must pass through this level to a level beyond the words of Holy Scripture and all creatures. This is the level of reason (*ratio*), which discerns the hidden realities they signify. They are so many manifestations of God that give the reason, purified by the light from God, the ability to go beyond what words and things say to apply their limited perfections to God. Finally, at the third level the intellect (*intellectus*) receives through the grace of illumination the absolutely simple and supernatural knowledge of God which is essentially inexpressible. This constitutes the return (*reversio*) of the soul to God.

Erigena's thought is, of course, the religious intellectualism of the true mystic of Greek origin. The contemplative ascent of the soul to God is the journey of the soul back to its Origin. Erigena's description of this journey is, however, not as straightforward as the previous explanation might suggest. He makes use of the principles of dialectic, that art which, according to him, is not the product of human invention, but has been established in the nature of things by the Author of all the arts. The journey towards the knowledge of God is dialectic: it consists of negation as well as affirmation. One has therefore to distinguish between two parts of theology: the apophatic or negative, which denies that the divine essence is any of the things that are, and the cataphatic or positive, which predicates of the divine essence all the things that are. In this Erigena clearly shows himself a true follower of his Greek masters, Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor.

Of the two theologies Erigena sees the negative as the more appropriate and more valid, for even the angels are unable to know God in his true nature. God is not any kind of essence nor any kind of goodness. He is exalted above all that can be spoken or understood. We can only say what God is not, not what God is. God transcends all categories of time and space, is beyond all accidents and

more than absolute. It follows that God is in Himself utterly impassable. But how then is it possible that the Bible can call God “love” and how is God said to love all things and to be loved by all the things that have been made by Him? The answer is that God is called “love” by a metaphor, trying to express something that surpasses all reason and understanding.

The negative theology emphasises the transcendence of God to such a degree that even the name “God” could become meaningless. Erigena therefore uses the principle of dialectic by applying to God absolute immanence as the obverse side of absolute transcendence. God is not only “nothing”, but also “everything”. All things are in God, he says, since God Himself is in all things. Everything that is said to exist does not exist in itself, but by participation in that nature which truly exists, namely God.

In his treatise *On the Division of Nature* Erigena describes the universe as the timeless process of the self-evolution of the Divine Trinity, which in creating all things is in itself marvellously created. Creation is the unfolding of the divine Ideas, the primordial causes as the intermediary between God and his creation. God is thus the principle of all creation. One and triune, God comes down into these primordial causes, and then through them into the creatures. The primordial causes themselves participate according to a hierarchical order in the excellence of God: they are goodness, being, reason, truth and the other truths we can confirm of God.

In the Logos the primordial causes are united as rays coming forth from a centre, while the Holy Spirit is the principle of the distribution of these causes. The Father is the source of the Son (Logos) and of the Spirit. Thus God is at the same time the principle and the term of all things. It is therefore not surprising that the last two books of *On the Division of Nature* deal with the return of all things to God, as the end of all. This return is made possible by the very close union between the Divine Being with human nature in the Word incarnate. Through Him the deification of humanity finally takes place.

Erigena adopts the doctrine of the restitution of all things and the deification of humanity from Origen. The final consummation began with the resurrection of Christ and will end with the final assumption of human nature into God, and the reinvolution of all things into their primordial causes, so that God may be all in all.

After an interruption of more than two centuries John Scotus Erigena reintroduced to the West the mysticism of Greek intellectualism. But he had little influence on his own times and the generations immediately following. Although there were superficial similarities between his mystical theology and the monastic spirituality of the dark ages, it was only later on, in the twelfth century, that efforts were made to integrate into traditional spirituality his

reflections on God and the universe. He appears like a meteor at the end of the Carolingian period.

Many scholars do not consider Erigena a true mystic, pointing out that he lacked the exalted religious experience and the yearning which characterise the mystic. This may be true, but he was nevertheless the only thinker steeped in the Greek tradition who was able to articulate the thought processes behind the mystical religious experience within the monastic orders of this period. Without there being a full realization of this, the emphasis on contemplation within monasticism was in the final analysis the heritage of the Greek mysticism that accompanied Christian thought almost, although not entirely, from the outset.

We have to look elsewhere for the development of a less cerebral piety at the time when the dark ages were drawing to a close and the new dawn of the eleventh century was approaching.

#### 4.3 MONASTIC REFORM AND THE GOD OF LOVE

After the death of Charles the Bald, the power of the Carolingians rapidly declined. The constant warfare between the various portions of the empire created a constant state of chaos and turmoil. The century that followed the Carolingians (850-950) was the darkest of all. The empire declined into feudalism and the monasteries decayed. The most significant monastic movement of this period, which emanated from the abbey founded at Cluny in Burgundy south of Dijon in the year 909, is usually seen as the herald of a new dawn, but it took almost half a century for Cluny to shape the monastic world. Cluny eventually succeeded in its programme of monastic reform and in the course of the eleventh century it virtually became the religious centre of Christendom and the nursing-mother of bishops, cardinals and popes. The great Burgundian abbey of Cluny ended up as the largest and most impressive monastic establishment in the West, exerting a revitalizing influence, both directly and through its many dependent and affiliated monasteries, most notably Bec, Moyenmoutier and Monte Cassino, all in their different ways houses of great distinction, nurturing scholars and church administrators. Half the great sees of Europe and the papal legacies were filled by the black monks of the Cluniac movement.

The Cluniacs observed the spirit, as they saw it, of Benedict's Rule, adapting the letter to the conditions of their time. Most significant, however, was the liturgical splendour of Cluny. A greatly lengthened liturgy left the monks very little time for silent contemplation and no time for manual labour. The monks of Cluny carried out what was then felt to be the *raison d'être* of monasticism, the intercession for the whole of society through adoration and service, in the most splendid setting imaginable.



Unfortunately, when Cluny's power was at its height, its fervour started to wane. The very fervour of its abbots and the prestige they enjoyed had brought them a material prosperity which to a greater or lesser extent involved them in temporal affairs. At the same time rapid economic and social changes in the late eleventh century ushered in a period of self-questioning and a search for identity among the religious groups. As at the beginning of Christian monasticism, there was a growing feeling that poverty and simplicity were a better reflection of the values of the Gospel than liturgical splendour. This resulted in a second, less conservative reform movement, that of the hermits and the ascetics.

The eremitical life as the most perfect form of monastic existence had never been wholly neglected. Now, at the end of the tenth century, the ideals of Egypt and the desert fathers were once more to influence the West as small groups began to settle in outlandish and infertile spots, and opted for a way of 'desert' life so austere in the early years that their own contemporaries viewed it with a mixture of horror and admiration. Thus started the Cistercian movement of white monks (as opposed to the black monks of Cluny), when a group of exiles from the monastery of Molesme settled in the 'desert' called Citeaux, a marshland south-west of Dijon, determined to renew a monastic life for which silence and spiritual contemplation, prayer and the meditative reading of Scripture and the Fathers, were the essence of religious life.

The continuity with the early Greek patristic culture, more specifically with its Platonic mystical side, gives medieval monastic culture its special character. This becomes abundantly evident in the Cistercian monasteries. There is, however, an important difference. Due to the enduring influence of Augustine the "intelligence of faith" that was being pursued by the monks did not have the speculative, intellectual nuance that characterized the mystical thinking of, for example, Origen or Pseudo-Dionysius. Like the Greek philosophers they also talked about *theoria*, but they made it very clear that it was understood not in the sense of a theoretical search for God by the intellect, but as a participation in, an anticipation of, celestial contemplation. They were fond of quoting the Apostle Paul's words about vain knowledge (I Cor 8:1) and counteracted this vain knowledge with what they called "holy simplicity". Where simplicity is absent, theoretical questions and argumentations about God rapidly lead to a sort of agitation not compatible with an attitude of contemplative prayer. The mind must be brought back to the simple quest of seeking God, not discussing Him. Gueric of Igny, the Cistercian monk, praised the simplicity of Christian humility, the only thing that safeguards the integrity of the mind and ensures that the search is for God, and for God alone. Everything else was to be subordinated to this search for God. In the final analysis nothing should come in the place of the monk's living in the presence of God, his mystical experience of union with God.

This experience in the cloister was both the principle and the aim of the quest for God.

In their study of, and meditation on, the Holy Scripture and the Fathers, the Cistercians looked for the inner illumination, for the grace of intimate prayer as a manner of savouring and relishing the divine realities. This is 'higher knowledge', which is the complement, the fruition of faith, and which reaches completion in prayer and contemplation.

Here we clearly discern the influence of Augustine. His conception of the inner illumination that penetrates us from the light which the Word Incarnate brought into the world had a decisive influence on the spiritual orientation of monasticism. In their mysticism the monks were Augustinian.

As we have seen, love is for Augustine the final result of God's disclosure of Himself in the soul and his mysticism is permeated with the concept of love. In Cistercian theology this side of Augustine's thoughts is revitalized in a most significant way. Nowhere else is it so clearly marked than in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, the great mystic of the eleventh century, lauded by some Roman Catholic authors as the "last of the Fathers" and who can claim the rare distinction of enjoying the esteem of both Calvin and the Curia.

Bernard of Fontaines, of noble descent, was born near Dijon, Burgundy, probably in 1090. In his early twenties he made a dramatic entry into the little-regarded monastery of Cîteaux, together with his brothers except the youngest and a number of kinsmen. Within a few years he had risen to be the abbot of a new Cistercian monastery at Clairvaux, soon to become the leading monastery in the West, its abbot the most influential churchman of his day. He made few excursions into the world outside his monastery, but the world increasingly sought him out, constantly embroiling him in affairs of church and state. Called by some a man of many paradoxes who did not shun controversy, who saw himself as the champion of the Bride of Christ, who tackled head-on the perceived heresy of Peter Abelard, who preached the Second Crusade and whose authority was constantly invoked in the settling of disputes, he nevertheless remained the mystic longing for the solitude and quiet of his cloister.

Bernard and his fellow Cistercians were all versed in the monastic tradition of meditative theology, a prayerful reflection upon God's revealed Word in which they discovered the 'economy' of God's salvation. Central to this tradition was the allegorical reading of Holy Scriptures, dating back to Origen and beyond. Their conceptual tools were not definitions, but symbols and analogies. They believed that to define is also to limit. To meditate on symbols leads into a mystery that has no limits.

In Bernard's homilies upon the Song of Solomon Cistercian theology finds its noblest expression. In these homilies he makes full use of the leeway given him by allegory and symbol, but in it all prayer and love remain the two pillars of his mystic theology. Prayer is the vehicle and love is the content. He is convinced that in our search for God we discover with greater facility through prayer than through disputation. The reverence for God's mysteries is a reverence of prayer. It is the source of all understanding and all love.

For Bernard the grace of intimate prayer and the experience of the realities of faith are essentially one and the same, because through prayer one savours and relishes the reality of union with God and therefore the reality of God Himself. It has been said of Bernard of Clairvaux that his watchword was not the Anselmian "I believe in order that I may understand" (*credo ut intelligam*), but "I believe in order that I may experience" (*credo ut experiar*).

In the theology of Bernard the knowledge of God belongs to a higher order than the one which can be reached through reason: it can only be experienced in the close union with God that comes through prayer. The knowledge of God is an act of recognition, recognition in a deep and living manner by means of prayer and the contemplation of the content of faith itself. The knowledge of God should therefore be a knowledge that unites and joins one to God.

In a remarkable passage from his *De Consideratione* Bernard says:

"It is not disputation, it is sanctity which comprehends if the incomprehensible can, after a certain fashion, be understood at all. And what is this fashion? If you are a saint, you have already understood, you know; if you are not, become one, and you will learn through your own experience."

The contemplation of the content of faith which leads to the contemplation of God Himself begins and ends with a contemplation of the mystery of the humanity of God in Jesus. The strongest feature of his homilies upon the Song of Solomon is the spiritual energy with which he leads his hearers and readers to immerse themselves in the contemplation of this mystery, particularly the mystery of his passion. What, he asks in one of the sermons, is more effective for the healing of the wounds of conscience, and for the clarifying of the vision of the mind than painstaking meditation upon the wounds of Christ? He compares the contemplation of the passion of Christ with a bundle of myrrh upon our breast, which leads us to the recognition of his divinity and thus to union with Him. Actually it is God who draws near to us in the man Jesus, who is the proof of divine love. In Jesus God Himself had changed his name from one that connoted his "majesty and power" to one that represented his "kindness and grace". Being Himself the wisdom of God, Jesus is the one through whom the

true wisdom of God comes to the human race: a wisdom that is none other than the love of God for humanity. As his love is revealed to us in the contemplation of this Jesus, we respond with our love and so become one with Him. It is “the outgoing of a pure mind into God”, or “the pious descent of God into the soul” to be received with the deepest emotions and within the very marrow of the heart. It is the blessed and delightful embrace between the loving soul and his beloved.

It is abundantly clear that for Bernard God’s love for us is the source of all the knowledge we have of God, and for our part, there is no knowledge of God without love: “The Father is never fully known if He is not loved perfectly”. To know God in a salutary manner, which is both the outcome and the means to salvation, is to love Him, and to love Him means to be willing that His mystery may be accomplished in us.

From the foregoing it is clear that Bernard would want to avoid any form of speculative theology divorced from the experience of the mystery of God’s love in us. When he deals with the doctrine of the Trinity, he tries to explain that this doctrine is not a speculative construct, or an exercise in dialectical subtlety, but a soteriological necessity. Only an impeccably orthodox doctrine of the Trinity could guarantee that the Saviour was God in a complete and unequivocal way. Bernard therefore vigorously reaffirmed the teachings of the Nicene Creed, including the Western elaboration of those teachings, the idea that the Holy Spirit “is the strong bond, the indivisible love, and the indissoluble unity between the Father and the Son”. The Trinitarian confession was fundamental not only to Christian faith, but also to Christian life, for each Person of the Trinity bore a special relation to the disciple of Christ. With apologies for the inadequacy of any such language, Bernard could say that “the entire Trinity loves” the child of God. Although the entire Trinity loves and the Holy Spirit could be identified as “the indivisible love between the Father and the Son”, it was nevertheless in the Son of God, incarnate as a human being, that saving love had come. It is He as the Logos who bestowed divine love on behalf of God; it is He as the Logos become flesh who accepted God’s love on behalf of humanity.

The mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux bears the mark of an almost radical Christocentrism and a remarkable disinclination for speculation in the best tradition of the early anti-Gnostic fathers. At the same time he carried forward Augustine’s peculiar form of mystical theology into the centuries to come.

A chapter on the mystics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries cannot be closed without mentioning the school of Saint Victor, founded near Paris by William of Champeaux. Here his successor, Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1141), introduced the Neo-Platonic mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius with its emphasis on the contemplative ascending steps towards the goal of an ineffable beatitude. But in his works there are already clear signs of an effort to combine mystical piety

with the theological methodology of the so-called schoolmen or scholastics of the early twelfth century, who had already begun to put more and more emphasis upon the rationality of the Christian faith. The great theoretician in this regard, however, was not Hugh himself, but his pupil and successor, Richard of Saint Victor, a native of Scotland, who died in 1173 in Paris. From him we have a comprehensive treatise on the Trinity which bears some resemblance to the thoughts of Bernard of Clairvaux in so far as the concept of love is central to it. But in contrast to Bernard, his approach is far more speculative and scholastic. It is therefore better to deal with him under the next heading.

# 5 THE FACE OF GOD IN MEDIEVAL SCHOLASTICISM

## 5.1 THE GOD OF REASON: THE RISE OF EARLY SCHOLASTICISM

In the previous chapter we saw that the century following the Carolingians was the darkest of all. Despite the reform movements in monasticism and the survival of some of the rudiments of Greco-Roman culture within the walls of the cloisters, this was still an age of superstition. While, on the one hand, the records of the spiritual experiences of the times reveal a vivid consciousness of the nearness of the Divine, there was, on the other hand, an unspeakable terror of the devil and the forces of darkness. The whole world seemed a dense mass of evil spirits, and magic had to be met with magic. It is said that the life of the Middle Ages dissevered from its superstitions would be as incomprehensible as the *Iliad* without its contending deities or *Paradise Lost* without its Satan. But new developments were at hand.

A great part of the countryside in Western Europe was still unpeopled and there were huge primeval forests untouched by human hand. With the growth in population, however, a process of clearance was started. The wastes and forests which had once been the abode of beasts and demons were falling to the axe and becoming dwelling places. Church buildings sprang up in almost every place where people grouped together in villages. This provided the physical background to the sense of dominance over nature and a belief in human capacity which was to characterize the new age. At the same time many old walled towns and cities with their cathedrals started to grow because of the increasing vitality of economic life. A larger population and greater production required better centres of exchange. Before the middle of the twelfth century the expanding cities were showing signs of a new cultural, educational and religious importance. The cathedrals were increasingly the finest architectural monuments of the time and the cathedral schools, which had been of lesser importance than the monastic schools for a long time, were emerging as a major intellectual force.

Despite the classical background the monasteries inherited through their reading and studying of the Fathers, most of the monastic writing in the eleventh century showed the marks of a non-speculative education. There were hymns, lives of saints and annals in abundance, but not much serious theology and philosophy. The spectacular growth of the city schools and the concomitant decline of monastic schools influenced Christian thinking deeply. The study of the arts,

which included logic or dialectics, received greater emphasis in a non-monastic environment and this in turn had a direct influence on the way in which the texts of the Bible and the Fathers, the *sacra pagina*, were studied. In all this there was no real search for new knowledge: the purpose of study was the elucidation of the texts of the past under the leadership of various masters or *scholastici*. They were curiously content with the body of knowledge which had been handed down to them. They seemed to assume that all the necessary material and factors were in their possession; what remained to be done was to arrange them in a system. In this process, depending as they did on logic and dialectics, it gradually became a generally accepted point of departure that human reason should be instrumental in building up their system. This does not mean that they questioned the truth and validity of the doctrine handed down to them. The authority of the Bible and the Fathers was fully accepted, yet doctrine was analysed, defined and codified in a way for which there is no previous parallel. Terminology drawn from logic invaded the study of doctrine, and some of the schoolmen saw in it the key which would give access to the mysteries contained in the Scriptures.

It should not come as a surprise that human reason was now being extolled as the instrument of system building. It had always been recognized that Christians should not rest content with blind affirmation, but should strive to understand their faith. From the time of the Apologists this conviction runs like a golden thread through Christian theology in the West. Even within the mystical tradition it was never the intention to ignore the claims of reason. It was accepted that faith was directed towards something that surpassed human understanding, but not that it contradicted reason. This was, however, never a matter of profound theological debate. The emphasis was elsewhere, John Scotus Erigena being the one great exception as we have seen.

With the advent of the schoolmen everything changed. They made it one of their main objectives to ascertain the relation of faith and reason. Is what Christians believe to have been given by God in his revelation consistent with reason, or are the two contradictory? If they are compatible, which should have priority? Can reason demonstrate as true what the Christian believes about God? If it cannot, does what is received by faith complement what is reached by reason?

A decisive source of the change was the use of an early doubtful Latin translation of Isaiah 7:9, based on the Septuagint but not included in the Vulgate: "Unless you believe, you will not understand". Anselm of Canterbury gave it its classical interpretation in the first chapter of his *Proslogion*: "I yearn to understand some measure of your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe".

Anselm ( AD 1033 - 1109) of the Cluniac monastery of Bec in Normandy - he later became Archbishop of Canterbury - together with Peter Abelard (AD 1079-1142) of Paris are to be considered as the initiators of this first phase in scholasticism, despite the fact that Anselm strongly opposed Abelard on certain theological issues. Some of their works were specifically designed to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith to unbelievers, who did not accept the same Scriptures but might be persuaded by rational argument. Anselm's two great works, the *Proslogion* and *Cur Deus Homo?*, and Abelard's *Dialogue between a Jew, a Christian and a Philosopher* were apologetics that targeted not only the Jews, but were quite likely also an appeal to Islam.

Beginning with the truth of the Christian faith, Abelard points out in his *Dialogue*, the Christian mind must seek to discover the reason why this is true. For these early schoolmen there was, in principle at least, no aspect of the truth to which the believing mind could not turn in its search for understanding.

The most important of these aspects of the truth for the Christian thinkers of the period was the existence of God. Closely linked to the question of the rational demonstrability of the existence of God was the question of the Trinitarian nature of God's existence: how could it be rationally explained that the one God exists as three Persons? The Trinity was necessarily an important issue in controversies with Judaism and Islam; and a new sense of the humanity of Christ, as it is clearly seen in the Christ-centric mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux, raised problems about the sense in which He is God, and therefore about the character of the Trinity. To this we must add the Filioque dispute of the day. It had by now become a real issue between the East and the West.

Anselm's so-called ontological proof for the existence of God is the most important debate of this kind during the period under discussion, while Abelard's controversial ideas about the Trinity give us an insight into the nature of the scholastic argumentation of the day. However, in order to understand fully the intricacies involved in these issues, it is necessary first of all to give a brief explanation of a debate that appeared early in scholasticism and continued throughout its course: the philosophical choice between realism and nominalism which, although philosophical in its origins, had important religious and theological implications.

Realism goes back a long way. Platonic in origin, it assumes that universals, the eternal ideas in the mind of God, are the only realities that really exist. All other particular things are no more than imperfect manifestations of these universals. Ontologically the universals exist prior to the particular. What is real is not so much "this man" or "this horse", but "man" and "horse".

Aristotle modified this way of thinking. Universals do not exist prior to the particular things, thus implying that the particulars are rather unreal, but they



exist within the particular things, giving those particular things their identity. A particular horse is a real horse, because the universal idea of a horse exists within it. According to the Aristotelian theory of knowledge, the human mind is able to abstract the universals from the mass of particular things, knowing that these abstractions are real and not fabrications of the mind. This is the reason why it is called realism. It accepts the reality of objects outside of the human mind, and, importantly, general terms and general concepts, even the more abstract ones like “justice”, “love” etc., are part of this reality.

Nominalism, on the other hand, maintains that only particular things are real. Universals like “horse” or “justice” have no reality. They are only names we give to the likeness that we observe in similar individual things and events - hence the term “nominalism” from the Latin “*nomen*” = “name”. Roscellin of Compiègne, the first real nominalist in the Middle Ages we know of (he died in 1125), believed that the words that express universal ideas are no more than “the wind of voice”, that is they do not refer to realities that exist apart from individual things.

When we now turn to Anselm’s treatise on the existence of God as we find it in his *Monologion* as well as in his *Proslogion* we discover how the choice between realism and nominalism made itself felt. Having become involved in the whole controversy through Roscellin, who applied his nominalist theory to the Trinity, Anselm affirms that universal conceptions or ideas represent truth and reality. This becomes evident in the *Monologium* when he poses the question of the existence and the nature of God under the form of a meditation. He attempts to prove the existence of God as well as the divine attributes and the doctrine of the Trinity, basing his arguments not on the authority of Scripture, but on the force of reason. His realist point of departure is very clear from these arguments, which may be condensed as follows: all things have attributes such as being and goodness in different degrees. It therefore follows that being and goodness have a separate existence above and apart from visible things. For instance, in the case of being we know that things only exist in as much as they have being, or rather, participate in being. This means that they exist not in themselves, but in being itself. It is impossible to distinguish several such beings. Being itself can only be one and we must accordingly say that this is the Supreme Being, or God Himself.

Anselm’s Platonic form of realism is even more pronounced when he points out that all beings created by the Supreme Being existed as examples or models in his mind. It is evident, he continues, that before the world was created, it was in the thought of the Supreme Nature what, and of what sort, and how it should be.

In his *Proslogion* Anselm attempts a different argument as rational proof of the existence of God, but again his choice for realism against nominalism is evident:

from the idea of God his real existence can be inferred. The highest can be thought of only as existent; therefore God cannot be imagined as non-existent. Thus Anselm gives us his famous “ontological proof” of the existence of God, which was to be discussed by philosophers such as Descartes and Kant and by theologians up to the present day.

Having called God a being “than which nothing greater can be conceived”, Anselm refers to the fool of Psalm 13 who claims that God does not exist. Such a denial is folly, says Anselm, because even the fool is convinced that something “than which nothing greater can be conceived” exists in the mind. But, he continues, something “than which nothing greater can be conceived” cannot exist in the mind only and not in reality. After all, existing in reality is greater than existing in the mind only. Anselm therefore concludes:

“Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the mind and in reality.”

Anselm’s proof for the existence of God did not go unchallenged. A certain Gaunilon, a monk at Marmoutiers, published a *Defence of the Fool* in which he, after having praised Anselm in many things, points out that the existence of a thing cannot be proved from its perfection. If, for instance, someone has an idea of an island that is the best possible island, it does not follow that such an island must exist. In his reply to Gaunilon Anselm makes it clear that he did not claim that each thing that is conceived the greatest or most perfect within its species - in this case the island of Gaunilon - must therefore exist. It may exist or not. In the case of “a being than which a greater cannot be conceived”, however, we have to do with absolute perfection. Perfection cannot be thought of as non-existent, for then it would be imperfect perfection.

This God whose existence Anselm believed he could prove rationally is absolutely simple. All other realities exist through this one ultimate reality. After all, there cannot be a multiple source of things, but only one source. Being one and absolutely simple, the so-called attributes of God are not accidents of his substance, but are rather his very essence.

For Anselm the oneness of God is a logical conclusion of rational thinking. But what about the testimony of Scriptures and tradition concerning the triune nature of God? Anselm fully accepts the doctrine of the Trinity, but he also believes that it is permissible to apply the methods of rational speculation to the mystery of the Trinity, even to the point of proving the doctrine of the Filioque on the basis of reason alone, without the authority of Scripture or tradition.

In his discussions of the triune nature of God in his *Monologion* Anselm sets out from the generally accepted idea of his day that the creation of human beings according to the image of God was a creation according to the image of the Trinity. This Augustinian point of departure allows him to make use of human analogies to demonstrate the reasonableness of his Trinitarian speculations.

Anselm starts his rather complicated argument by stating that the Son not only has the same essence with the Father, but has this very essence from the Father. The very essence of the Father is intelligence, and knowledge, and wisdom, and truth. It is consequently inferred that, as the Son is the intelligence, and knowledge, and wisdom, and truth, of the paternal substance, so He is the intelligence from intelligence, the knowledge of knowledge, the wisdom of wisdom, and the truth of truth. But how is relationship between Father and Son established? Here Anselm introduces the concept of memory, or more strictly, the memory of oneself, remembering oneself. It cannot be denied, says Anselm, that the supreme Wisdom remembers itself. Nothing can therefore be more consistent than to regard the Father as memory, just as the Son is the Word; because the Word is born of memory. This can be seen more clearly in the case of the human mind which is the mirror and image of that Being. The human mind alone among all created beings is capable of remembering itself and conceives of itself. Thus, the supreme Wisdom which always thinks of Himself, just as He remembers Himself, his co-eternal Word, is born.

At this stage Anselm introduces his third concept: love. It is clear to the rational human being that he loves himself, because he remembers himself and conceives of himself. He could not love himself if he did not remember and conceive of himself. So it is also with God who, through his memory and intelligence and love, is united in an ineffable Trinity.

From here Anselm also establishes the rational correctness of the Filioque. The love of the supreme Spirit proceeds from the fact that, as the Father, He remembers Himself and, as the Son, conceives of Himself. It is therefore manifest that the love of the supreme Spirit proceeds equally from Father and Son (*filioque*).

It is no wonder that Anselm gives so much attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. The widespread revival of interest in dialectics and grammar sparked off a series of disputes and speculations on the Trinity. Even the mystics of the school of Saint Victor became involved.

Augustine's idea of traces of the Trinity in the mind as interpreted by Anselm had served Hugh of Saint Victor as a justification for the claim that to some degree the human reason has the power to penetrate the truth of the Trinity. Richard of Saint Victor, Hugh's pupil, carried to further lengths the attempt to prove the Trinity rationally. In this attempt he takes the concept of love as his

point of departure, reminding us of Bernard of Clairvaux, but which in fact goes back to Augustine, whose analysis of love led, in his *De Trinitate*, to the conclusion that “there are these three: the one who loves, the one who is loved, and the love itself”. Richard now proceeds to a consideration of the Trinity on the basis of love, concentrating on the implications of love as a natural proof for this doctrine. There can be no love where there is only one person. Since God is supremely good and only God is deserving of absolute love, it follows that the infinite love which is God must always have had an infinite object even when there were no creatures. Therefore a rational consideration of the nature of love, without the aid of revelation, leads to the conclusion that the fulfilment of love requires a Trinity of Persons.

The debate concerning the relation between the Three and the One in the Godhead was bound up with the question of universals. This was not so apparent in the thoughts of Richard of Saint Victor, but it was clearly the case in Peter Abelard’s refutation of the position taken up by his mentor, Roscellin of Compiègne.

As we have seen, Roscellin could be regarded as the probable founder of nominalism in the early Middle Ages. He considered universal substances as only vocal sounds so that, for example, colour has no reality of its own as distinct from a coloured object. Very little of his work has survived, but from the writings of his opponents, Abelard being the most important one, we deduce that he applied his nominalist theory to the doctrine of the Trinity by stating that in God the Three Persons had to be three separate realities, or else the Father and the Holy Spirit were incarnate together with the Son. The only surviving work of Roscellin, a letter to Abelard, seems to bear out this accusation, because in it he speaks about three “substances” in the Trinity: “Nothing else is the substance of the Father except the Father Himself, and nothing else is the substance of the Son except the Son Himself”.

At the Synod of Soissons (1092) Roscellin was accused of tritheism, an accusation which he strenuously denied, perhaps not altogether without reason, because of the confusion between the Greek and the Latin terminology that always arises in any debate on the Trinity. As we have seen, the Greek Fathers found consensus in referring to the Trinity as one *ousia* (being) in three *hypostaseis*. *Hypostaseis* could originally be translated as “substances”, but was primarily intended to signify the distinct and individual existence of each of the three members of the Trinity. The Latins, on the other hand, used the term *substantia* for the Greek *ousia* and preferred *personae* for *hypostaseis*, thereby honouring the intention of the Greeks. They therefore spoke of one Substance and three Persons for the Greek one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis*. Roscellin, however, reverted back to the original meaning of *hypostasis* as “substance” and spoke of the “substance” of the Father, the “substance” of the Son and the “substance” of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore there were “three substances” in the Trinity. Roscellin apparently went so far as to say that the Three could truly be called three Gods, “if usage permitted it”. Whether the accusation of tritheism against Roscellin was due to this confusion or not, the fact of the matter is that Roscellin’s trinitarian terminology suited his nominalist point of departure.

Peter Abelard’s view of the Trinity was diametrically opposed to that of Roscellin, although it is doubtful whether his opposition to Roscellin was motivated by a form of realism. The truth is that even today there is very little certainty about the position Abelard took up in the nominalism-realism debate. Whatever the case may be, he attacked Roscellin firmly believing that he would not only be able to refute Roscellin’s apparent tritheism, but that he would also succeed in giving a rational basis to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Stressing the unity of the Godhead, Abelard strongly opposes the notion that the diversity of Persons in the Trinity implies diverse realities as Roscellin contended. For him there is only one substance and one reality in the Trinity, as he points out in his *Theologia Christiana*. The way in which he stresses the unity of God, however, seemed in the eyes of his contemporaries to imperil the distinction of Persons, especially when he attributes to one of the divine Persons a work that belongs to all of them in accordance with the union of their nature. When he accordingly contends that the entire Trinity was present in the incarnation, although the assumption of flesh is assigned only to the Son, and that the entire Trinity was present in the work of regeneration, although it is assigned only to the Spirit, he laid himself open to the charge of Sabellianism. In 1140, largely at the instance of Bernard of Clairvaux, who regarded him as a dangerous rationalist subverting the faith through some of his teachings, including his views on the Trinity, Abelard was condemned by the Synod of Sens. The Pope confirmed the condemnation and he was excommunicated, but Peter the Venerable of Cluny gave him refuge where, towards the end of his life, he was reconciled to Bernard.

Bernard also opposed Gilbert de la Porée who, together with Abelard, believed that the problem of the Trinity is in origin one of predication and logic and that the relationship between the three Persons could be clarified by dialectical methods. Bernard strongly objects to the use of logic to elucidate the mystery of the Trinity. In the strictest sense, the question is whether it was possible to say anything about God at all, or whether He could merely be apprehended by faith and love. The answer of Abelard - in this he did not differ from Anselm - was the doctrine of analogy: we can use images of God which have a certain resemblance to Him, but are nevertheless susceptible to logical treatment. Bernard rejected Abelard’s analogies, although he did not do so on the grounds that there was no point of contact between God and a human being, but rather that Abelard was looking in the wrong place, to reason instead of love.

Bernard's resistance to Abelard highlights the emerging concept of God's nature in the early Middle Ages. The resurfacing of Greco-Roman culture through the monastic movement in an age of superstition shifted the emphasis - at least in the majority of monasteries and in the schools - to the human reason and intellect. The application of dialectics and grammar to theological questions and the use of the instrument of analogy led to a situation in which God was more and more defined in terms of the intellect. All the speculative thinkers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries contributed to this image of God. These thinkers include the conservative Anselm who, as we have seen, considered the very essence of God to be intelligence, knowledge, wisdom and truth.

The juxtaposition of respectively reason by the speculative theology of the schoolmen and love by the more practical mystical theology of Bernard of Clairvaux and other mystics led to a situation which some historians have called two Middle Ages co-existing side by side. In the school of Saint Victor attempts were made to bring the two together and these efforts would continue in the thirteenth century, but gradually it became clear that the image of God created by speculative reason would gain the upper hand, although never succeeding in completely eliminating the God of the mystics. This could not happen for a very good reason. The ordinary lay people of the Middle Ages lived in a world full of superstition, magic and evil spirits. In the midst of all these threatening powers the God of the mystics was much closer to them through the visual enactment of his presence in liturgy and sacrament than the aloof God of speculative theology.

## 5.2 THE HIGH TIDE OF SCHOLASTICISM

The developments that coincided with the rise of early scholasticism as we described them in above gained momentum in the latter part of the twelfth century. By the middle of the thirteenth century a definite pattern had already emerged.

In order to understand the profound influence these developments would have on the theological and philosophical thinking in the West, we must look at the main characteristics of this period.

In the first instance we must mention the phenomenon of rapidly increasing urbanisation as a result of the expansion of commerce and trade. The influence of this development on the thought processes of the time can hardly be overestimated. Urbanisation led to a rapid diffusion and exchange of new ideas. The Spanish city of Toledo is but one example. It became one of the most important centres of dissemination of Greek and Arabic philosophy in the twelfth century. From here translations in Latin of the works of Aristotle, Avicenna and others reached places like Paris, Bologna and Oxford. This coincided with a shift of places of learning from the monasteries to the cities, where cathedral schools

became more and more prominent. The cathedrals themselves, great Gothic masterpieces, point to the importance that cities gained in this period.

The most significant part of this development was the establishment of universities as the prolongation of the cathedral schools. The word *universitas* first meant the “whole” group of masters and students residing in some town or city. The University of Paris, the most famous of these early universities (Salerno, Bologna and Oxford are some of the others), is perhaps our best example. Since it had grown out of the cathedral schools in Paris, the bishops of the city continued to control it through the Chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame, himself being one of the masters in theology. The university progressively asserted its independence with respect to the Chancellor. The recognition of the privileges of a university of masters, gradually freed from control by local ecclesiastical or civic authorities, created a new type of higher education in Christendom with profound consequences for theology, one of the four faculties. The other three faculties were law, medicine and arts. The supremacy of theology was never contested.

Closely associated with the growth of cities in Western Europe was also the emergence of new forms of monasticism. This displayed itself in what are called the friars or the mendicant orders. They are usually thought of as four in number, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Carmelites and the Augustinians. They all combined their monastic ideals with missionary zeal, preaching both to nominal Christians in Western Europe and to non-Christians in different parts of the globe. It was to deepening the religious life of the populace of the cities that the friars devoted much of their energy. Most of the earlier monks had chosen solitude. The friars by contrast felt duty bound to bring the Gospel to urban and town dwellers. Very soon the Franciscans were beginning to establish themselves in the universities which were arising in Europe, to the considerable distress of Francis, the founder of the Franciscan Order. The Dominicans, on the other hand, were from the outset dedicated to teaching and scholarship. It was no accident that from them came Thomas Aquinas, whom Roman Catholics were eventually to regard as their most eminent theologian responsible for the authoritative intellectual and systematic statement of their faith. In fact, nearly all the theologians claiming our attention in the Middle Ages belong to the Dominican or Franciscan orders.

All these developments coincided with a growing awareness in the Church that sections of the urban population had become sceptical of established religion in general, in contrast to rural society, where it was more usual for religious practice to be shaped by cults of holy places, stories of the saints, legends woven round the biblical narrative and ceremonies supplied by the Church. In the migration towards the cities these rural practices were difficult to maintain and, although Christian symbolism insinuated itself into the details of everyday life -

it was, for instance, common to make the sign of the cross and to possess a small personal cross - the process of a gradual alienation from the established forms of religion could hardly be stopped. Ignorance played a significant role in this respect. Most people knew little about the Christian faith. It seems as if the Church did not expect much more from the people than that they should know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Hail Mary. Even the friars, working amongst the poor in the cities, seem to have accepted ignorance as a fact of life.

All these and other factors created an urban atmosphere - especially in the bigger cities like Paris - in which a more secularised approach to education and learning could flourish. This explains the enthusiasm with which the introduction of Aristotle was greeted in the intellectual circles of the day.

The introduction of the philosophy of Aristotle to the places of learning in Western Europe in the thirteenth century was one of the most important contributing factors to the development of scholastic theological speculation. Ultimately it would lead to a concept of God in which we find a confluence of theological and philosophical thought patterns.

As we have seen, Latin translations of the works of Aristotle on physics, cosmology and biology were disseminated from Toledo. These works were translated from Arabic, but, more importantly, they were accompanied by works of several Arabic and Jewish philosophers who all claimed to be no more than expounders of Aristotle's philosophy. Maimonides(1135-1204), a Jewish philosopher who was also the personal physician of sultan Saladin in Egypt, Avicenna (Ibn-Sina) who lived in Persia from 980-1037, and especially Averroës (Ibn-Rushd), who lived and worked during the twelfth century (1126-1198) in Southern Europe and Northern Africa, are some of the important names in this regard.

In the University of Paris, which had just been established, from the first year of its activities translations of the scientific treatises of Aristotle and his Arabian commentators made their first appearance in the classrooms. The Latin world was discovering the universe of Greek science. For the first time the masters of the schools and universities found themselves face to face with a purely philosophical explanation of nature. The inevitable conflict between Christian theology and Arabian and Aristotelian philosophy followed. As early as 1210 the teaching of the Parisian masters of the Faculty of Arts was indicted under penalty of excommunication.

In some of the other universities, such as Oxford, the works of Aristotle in the fields of the so-called natural sciences were never prohibited, but in theology it was a different story. In the early eleventh century, with the rise of early scholasticism, the use of dialectical reason was allowed in the field of theology at a time when only a small fraction of Aristotelian philosophy was known. But



now it was a different matter altogether. It was felt that this philosophy was incompatible in too many points with the Augustinian Neo-Platonism that was the philosophical foundation on which medieval theology had been built.

But the theology taught at the new medieval universities could not escape the influence of an ongoing secularisation in the cities, strengthened by the new philosophical perspectives that resulted from the reading of Aristotle by the intellectuals of the day. At Oxford Robert Grosseteste and several colleagues translated and commented on the works of Aristotle, and it was from England, through the influence of Roger Bacon and Roger Kilwardby just before the middle of the thirteenth century, that Aristotle's books on physics and nature was again introduced at the University of Paris.

The breakthrough for Aristotelianism in theology came from the side of the Dominicans. The Franciscan scholastics tended to hold the traditional Augustinian and Neo-Platonic views and at times were very critical of Aristotle, but the great Dominican theologians boldly thought through the Christian faith in terms of Aristotelian categories and thought patterns. The two most prominent of the Dominican schoolmen were Albertus Magnus (1206-1280), the German-born preacher and a lecturer in Paris, and the already mentioned Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Italian nobleman who became the greatest of them all. On the Franciscan side and one who was strongly opposed to Aristotelianism, we must mention John of Fidenza (1221-1274), better known as Bonaventura.

The cultural and spiritual climate of Western Europe in the thirteenth century with its growing sense of indifference towards the established forms of religion presented the ideal context for a synthesis between the Christian faith and the ideals of Aristotelian natural philosophy. The success of this venture had far-reaching consequences. For a while it held back the process of secularisation and supplied the scaffolding for upholding the structures of established religion and the hegemony of the Church, but it nevertheless carried within it the seeds of a future disintegration of the close-knit medieval society. The consequences for theology were even more profound. From this evolved a philosophical concept of God, more rationalist than the schoolmen of early scholasticism had ever dreamed of, that would hold sway for many centuries to come.

As we pointed out above, this development did not bring about the demise of the mystical approach to the mystery of God. The latter would resurface time and again. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place, large numbers of ordinary lay people, despite or perhaps because of the lure of a secular world, continued to lead a spiritual life that related more closely to the God of the mystics than to a God of intellectual philosophy. Secondly, the Augustinian tradition displayed a remarkable tenacity, especially within Franciscan ranks, for reasons that are not unrelated to the first reason mentioned. Finally, we must

keep in mind that even within a rationalist framework there will always be a mystic element. We saw this when we looked at the mystical theology of the early centuries up to Pseudo-Dionysius and again when we dealt with John Scotus Erigena. This mystical element was kept alive by the Aristotelian schoolmen, because, in the final analysis, they were Christian theologians who at least knew something about the meaning of prayer.

Comparisons have been made between the theology of the scholastics of the thirteenth century and the great cathedrals of the same age, and rightly so. The task of the Gothic architect was to design a building in stone that would lead the eyes of the believer away from the stone itself by enveloping him or her in pillars that seem to rise to heaven like so many prayers. But, at the same time, it was necessary to make the building sound by resting it on the outside arches. This ordered but very complex architecture of the Gothic cathedral can also be found in the great theological works (*Summae*) of the scholastics. They produced huge systematic works of art in which all the weight of intellectual rigor can be found; but at the edges of their rational language we discover the same mystical element that inspired the cathedrals.

In the following sections we intend to explore the way in which concepts such as the knowledge, the existence and the nature of God were addressed during the high tide of Scholasticism by theologians whose purpose was to bring about a synthesis between the Christian faith and Aristotle. But before we do that, we need to look at those theologians who were unwilling to change radically the metaphysical framework derived from Augustine and the Neo-Platonists. They were also the theologians in whose midst the mystical tradition was kept alive, more so than was the case among the Aristotelians.

### 5.3 THE GOD OF THE MYSTICS WITHIN SCHOLASTICISM

Western theology had been Augustinian for many centuries, despite rather important deviations in matters pertaining to the doctrines of predestination, grace and free will. As far as the doctrine of God is concerned, no profound changes had taken place, although we must admit that the mystical framework within which this doctrine had been functioning showed traits that did not originate with Augustine, but rather with the mysticism of the Eastern Fathers culminating in the thinking of Dionysius. The mystical theology in the East had a typical Greek atmosphere of intellectualism, whereas in Augustine we find the mysticism of an introspective self-scrutiny which revolved around the deep experience of the love of God. But still, despite the Dionysian influence, all the more difficult questions about the knowledge of God and the Trinitarian nature of God had been answered with a clear reference to the Augustinian tradition. For example: the Augustinian emphasis on divine illumination as the source of all

knowledge, including the knowledge of God, remained intact and in the debates about the Trinity Augustine's idea of the vestiges of the Trinity to be found in its creatures (*vestigia Trinitatis*) played an important role.

The dormant Greek intellectualism with its emphasis on the human reason, which reared its head in the eleventh century in the early phases of medieval Scholasticism, did not seriously threaten the Augustinian- Dionysian heritage. Anselm and others did not consider the importance they attached to reason in matters of faith to be incompatible with Augustine's concept of divine illumination. In the last analysis all knowledge starts with faith, the mystical bond between a human being and God through divine illumination, and from there moves on towards understanding.

Still, the intellectualism of early scholasticism was more Dionysian than Augustinian. Bernard of Clairvaux's suspicious attitude towards the rationalism of, especially, Abelard is indicative of the fear of many that the schoolmen were departing from authentic Augustinianism and a life of true devotion to God and a mystical union with Him.

In the thirteenth century this fear increased, especially among the Franciscans, when they viewed the growing influence of Aristotelian philosophy in theology with misgivings. In their view the rationalism of the Aristotelian schoolmen was of a different kind than that of, for example, Anselm. Whereas Anselm believed in a confluence of faith and reason, the Aristotelians distinguished clearly between reason and faith, and made natural reason a preamble to faith. The Augustinians were of the opinion that this epistemology could endanger theology.

The Christian tradition adapted the ancient philosophy of Plato to its own needs and through the Neo-Platonic tradition that was represented in Christian theology by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius it became the familiar framework within which the theologians of the Middle Ages conceived of God and the Christian faith. The Augustinians were determined to defend this position and at the same time to preserve the mystic tradition that had been part of it from the start.

The first Franciscan teacher and mystic in Paris was Alexander of Hales, but he only became a Franciscan in 1236, when most of his theological works had already been produced. By his emphasis on theology, not as a science of causes and effects but as a means of perfecting the soul in communion with God, he nevertheless opened the path for his pupil, Bonaventura, who would eventually become the most important mystic of the thirteenth century and the founder of Franciscan theology.

Bonaventura (John Fidanza) was born in Tuscany in 1221. A contemporary of Thomas Aquinas (together they were made doctors in 1257), he entered the

Franciscan order and his mystical writings reflect the direct heritage of the Franciscan religious experience. Francis had died only thirty-three years before the conception of Bonaventura's great work: *The Journey of the Mind into God* (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*). Theologically, however, the roots of Bonaventura's mysticism go back to Augustine and his work is regarded with good reason as the supreme example of medieval Augustinianism.

Scholars have pointed out that Bonaventure's Augustinianism is often filtered through the prism of an equally enthusiastic Augustinian of the twelfth century, Hugh of St Victor. But it must be kept in mind that in the thinking of Hugh of St Victor a confluence of Augustinian and Dionysian materials had already taken place. Both of these trends - the Dionysian emphasis upon the objective, cosmic hierarchy, and the Augustinian upon subjective interiority - can clearly be seen in Bonaventura. The root of Bonaventura's thought is thrust firmly into Platonic soil.

The Franciscan spirit of Bonaventura's theology gives it an affective, devotional tone, directed towards Christ and the appealing mysteries of his birth and passion. The purpose of his theology is not to solve or to discover the deepest mysteries of God, but rather to enable us to have communion with God and to contemplate Him by the way of love. The contemplation of Christ in his humanity is an indispensable part of this process.

Bonaventura has no quarrel with theologians who consider it necessary to give rational proofs for God's existence. The human mind, corrupted by the fall into sin, can be ignorant of something that is self-evident. To offer proof of God's existence helps to confirm that the existence of God is evident and that human reason cannot deny it. The problem with our defective intellect is that it has no idea of the essence (*quid est*) of God, with the result that our intellect often thinks that God is that which He is not, and not that which He is.

The manner in which the created universe leads to the Creator forms one of the pillars of Bonaventura's mysticism. His dependence on Augustine in this respect is very clear. The Trinity has left its imprint on the creatures, although not equally clearly in all creatures. These vestiges of the Trinity are being, truth and goodness. In the contemplation of these divine footprints the soul ascends by various stages to God, finally to contemplate God Himself in perfect peace.

The treatise, *Itinerarium*, presents us with a philosophy of mystical experience and tells us about the six stages of illumination by which the soul ascends to God starting from the visible external creation which contains the footprints of the Divine, through the internal world of the human soul itself which contains the images of the Divine, and finally through the work of grace which raises the soul above itself to become a likeness of the Divine. We must, says Bonaventura, begin with God's footprints which are corporeal, temporal and outside us, and so

enter on the way that leads to God. We enter within our own souls, which are the images of the eternal God, spiritual and interior to us, and this is to enter in the truth of God. Finally we must reach out beyond and above ourselves to the region of the eternal and super-eminently spiritual and look to the First Principle of all, and that is to enjoy the knowledge of God in reverential contemplation of his majesty.

Bonaventura now doubles each of the three stages, so that one gets six gradations in the soul's ascent to God. In the final two gradations he distinguishes between the contemplation of the being of God in his oneness and the contemplation of the goodness of God in Trinity. At this highest level, contemplation of God becomes more or less direct and unmediated. At the lower steps we make use of images, analogies and metaphors derived from created things. In the final gradations, however, 'being' and 'goodness' apply directly to God, because their proper and primary referent is God and not the creatures. They belong only secondarily to created beings. That is why Jesus said that none is good but God alone.

At this point Bonaventura uses language that strongly reminds us of the imagery of Plato's cave. Our mind, says Bonaventura, accustomed as it is to the opaqueness in beings and the phantasms of visible things, appears to be seeing nothing when it gazes upon the light of the highest Being. But this does not mean that we are forced to a complete silence about God. Making use of a typical Dionysian turn of phrase, Bonaventura continues that the mind cannot understand that this very darkness of the highest being is the supreme illumination of our mind, just as when the eye sees pure light, it seems to be seeing nothing. From this follows the dialectic of affirming contradictory things about God. God as the highest Being is the first and the last; it is eternal and yet most present; it is most simple and the greatest; it is most actual and most changeless; it is supremely one and yet omnifarious.

While the Dionysian influence on Bonaventura is very clear when he speaks about the ascent of the mind into the divine darkness of the unknowing, the Augustinian tradition is by no means absent. At a critical stage the intellectualism of a Dionysian mysticism makes room for a more Augustinian mysticism of love. It is true that the ascent into God is, like Dionysius', an ascent of the intellect, but the intellect is engaged in perfect unity with love through every stage of the ascent into God, except when it passes into the final extremity into which only love can proceed.

The resolute Christocentrism of Bonaventura's hierarchical ascent to God is also Augustinian. The incarnation and the human nature of Christ are pivotal here. The human being is a microcosm, containing within its nature all that the universe of beings contains, from the elements of the human body which it has in

common with all material things to its intellectual capacity which exists in pure form in the angels, a cosmic hierarchy in small. It is because the human is the meeting point of all creation that the incarnated Christ is the place where God meets all of creation. The human Christ is the 'supreme Hierarchy'. He is the ladder of ascent to the invisible and unknowable Godhead. Through Him we are raised, to the height above ourselves, to the ecstatic oneness of love with the Father who is hidden in the divine darkness of the unknowing.

Bonaventura never fully defines contemplation, but he certainly depends on Hugh of St Victor, who describes contemplation as a free, penetrating and fixed gaze directed to God. It would be safe to say that Bonaventura, in good Augustinian fashion, sees contemplation as an act of the human will, an act of love, but which at the same time is an act of the intellect directed to God. This gaze of contemplation is not turned away from creatures, because God's footprints are present in them. The religious significance of creation is thus disclosed to the contemplative soul, assisting its flight towards God.

The Franciscan order liked to draw upon the *Itinerarium* to describe the progressive ascent of the soul through the stages of prayer. In this way they simply emphasized a tendency that can already be seen in Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi. The Franciscans remained - and in this they were being faithful to their Augustinian tradition - the defenders of love and its primacy in our relationship to God. The best Dominican theologians, however, did not always agree in this respect. We must now turn to them.

#### 5.4 ANALOGY AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The arrival of Aristotle via his Arabian commentators confronted the Latin world with an entirely new problem: is it possible to interpret Aristotle in a Christian way? Roughly speaking, two main Arabian interpretations attracted the attention of thirteenth-century philosophers and theologians, namely, those of Avicenna and Averroës. Theirs were two different philosophies, Avicenna firmly stating the possibility of a blending of philosophy with religious beliefs, Averroës expressly favouring a complete separation of philosophy and theology.

The progressive invasion of the University of Paris by the Aristotelian-Arabian philosophies forced the Parisian masters to make a clear choice: either reject the new learning as harmful to faith or attempt to reconcile the two in one way or the other. Despite the resistance of most Franciscan theologians, Aristotle - more or less as interpreted by Avicenna - won the day. The historical setting made the final choice almost inevitable. The Faculty of Arts, the natural teaching centre for philosophy, especially logic, found in the philosophy of Aristotle a new and universally applicable method. The notion of knowledge as a systematic body of principles and consequences justified by demonstrations

invaded the whole field of intellectual culture. Yet, from the very beginning, the masters of Arts were reminded that there was a Faculty of Theology, whose decisions were final in most matters of a philosophical nature. Here Christian dogmas were taught as found in the Bible and the *Book of the Sentences* of Peter Lombard, an ordered compilation of texts borrowed from the Fathers of the Church, especially Augustine. The Parisian masters found it impossible to reject Aristotelian philosophy, but it was just as impossible to keep it independent and completely separate from theology. The end result was a synthesis that would not only characterize the mainstream scholastic theology of the thirteenth centuries, but also Christian theology in the centuries to come.

The first attempt within Parisian intellectual and theological circles to interpret the Christian orthodoxy of Augustinian theology within the framework of the philosophy of Aristotle was made by Albert, known by posterity as the "Great". He taught at the University of Paris from 1245 to 1248, before he took over the leadership of a group of Dominican scholars in Cologne.

The way in which Albert tried to construe a synthesis was rather eclectic and his only significant contribution in this regard was the manner in which he distinguished between philosophy and theology. Albert was a convinced rationalist, who believed that human reason is the final judge in assertions of a philosophical nature. Natural philosophy is not subjected to theological criticism and is free to follow its own way - but this also as far as the human intellect is allowed to play a determining role. In matters of faith, theology differs from every other science inasmuch as it takes its point of departure in the revelation of God and that which it proves follows from revealed principles. They are not contrary to reason, but because they surpass it, these revealed principles cannot be subjected to the judgment of the human intellect. Theology and philosophy can therefore develop as parallel disciplines.

At the University of Oxford Roger Bacon (1214-1294), a Franciscan and not a Dominican, also had in view a great theological synthesis which it was his intention to write, even while explaining Aristotle at the Faculty of Arts. Renowned for his emphasis on experiment as the source of all veritably certain scientific knowledge he also, as a typical Franciscan, maintained the validity of an experiment that is internal and spiritual, whose highest degrees lead to the summit of inner life and mysticism. The two ways of knowledge do not contradict each other. In the final analysis all wisdom, says Bacon, has been given by one God, to one world, for one purpose, the salvation of humanity. He therefore puts forward the idea that perfect knowledge of divine truth can be found when Scriptures are unfolded by philosophy and canon law.

Similar attempts by various other theologians can be mentioned, but all of them are dwarfed by the one outstanding teacher of the Dominican school, and

without doubt one of the greatest theologians and philosophers of all times, Thomas Aquinas. Thomas intended to do exactly the same thing as all the other theologians of his time, only he did it differently.

Thomas distinguishes two spheres of life and knowledge. On the one hand, there is the sphere of nature or natural life that everybody shares. In this sphere the light of natural reason operates. Philosophy is the science that deals with nature and reason is the instrument of knowledge. On the other hand, there is the sphere of grace that God bestows upon humankind for its salvation. Knowledge of this sphere of grace is something human beings cannot be without, because they are directed to God as their end. But God, and the things He has prepared for those that wait for Him, surpass the grasp of human reason. Hence, says Thomas in his *Summa Theologica*, it was necessary for the salvation of humanity that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known by divine revelation. Revelation extends also to such matters as reason might perhaps by itself discover, but only slowly and at a late period.

Revelation is contained in the Holy Scriptures and their real author is God. In this way there can be absolute certainty in regard to religious knowledge, since it comes immediately from God. Thomas calls the science that deals with knowledge in this sphere “sacred doctrine” (*sacra doctrina*). Sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from principles made known by the light of higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed. Whereas human reason is the instrument of knowledge in the natural sphere, faith is the instrument of knowledge in the sphere of grace.

Although the distinction between nature and grace covers human existence in its totality, Thomas maintains that this distinction does not imply division. Nature and grace do not oppose, or are in conflict with, each other. The one bears upon the other. Thomas’ favourite phrase in this regard is: grace does not abrogate nature, but perfects it (*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*).

What Thomas means by this phrase becomes very clear when we have a look at his doctrine of God. How does it come about that we can talk about God, asks Thomas. Do we need the Holy Scriptures or Christian tradition to make it possible for us to talk about Him? No, it is possible for the human reason to talk about God without the assistance of the Bible or tradition. It does so on the basis of what it discovers in the general principles of being underlying the creation. At this level we have a natural knowledge of God that gives us the necessary and reasonable presuppositions upon which we can build our idea of God as it is revealed to us in Scripture. The natural knowledge of God is in itself true and valid, and forms the presupposition or preamble to the knowledge of faith (*praeambula fidei*), but at the same time it is inadequate and insufficient. It needs the completion and perfection that can only come from the knowledge of



faith. The one needs the other. Faith needs the presupposition of natural reason, natural reason needs the completion of faith.

But what is faith? Thomas describes faith in terms of the intellect and the will, although in the final analysis faith is an act of the intellect. Thomas starts with the Augustinian formula: “to believe is to think with assent”. The thinking faculty reaches a conclusion in one of two ways: either that the object impresses itself upon this faculty in an intellectual way as true, or that the faculty is, by the will, inclined to assent. That the intellect in this way responds to the impulse of the will is explained by the disposition to faith, a disposition (*habitus*) infused by God Himself. Although faith is thus incited by the will, it has its seat in the intellect. By an act of the intellect the supernatural divine truths are accepted as true, because the truth that forms the object of this act is directed towards the intellect. The origin of faith is God Himself. Through the working of the Spirit of God the human intellect is driven and illuminated and thus enabled to understand and accept the eternal truths about God. God’s relationship to his believers is based on the intelligibility of God and hence on the access believers have to understanding Him.

The knowledge of God thus gained is just as little as revelation itself contrary to reason; it is above reason. It is therefore not the task of theology to prove the truth of revelation. Nevertheless theology can always try to demonstrate that the claims of faith are not impossible.

The fact that faith belongs to the sphere of supernatural grace does not mean that natural reason, as we have seen, has no place in the human quest for God. On the contrary, the route towards a true understanding of God starts with the natural human intellect and finds its completion in the intellect illuminated by the Spirit.

The natural knowledge of God, however, is never immediate. It is a secondary knowledge mediated by the creation. As knowledge of God, this knowledge is, as we have seen, insufficient and with all sorts of limitations precisely because it derives from the creation. After all, God transcends his own creation as the cause transcends the effect. This means that God is at the same time knowable and unknowable. By way of explanation Thomas points out that we can distinguish three methods of gaining knowledge, each method complementing the others: 1. the way of affirmation (*via affirmationis*); 2. the way of negation (*via negationis*); and 3. the superior way (*via eminentiae*).

The way of affirmation is based upon the causal relationship between God and his creatures. God is the cause and the creation the effect of God’s creative activity. Therefore, since there is always a similarity between cause and effect, something of God can be known from his creation. But the cause always transcends the effect. Therefore, the way of negation affirms the complete

otherness of God over against his creation, his immutability and infinitude, for example. Finally, there is the superior or eminent way that regulates the way of negation in such a way that it becomes clear that the otherness of God has nothing to do with some or the other defect or weakness in God. God's otherness is an all-surpassing otherness, his omnipresence, for example.

The first of the three ways forms the basis for the other two. In it Thomas makes use of his well-known concept of analogy. Analogy is for Thomas the midway between a univocal and an equivocal statement.

A univocal statement refers to two or more things that are more or less similar. They can be compared, because they are of the same kind or species. The number "2" can be compared to the number "1", of which it is a doubling, because both are numbers. An equivocal statement, however, has to do with things that are dissimilar. No direct comparison between them is possible, because they belong to completely different kinds. Thomas uses the example of the name "dog" that we give for both an animal and a configuration of stars. Because of the dissimilarity, we can only give the name of "dog" to the stars by way of a metaphor.

For Thomas it speaks for itself that it is impossible to refer to God and his creatures in a univocal manner. God and his creatures are not of the same being. The naming of God on the basis of what we know about God's creatures is also not an equivocal matter, because there is always some similarity between God as the cause and the creature as the effect. In some way or the other the effect always participates in the cause and this makes it possible to name God, not univocally or equivocally, but analogically as the midway between the other two. For example: God can be called "good", because we discover goodness in the creatures. God's goodness is not the same as human goodness, but it is also not completely dissimilar, because God's goodness is the source of human goodness. When we discover human goodness we can, therefore, in our minds ascend to God as the highest good.

The analogical knowledge of God, as Thomas understands it, proceeds from two suppositions: first, God is entirely unlike any one of his creatures; secondly, He is in Himself at least what He has to be in order to be their cause. The second supposition makes it possible for God to be known imperfectly, from the consideration of his creatures; the first supposition, however, remains basic: God is unknowable in Himself, He is the ineffable God. But if He is ineffable, is it at all possible to say anything about his existence *qua* existence before we proceed to compare Him in an analogical way with his creatures? The next section will address this question.

## 5.5 THE EXISTENCE OF THE INEFFABLE GOD

In order to understand fully Thomas's view on the existence of God, we must look at some of the terms he uses which find their origin in Aristotelian metaphysics.

In the first place Thomas uses the distinction between act and potency. This distinction goes back to the old Greek philosophers, who were fascinated by their observation of movement and the changes that took place around them. Every movement (or change) implies that something has the potential to move from one place to the other, or to change from one thing to another. The movement or the change accordingly means the actualization of what was previously a potential, the potency has become act. The act carries in itself the potency for a new act and so the process goes on. A baby has the potency to become a child, the child has the potency to become an adult. In each case the result is the act. But where does the process stop? When we have reached the state of perfection which means that there is no longer a potency for something else. Perfection is pure act.

In the second place Thomas distinguishes between essence and existence. Essence means the "whatness" of a thing, that which makes something definable. But a thing is only definable if it is real, if it exists. Existence is the "thatness" of a thing. The thing "is", it has "being" from the verb "to be".

Like all Christian theologians, Thomas knows that the proper name of God is according to Exod. 3:14: I AM WHO I AM, or HE WHO IS. As Thomas understands it, God is the being whose whole nature is "to be" (*esse*). God "is" absolutely. He is the pure act of existing in which there is no potency. This also means that God has no essence apart from his existence, or rather, his essence is his "to be". God is pure Existing, He is Existing Itself (*ipsum esse*). To add something to the name HE IS is an unacceptable restriction of the being of God. For example, to say that God is the Good, or Love, would be to restrict Him to the essences of good and love. God exists in Himself without any addition whatsoever, since all that could be added would limit Him. We can establish that God is, we cannot know what He is because, in Him, there is no what. His "whatness" is in his "thatness". We can prove the truth of the proposition "God is", but we cannot give a definition of the verb "is". God is His own existence, Thomas says. More we cannot say. Therefore, to know God in his essence is unattainable in this life. The blessed in heaven will see God in his essence through divine illumination, although not in its totality. God transcends all knowledge, even in heaven.

Unknowable in Himself, at least in this life, God can nevertheless be known imperfectly, from the consideration of his creatures as we have seen. This applies in the first instance to his, although indefinable, existence. To demonstrate the notion of God as the absolute act of being is both possible and

necessary. It is necessary because the existence of God is not self-evident. The direct way apparently opened by Anselm's ontological argument is closed in Thomas's opinion; but the indirect way pointed out by Aristotle remains open.

Thomas therefore presents us with five ways (*quinque viae*) or proofs of God's existence. Each of these various ways brings two elements into play: in the first instance the acceptance of the necessity of a cause for the existence of a reality which one knows through the bodily senses, and secondly, that a series of causes require a Prime Cause, which is what we call God.

The first way is the easiest to grasp, because it starts from the undeniable fact of movement (*ex parte motus*), something that is immediately perceptible to sense knowledge. It is certain, and evident to our senses, argues Thomas, that in the world some things are in motion. He now applies his basic distinction between potency and act. Things that move, move from potency to act because nothing can be moved except that it has the potentiality to that towards which it is moved. But nothing can pass from potency to act by itself. It must be moved by another, and that other must be itself an act. If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then also this must needs be moved by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at the first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God. God is the unmoved mover. He is pure act.

Just as there is motion in the world of sensible things, there are also causes and effects. What has been said of the causes of movement can also be said of causes in general. Thomas's second way is therefore that of causality (*ex ratione causae efficientis*). Nothing can be its own efficient cause; for this would mean that it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Thus there exists an order of causes and effects which cannot go on to infinity. Somewhere there must be a first cause. That first cause is God.

The third way is a little more complicated than the previous two. It refers to the distinction between, on the one hand, beings that come and go, and for whom it is possible to be or not to be and, on the other hand, something the existence of which is necessary (*ex possibili et necessario*). In the first instance we deal with all things we see in this world. Their existence is not necessary. The fact that they do exist implies that they have their existence from another being, for the possible cannot account for its own existence. If there were nothing but possibility in things, there would be nothing - which is absurd. This is to say that, since there is something, there must be some being whose existence is necessary. Even if there are several necessary beings, there still has to be a first necessary being causing in others their necessity. This necessary being is God.

The fourth way deals with the hierarchy of perfections in beings (*ex gradibus*). There are degrees in goodness, truth, nobility and other perfections of being. We

therefore talk about “more or less” with reference to these degrees when compared with that which is absolute: something is more or less good when compared with absolute goodness. So there is something best, something truest and something noblest, which is the cause for the various degrees of perfection in all other beings; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world (*ex gubernatione rerum*). All natural bodies, even those which lack knowledge, act for an end. The fact that they more or less all reach that end is an indication that they do not arrive at it by chance. Since they themselves lack knowledge, they must have been directed by someone endowed with knowledge and intelligence, as the arrow is directed by the archer. This primary intelligent being is God.

What more can be said of this ineffable God but that He exists? Thomas acknowledges the problem he is facing. If we have ascertained the existence of a thing and now ask the further question of the manner of its existence so that we may know its essence, we run into difficulties if we are dealing with God. Because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, says Thomas; we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not. The first way of proceeding therefore consists in removing from Him whatever does not benefit Him. Thomas does this by successively removing from the idea of God movement, change and composition. God is non-corporeal, immutable, infinite and absolutely simple.

But the way of negation is balanced by the way of analogical affirmation. There is necessarily a connection, and consequently a resemblance, between cause and effect. What exists in effects must also pre-exist in its cause. Therefore, argues Thomas, names can be predicated of God in an analogical sense. For example, the words, God is good, or wise, signify not only that He is the cause of wisdom or goodness, but that these exist in Him in a more excellent way. In this sense, we attribute to God all the perfections of which we have found some resemblance in the creature, but we do so according to the superior way, we carry them to the infinite. God is supremely good, supremely wise, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, each of these perfections reduced to the perfectly single perfection of the pure act that God is.

All these matters pertaining to God’s existence and attributes are dealt with by Thomas in his *Summa Theologica* under the heading: God, The Divine Unity (Questions 1-26). The unity of God is also the last attribute he investigates. From God’s simplicity and from the infinity of his perfection it can be shown that God is one, not only one, but supremely one. But if God is one in the supreme degree, what about the plurality of the Divine Persons? In his treatise on the Trinity (*Summa Theologica*, Question 27-43) Thomas deals with this problem.

## 5.6 THE TRIUNE NATURE OF GOD

The Aristotelian framework within which the great schoolmen of the thirteenth century approached theological matters was not meant to produce doctrinal innovations, but to be an authoritative reinterpretation of the existing doctrines of the church. These were handed down to them accompanied by commentaries and writings meant to be a clarification of the norms of orthodox doctrine. Access to these works was made possible by the compilation of quotations from the Fathers in the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard, and by the work of the Sententiaries, more than a thousand in number, who commented on his book.

In the *Sentences* Augustine reigns supreme. He is quoted more than twice as often as all the other Fathers combined. Nobody, the scholastics included, wished to set Augustine aside. There were numerous indications of efforts to “liberate” the Bishop of Hippo from his Platonic context and yet keep the orthodox substance of his doctrine intact. Nowhere is this dominance of Augustine seen so clearly as in the theological debates on the doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity became one of the most important theological points of debate in the thirteenth century. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place the conflict with the church in the East over the procession of the Holy Spirit was still fresh in the memory. Secondly, and most probably as a result of the Filioque controversy, theological speculations about the Trinity abounded. The section on the rise of early scholasticism described some of the attempts to demonstrate on rational grounds the triune nature of God by theologians like Richard of St. Victor, Roscellin, Peter Abelard and Gilbert de la Porré. The heretical possibilities of some of these speculations led to a conscious attempt to re-appropriate Augustine by building on the foundations he had laid. Paradoxically this did not result in less but in more speculation. This becomes abundantly clear in the writings of Bonaventura. More than the Aristotelians whom he opposed, he felt obliged not only to clarify but also to expand Augustine’s Trinitarian concepts. He thus created what is sometimes called a Trinitarian ontology with few parallels in the history of Christian doctrine.

In the mystical speculation of his *The Journey of the Mind into God* Bonaventura speaks about the power, wisdom and goodness of the Triune God who by his power, presence and essence exists uncircumscribed in all things. The journey of the mind (soul) into God starts with the visible external creation, which contains the footprints of the Divine. This leads us, says Bonaventura, to the point of re-entering into ourselves, that is, into our mind in which the image of the most blessed Trinity shines in splendour. But what does the soul observe when it enters into itself? Here Bonaventura makes use of the Augustinian trinity of memory, understanding and love. The soul loves itself, but it could not love itself

unless it knew itself, and it could not know itself unless it remembered itself. The memory is an image of eternity, because its function is the retention of all things, past, present and future. From memory comes forth intelligence as its offspring, and from memory and intelligence love is breathed forth as their mutual bond. All three are consubstantial, coequal and coeval in the soul. If, then, God is a perfect spirit, He has memory, understanding and love breathed forth.

When, therefore, the soul considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror to behold the blessed Trinity of the Father, the Word, and Love: three Persons, coeternal, coequal and consubstantial.

But Bonaventura went even further than seeing the human mind as a mirror of the Trinity. He maintains that, apart from the science contained in the Holy Scriptures, every other science is concerned with the Trinity and that every science must necessarily present some trace of the Trinity. For example: all philosophy is either natural or rational or moral. The first deals with the cause of being and therefore leads to the power of the Father; the second deals with the basis of understanding and therefore leads to the wisdom of the Word; the third deals with the order of living and therefore leads to the goodness of the Holy Spirit. Again, the first, natural philosophy, is divided into metaphysics, mathematics and physics. The first deals with the essences of things and leads to the First Principle, the Father; the second deals with numbers and figures and leads to the image of the Father, namely the Son; and the third with natures, powers and diffusive operations which leads to the gift of the Holy Spirit. And so it goes on. He not only followed the patristic consensus in finding evidence of the Trinity in the creation story and other passages of the Old Testament, but in one "natural" trinity after the other, even in trinities within trinities as in the example already given. It is therefore not without merit to say that Bonaventura developed a trinitarian ontology. The fundamental structure of the created reality is trinitarian and as such an analogy of the nature of the Triune God.

In setting forth such a Trinitarian ontology, Bonaventura was continuing the thought of Augustine, who started the process of translating the doctrine of the Trinity into a metaphysical understanding of creation. In this Bonaventura, Franciscan and mystic, went further than his Dominican and Aristotelian counterpart, Thomas Aquinas, was willing to go.

Thomas shared the deepened awareness of the thirteenth century of the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity as the fundamental teaching of the Christian faith, immediately and indissolubly linked to the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who became a human being. Richard of St Victor calls the doctrine of the Trinity the supreme article of the Christian faith, a sentiment

echoed by Thomas, when he said that the recognition of the Trinity in unity is the fruit and goal of the entire life of a Christian.

Some historians are of the opinion that the dogma of the Trinity is the key to the whole theology of Thomas's *Summa Theologica*. This is correct in so far as every treatise on Christian teaching implicitly or explicitly takes its point of departure from the concept of a trinitarian God. Whether the structure of the *Summa* is such that it warrants this kind of opinion is, however, doubtful. The *Summa* is in a certain sense the culmination of the long effort to codify Christian doctrines in an orderly way. Such a codification necessitated the resolution of a huge range of problems, such as the relation between revelation and reason, between metaphysics and the biblical history of salvation, etc., which means that a simplistic idea of a key to the *Summa* should be avoided. Nevertheless, the Trinity takes up a significant part of the section in the *Summa* that deals with the doctrine of God (Part I, Questions 27-43) and it again appears in connection with the image of God in human beings (Part I, Question 93) .

Although Thomas tries to bring an Aristotelian corrective to the Platonic framework of Augustine's teachings, he nevertheless remains faithful to the Augustinian heritage in respect of the doctrine of the Trinity. In the *Summa* he reintegrates the Augustinian tradition on the Trinity into his own system, avoiding the ambitious speculations of Bonaventura concerning the footprints and images of the Trinity in the creation.

Thomas gives little or no attention to the idea of the creation in general as a creation after the image of God. Although he acknowledges that there are in all creatures traces of the likeness of God, he does not elaborate on it in his *Summa Theologica*. The concept of the image of God he reserves for human beings. But the question is whether the image of God is in a human being according to the Trinity of Persons. In his answer to this question Thomas refers to a statement of Hilary of Poitiers in which the latter says that a human being is made to the image of that which is common to the Trinity, which in essence, according to Augustine, is the Godhead of the Trinity. A further objection to the idea of an image according to the Trinity of the Persons could be, says Thomas, that the term "image" is not applicable to the Three Persons, but only to the Son, for according to Augustine the Son alone is the image of the Father. To these objections Thomas replies that the distinction of the divine Persons is made only according to relations of origin. Therefore, to be the image of God by imitation of the divine nature does not exclude being the image of God by the representation of the divine Persons. Therefore, in a human being there exists the image of God, both as regards the divine nature and as regards the Trinity of Persons; for in God Himself there is one nature in Three Persons.



The next question is what this image of the divine Trinity consists of. In his answer to this question Thomas makes use of a typically Augustinian distinction between the mind, knowledge and love, which corresponds to the “memory, understanding and will” used by Bonaventura. The divine Persons are distinct from each other by reason of the procession of the Word from the Speaker, and the procession of Love connecting both. The inner word (knowledge) cannot exist without actual thought (the mind) which then breaks out into love.

The second issue for which Thomas Aquinas drew upon Augustine was the Filioque. As we have seen, the schoolmen of early scholasticism were, in respect of the doctrine of the Trinity, to a certain degree preoccupied with the Filioque. This is understandable because the theologians from the Eastern church accused the supporters of the Filioque in the West of endangering the unity of the Godhead. Their charge was that by introducing the notion of a procession of the Holy Spirit not only from the Father but also from the Son, the church in the West was making the Son a second source or principle within the Trinity, thus effectively introducing two Gods.

This was a most sensitive issue and some of the Western theologians did not help their cause by stating that the Father and the Son were both “Spirators” of the Holy Spirit. Thomas realised the danger of such a viewpoint. To avoid any misunderstanding he proposes in his *Summa Theologica* that the word “spirator” in this regard be dropped. He has no objection to saying that both the Father and the Son are spirating, but because there is only one spiration the idea of two Spirators cannot be upheld.

Thomas draws from Augustine his defence against any suggestion that the Filioque advocates two principles or causes in the Godhead. Quoting Athanasius, he first establishes that the Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son; not made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. Because, he continues, the divine Persons are distinguished from each other only by the relations, the Holy Spirit could not be personally distinguished from the Son, if He were not from Him. Therefore, because the Son receives from the Father that the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him, it can be said that the Father spirates the Holy Spirit through the Son, or that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. The meaning is the same.

Thomas can now deal with the question of whether the Father and the Son are one principle of the Holy Spirit. Raising various objections, including a quotation from Hilary of Poitiers to the effect that the Holy Spirit is to be confessed as proceeding from the Father and the Son as Authors, which would support the view that the Filioque introduces two principles in the Godhead, Thomas quotes the *De Trinitate* of Augustine, which says that the Father and the Son are not two principles, but one principle of the Holy Spirit. Here Thomas elaborates and

points out that the Father and the Son are in everything one, wherever there is no distinction between them of opposite relation. Hence, since there is no relative opposition between them as the principle of the Holy Spirit, it follows that the Father and the Son are one principle of the Holy Spirit. This does not negate but supports his contention that the Father is the principle of the whole Godhead.

Thomas is very careful in using the term “principle”. As part of his refutation of the complaint from the Eastern theologians that the Filioque introduces a second principle or cause within the Godhead, thereby jeopardising the unity of God, he points out that the Greek trinitarian terminology is imprecise compared with that of the Latin Doctors, meaning Augustine. They (the Greeks) use the words “cause” and “principle” indifferently when speaking of God, whereas the Latin Doctors do not use the word “cause”, but only “principle”. The reason for this is that the term “cause” seems to mean a dependence of one on another, which is not implied in the word “principle”. Using the word “cause”, if applied to the relation between the Father and the Son, could not fail to create an impression of subordinationism. For in all kinds of causes there is always to be found between the cause and the effect a difference of perfection or power, whereas the term “principle” usually refers to things which have no such difference, but have only a certain relation to each other.

Despite his obvious embracement of Augustine in matters relating to the doctrine of the Trinity, Thomas Aquinas had difficulty in convincing many of his contemporaries of his faithfulness to the orthodox catholic tradition as contained in Augustinian theology. The attacks were especially virulent from the side of the Franciscans. The Dominicans rallied to the defence of their illustrious theologian and in 1309 the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor was declared the rule of all teaching by Dominicans. Finally, canonised in 1323 and given the title of “Universal Doctor of the Church” by Pope Pius V in the sixteenth century, it speaks for itself that little development would have taken place concerning the doctrine of God within the ranks of the Dominicans. There were exceptions, such as Durand of Saint-Porcain, but, generally speaking, the Order remained faithful to the teachings of Thomas. It was up to a Franciscan, John Duns Scotus, to turn the thinking about God away from an almost exclusive intellectual point of reference.

The thirteenth century is sometimes called the greatest of all centuries in the history of Christendom in the West, with reference to the array of famous religious leaders such as Francis of Assisi and Dominic, to philosophers and theologians like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura and Roger Bacon, to Dante, the author of *The Divine Comedy* and one of the more magnificent personages in the whole pageant of Christian literature, to painters such as Giotto and to Gothic

architecture, which made structures sprout from stone and rise up to dizzy heights as if they had no weight.

Calling it the “greatest of all centuries” is probably an over-statement, because as far as the doctrine of God is concerned very little real progress took place. All emphasis was on the theological exposition, clarification and interpretation of the existing Christian doctrine. The Aristotelian approach adopted by the great schoolmen of this century was not meant to produce doctrinal innovations, but to be an authoritative interpretation of the existing doctrines of the church. In this Thomas Aquinas was undoubtedly the greatest of them all.

Medieval scholasticism reached its peak in the theology of Thomas. The manner in which he succeeded in bringing together the two sources of knowledge of God into a coherent system had a huge influence on the development of the idea of God and his revelation in the centuries that followed. But his synthesis did not remain unchallenged. New developments during the declining years of medieval theology opened up new, unprecedented and often controversial avenues of doing theology and thinking about God.

# 6 THE FACE OF GOD AND THE DISSOLUTION OF SCHOLASTICISM

## 6.1 THE COLLAPSE OF THE MEDIEVAL ORDER

Periods in history do not follow well-defined lines. The end of a period which historians characterise as “great” or “important” is often marked by a time of confusion, or even by a widespread reaction against those things which contributed to the greatness or importance of that period. The thirteenth century which had started with the promise of great things to come and which had seen the fulfilment of a number of these promises petered out in almost a whimper. The great harvest had been reaped, and the late harvest was scant.

The following century brought no relief; in fact the fourteenth century saw the progressive dissolution of the medieval order. This century has been referred to as the waning of the Middle Ages, no doubt because of the devastation that the historian beholds. The fourteenth century was indeed visited by many catastrophes. It suffered many strange and great perils and adversities, so that its disorders cannot be traced to any one cause: famine, plague, war, brigandage, bad government, insurrection and schism in the Church.

A physical chill settled on the fourteenth century at its very start. Western Europe experienced years of unseasonable cold, storms and rain. It was the onset of what has since been recognised as the Little Ice Age. Cultivation of grain was severely reduced because of a shorter growing season. This meant disaster, for population increase in the previous century had already exceeded agricultural production. Crop yields could not be raised and the inhabitants of towns and cities who were forced to live on local resources starved. Famine became familiar to all.

On the political front the Empire ceased to be a world empire; it became an empire of the Germanic nations. Occidental-Christian universalism declined; the Christian West failed in every endeavour it undertook in its capacity of defender of the faith and in 1291 it gave up its last possessions in the Holy Land. Proud and glittering knighthood became an anachronism. Six decades of the terrible Hundred Years’ War put an end to that.

Indicative of the instability of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century was the fateful feud between Pope Boniface VIII and Philip IV of France. The issue was temporal power versus papal authority arising from Philip’s levy of taxes on clerical income without the consent of the Pope. Boniface tried to

assert his authority in his Bull of 1302, *Unam Sanctam*, in which he declared that it is necessary to salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff. Philip responded by physically apprehending Boniface with the intention of forestalling ex-communication. The shock of the outrage was mortal and within a month the 86-year-old Pope, although freed in the meantime, was dead.

The claim Boniface made was obsolete even before he made it. The indirect consequence of it all was the removal of the papacy to Avignon. In the half-enforced, half-voluntary exile to Avignon (1309-1376) and the subsequent schism in the West, the papacy suffered the greatest crisis in its entire history. In the “Babylonian Exile” demoralisation set in. No question of faith or practice was involved here, for the whole struggle was entirely a matter of persons and politics, to the dismay of the faithful and the pious. The brilliance of the papal court at Avignon was unsurpassed, with up to thirty cardinals in residence, each with his palace. More and more the papal court and its machinery turned itself into a money-raising organization and it soon became the strongest financial power in the West. In some parts of France and Germany the Church owned one third to a half of all real estate. Petrarch wrote of the regime in Avignon, perhaps hyperbolically: “Here reign the successors of the poor fishermen of Galilee. They have quite forgotten their origins... Babylon, the home of all vices and misery... there is no piety, no charity, no faith, no reverence, no fear of God, nothing holy, nothing just, nothing sacred... every example of impiety and evil the world has to show you are collected here...”.

And then, in 1348, the Black Death struck the European mainland. The bubonic plague raged through the cities, killing anywhere from one third to two thirds of their inhabitants. When graveyards filled up, bodies were thrown into rivers until mass burial pits were dug for dumping the corpses. In London corpses piled up in layers in such pits until they overflowed. Everywhere reports spoke of the sick dying too fast for the living to bury.

As if the world were indeed in the grasp of the Evil One, the first appearance of the Black Death coincided with a fearsome earthquake that carved a path of wreckage in Italy. Houses collapsed, church towers toppled, villages were crushed, and the destruction reached as far as Germany and Greece.

The population of Europe was terror-stricken by the plague, and when it was over, the picture of death indelibly impressed on their minds turned them as never before toward contemplation of the transience of earthly life. This, however, did not translate into a religious and moral awakening. Innumerable people danced over death and gave themselves freely to all kinds of vices. Monks descended to the towns to dispose of their monasteries’ revenues - now distributed among a handful of them, as their brethren were wiped out - and

took part in the wildest celebrations. All these were unmistakable signs of a culture gravely ill and on the decline.

It is inevitable that the events of the last decades of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century would have a profound impact on the philosophical and theological outlook of the time and that the concept of God would change along with it. Great uncertainty prevailed among theologians and philosophers. They suddenly started to question those things they had taken for granted. Faith in the traditional formulas concerning the rationality, harmony and order of the universe was shattered.

It must be noted that, even before the catastrophic events described above, a certain scepticism had arisen concerning the validity of a natural knowledge of God as the rational preamble to the Christian faith. Within Franciscan ranks, especially after the initial condemnation of several Thomist theses in 1277, we find the strengthening of the tendency (which had been there long before that date) to rely upon revelation and faith more than upon philosophical reasoning in order to ascertain the truth of theological conclusions. Our best example in this regard is Henry of Ghent, who taught at the University of Paris from 1276 to 1292 and died in 1293. His mistrust of natural knowledge is evident when he maintains that pure truth cannot be known without divine illumination. God gives this illumination when He pleases and to whom He pleases. It is a free gift of God. Thus Henry of Ghent started a process which would lead the almost complete divorce between the supernatural theology of the theologians and the natural theology of the philosophers, on the one hand, and the reaffirmation of the entire Augustinian tradition of insisting on the primacy of will over reason in God, on the other hand. God's will is such that it is the only cause of its own action.

The close link between these two concepts becomes obvious when we consider that the only God whose existence can be proved by strict philosophical reasoning is the Prime Cause of a physical universe, operating through secondary causes which, like itself, obey the laws of intelligible necessity. It is a far cry from that impersonal Being to the living God of Christian faith. From the Prime Cause to the physical world everything is interlinked by a series of necessary causal relations, which do not entail the presence of this Prime Cause in the distant consequences of his act, but on the contrary exclude the possibility of his intervening by a free and immediate act. Conversely, nothing of what depends on the free decisions of an absolutely free God is philosophically deducible.

It does not need too much imagination to realise that the idea of a rational God whose existence can be rationally deduced from a universe of harmony and order - the essential universe of scholasticism - could hardly be reconciled with the events that indelibly marked the end of the thirteenth and the first part of

fourteenth century. A new approach to the question of God and his relationship to the world became necessary. For this transition John Duns Scotus, the last of the great scholastic doctors, following in the footsteps of Henry of Ghent, prepared the way by stating unequivocally the primacy of the will of the omnipotent God.

Some historians are of the opinion that voluntarism (the primacy of the will over reason not only in God, but also in humans) eventually made it possible for the young Europe to triumph over the carnage of the fourteenth century by imposing will as the greatest power on earth. It is a debatable point, but nothing detracts from the fact that by giving the will instead of the intellect centre stage Duns Scotus started a process that would in its consequences alter the theological landscape in the centuries to come.

## 6.2 THE VOLUNTARIST GOD OF FREEDOM

Voluntarism as a new philosophical system that superseded the rationalism of the philosophers and theologians of scholasticism is usually associated with Duns Scotus, despite the fact that he is still considered a scholastic who, with his masterly skill in dialectics and his acuteness, carried the scholastic method to its highest point of development. Yet it is equally true that his point of departure and the theological method he pursued eventually led to the gradual dissolution of scholastic theology.

John Duns, called Scotus from his country's name, was born in Scotland in 1266. He studied and taught at Oxford and Paris, and died at Cologne in 1308 at the early age of 42. He experienced the early calamities of the fourteenth century and, because he had taken the part of the pontiff against Philip IV, he was banished from France for a short period. Because of the fine distinctions he frequently drew in his theological and philosophical discussions he was given the title of the "Subtle Doctor". Nevertheless, he was basically a Franciscan theologian who tried to find a new synthesis that would be profoundly Augustinian without ignoring the problems raised by the Aristotelian critics of traditional theology.

When Duns Scotus deals with the question of the existence of God he moves within the general framework of scholastic thought in that he posits a necessary being as the first cause of all that is. He, however, differs from Thomas Aquinas in that he does not take his as point of his departure the existence of a reality which one knows through the bodily senses, like movement in the first of Thomas's proofs of the existence of God, but from the metaphysical concept of being as being. Being is the proper object of the human intellect, because whatever is, by the very fact that it is, is intelligible. Only non-being is unintelligible. Being can be predicated of everything, creatures as well as God.

This predication takes place univocally and not analogously, as in the case of Thomas. Thomas is forced to use the concept of analogy, argues Duns Scotus, because he starts from the contingent existence of physical beings. But, exactly because of the analogical method, the gap between the contingent existence of the physical world and the necessary existence of God cannot be bridged. Only the univocal notion of being makes the jump possible.

Having thus posited a necessary being as the first cause of all that is, Duns Scotus continues to affirm the infinity of this primary. A primary and consequently uncaused cause is not limited by anything in its causality; it is therefore infinite. But what is the relation of finite beings to the infinite being? Avicenna, the Arabian commentator of Aristotle, holds that the possible emanates from the necessary of necessity. Duns Scotus takes the opposite view: the possible comes from the necessary by way of liberty. The relationship of the God of Duns Scotus as the necessary and infinite being to finite beings is radically contingent. Between the necessary and the contingent the only conceivable link is the divine will.

Thomas Aquinas used his doctrine of the analogy of being to distinguish clearly between the nature of God's existence and the existence of finite creatures. A doctrine based on univocal being was in grave danger of losing sight of that distinction. In Duns Scotus's thinking the will of God draws that dividing line. At the same time the will of God intervenes to bridge the ontological gap between the necessary existence of Infinite Being and the possible existence of finite beings.

With respect to God Himself there is no voluntarism. The infinite essence of God is the necessary object of God's will. But with respect to finite things there is no necessity binding God's will. There can be no reason for his willing or not willing, since all willing is absolutely without ground or reason. There is no reason, says Duns Scotus, why his will willed this, except that his will is will. God creates if He wills do so, and only because He so wills. To ask a reason for God's will is to ask the reason for something for which there is no reason.

It follows therefore that all things may be said to be possible to the omnipotence of the divine will, with the exception of the principle of contradiction. The absolute and undetermined freedom of God's will (*potentia absoluta*) has only one limit, the logically impossible. God can save the already lost Judas, but He cannot give eternal blessedness to a stone, nor make undone what has been done.

So also is the choice of good subject to the will of God. If God wills a thing, that thing will be good.



Duns Scotus's idea of the primacy of the will over against the intellect becomes clear when he refers to the role that the will plays in human nature. The entire human being, including all the thoughts, words, works and impulses, is subject to the will. The will, and not the thought, is the organ for the appropriation of the highest objects and values. It is true that in its decision-making the will is informed by the intellect, but it does not derive its ability to make free choices from the intellect. It is certainly the will that wills and the intelligence that knows, but the fact that the will can command acts of understanding seems to Duns Scotus to decide in favour of the primacy of the will. No doubt we only will what we know, but the intellect cannot command the will. On the contrary, the will commands the intellect. The intellect is only the means towards the will's ultimate goal, its own self-realization.

In an absolute sense this also holds true of God. The divine will takes precedence over the divine intellect. Why, for instance, does God decide to reward a human moral action? Thomas Aquinas would have argued that the divine intellect recognises the inherent worth of the human moral action. It then informs the will to reward it appropriately. Duns Scotus goes in the opposite direction. The divine will rewards the moral action before any evaluation of its inherent worth. God does not will something because it is good. Something is good, because God wills it.

The creation, the incarnation and redemption through the cross are all contingent acts of God. God could have decided not to create. He could have decided that the incarnation should take on another form. But He did not do so. The satisfaction of Christ brings about redemption, because God ordained and determined it accordingly.

In this way Duns Scotus distinguishes between the absolute and undetermined freedom of God's will (*potentia absoluta*) and the actual plan of creation and redemption that He ordained and set into motion (*potentia ordinata*). This ordained power is the manifestation of God's divine power upon the ground and within the bounds of laws and ordinances fixed by God Himself. God commonly works according to his ordained power, but it is also conceivable that He may, upon occasion, by virtue of his absolute power, vary from the course of the former, or abolish it entirely. In our quest to know God, however, we must deal with the *potentia ordinata* and we must accept that there is no cause or determining factor behind it all that we can discover by means of our human reason or intellect. In the final analysis we have to accept it on authority and by faith.

Far more clearly than in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus presents to us God as a thinking and willing personality. The emphasis shifted from eternal ideas and divine laws to God's activities in the world. The sum total of these

activities is love. When we say that the infinite essence of God is the necessary object of God's will, we mean nothing more and nothing less than that God wills or loves Himself. This love of God towards Himself embraces the whole of creation, because all being originates in God and has Him as its final end.

There is no doubt that Duns Scotus saw himself as a faithful follower of the Franciscan tradition and many see him as the man in whom the theological intuitions of Bonaventura come to full fruition. But whereas Bonaventura and the Franciscans of the thirteenth century basically adhered to the Anselmian idea of a confluence of faith and reason, Duns Scotus started the process of putting an end to this symbiosis by positing the inaccessibility, through reason or intellect, of that which lies behind the ordained order. In this way he prepared the way for the sharp division between philosophical and theological truths, scientific knowledge and the knowledge of faith that took hold amongst nominalists like William of Ockham in the fourteenth century, who is said, rightly or wrongly, to have dug the grave of scholasticism.

### 6.3 THE NOMINALIST GOD AND THE GRAVE OF SCHOLASTICISM

It is customary to divide the theological teachings of the second part of the fourteenth century into two classes, according to whether their authors were following the *via antiqua* (the old way of Thomism) or the *via moderna* (the new or modern way). The initiator of the modern way is no less commonly considered to be William of Ockham (1285-1347), who introduced nominalism as its underlying philosophical structure. Duns Scotus set in motion the process that ultimately led to the disintegration of scholastic hegemony in the late Middle Ages. William of Ockham and his followers, Pierre d'Ailly and Gabriel Biel, for example, completed what Duns Scotus had started.

As we have seen, realism, which goes back to its early formulator, Plato, accepted that universals have an existence independent of the mind of the thinker and prior to the existence of particular things. As modified by Aristotle, realism referred to the existence of universals within the particular things, giving those particular things their identity.

Thomas Aquinas used this modified realism as the basis of his theory of knowledge in his theology. The nominalism of Ockham, however, while professing to be a true representation of Aristotle, in effect killed traditional Aristotelianism by teaching the opposite. He insists that the universals have no independent reality, but that they are names we give to the likeness that we observe in similar individual things. In this sense universals may be regarded as legitimate inferences and cannot be discarded as figments of human imagination. Nevertheless, universals do not exist outside of the mind; they are products of the intellect. The knowledge of general concepts is, therefore, subjective and

does not penetrate to the essence of the things. Real knowledge occurs only where we intuitively know individual, concrete things.

Even in God universal objects have no being. It is because there are no universal ideas in God that there is no universality in things. The so-called ideas in God of Platonic realism are nothing but the very things producible by God. God needs no ideas in order to know; by the very fact that God is God, He knows all.

This philosophical shift from realism to nominalism had an immediate impact on the whole idea of natural theology as we come to know it in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. The intellectualism that underpinned Thomas's theology had already been dealt a significant blow by Duns Scotus. The nominalism of Ockham and his followers drove a further nail into the coffin.

The reason why nominalism had such repercussions for the whole idea of a natural theology in the Thomistic sense of the word is obvious. Thomas was of the opinion that the human reason is able to talk about God without the assistance of the Bible or tradition, on the basis of what it discovers in the general principles of being underlying creation. For a nominalist such general principles can, of course, bring no real certainty because, as such, they only exist in the human mind.

This does not mean that Ockham rejects the idea of a natural theology. In his view God can indeed be known in a natural as well as a supernatural way. But the important thing is the degree of certainty in the two types of knowledge. He here introduces the idea of divine illumination. It is supernatural divine illumination alone that permits faith and is a matter of absolute certainty. Reason brings no such certainty. In this way Ockham thoroughly undermines the traditional proofs of the existence of God that had been the mainstay of scholastic natural theology. For him the attempts to prove the existence of God only led to probabilities and not to certainties. Since creatures are finite, we cannot prove by evident demonstration that their cause is infinite. We cannot evidently prove that there is only one such cause. If it were possible, argues Ockham, to prove the existence of God as a God who is a being than which nothing better, higher or more perfect exists, then there is no evident demonstration that there is one such God. Nor can it be proved that this God is an infinite being in the Scottish sense. Finally, it cannot be proved that God is the immediate efficient cause of all things. All that can be proved is the existence of one or several Gods, finite rather than infinite.

Although it cannot be demonstrated that God is the mediate or immediate cause of all things, it can be the object of persuasion by authority and reason. Only when reason opens itself to divine illumination is it able to complement faith, but it is definitely not in itself the preamble to, and the affirmation of, the

truths of faith as had been propounded in scholastic theology from Anselm to Thomas Aquinas.

It follows that Thomas and Ockham were also in direct disagreement with reference to the meaning of God's relationship to his believers. Thomas maintained that it is a relationship based on the intelligibility of God and hence on the access believers have to understanding Him. For Ockham - in this he followed Duns Scotus - the relationship is based on the will of God to have human beings believe in Him. This takes place through divine illumination. God, out of his grace, infuses into believers an attitude (*habitus*) through the medium of which they are able to assent to any article of faith whatsoever.

It is traditionally asserted that William of Ockham and the nominalists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries ripped apart the coherent system of nature and grace, reason and faith, philosophy and theology that Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic thinkers had so painstakingly worked at and that subsequently a sharp division between philosophical and theological truths, scientific knowledge and the knowledge of faith, forcefully came to the fore. Such an assertion is not altogether true. A complete divorce of faith and reason certainly does not apply to the fifteenth-century nominalism of, for instance, Gabriel Biel. In the case of Ockham it is also an overstatement. Ockham certainly denies that theology is a science, because no science can rest upon faith. But this does not trouble him. What natural reason can, or cannot, prove in matters of faith is of no consequence. But this does not mean that there was in his mind a conflict between faith and reason, or revelation and philosophy. Ockham feels himself perfectly secure in what he believes. There is no need to prove it. It has been said of Ockham that what he rejected as a philosopher, he accepted as a believer. Such an interpretation hardly does justice to Ockham's intentions.

It is necessary that a distinction should be made between the certainty of revealed knowledge that has to be accepted on authority and the probability of the conclusions reached by reason in matters of faith. Though the rational arguments offered by theologians are never compelling, they are sufficient to refute the accusation of the absurdity of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. What is offered is not evidence, but a probable opinion which helps to clarify what is believed with certitude.

Such a limited application of reason in theology holds good even in the case of such a mystery as the Trinity. William of Ockham, for example, does not accept that there is necessarily a disparity between the laws of logic and the belief in a triune God. It is only when one uses a strict syllogism that one succumbs to heresy: the divine nature in its entirety is the Father; the Son has the divine nature; thus the Son is the Father. Paternity and sonship, however, refer to distinct realities and are predicated on the divine nature in a distinct way. The

sylogism therefore does not apply. In this Ockham is followed by Biel, who clearly states that the divine nature is distinct from the person and its property. Such arguments, however, are a far cry from a rational clarification of the doctrine of the Trinity. We must rather see in them the attempts of theologians to advance probable considerations appealing to practical reason with a view to clarifying some of the more difficult problems of revealed truth.

It is significant that the Augustinian psychological interpretation of the relations within the Trinity resurfaced in nominalist theology. The traditional images of the Father as the One who loves, the Son who is the beloved, and the Holy Spirit as their mutual bond of love are used to explain the inter-trinitarian relations. These images, however, are not supposed to analyse the inner life of God, but are only attempts to clarify something of the mystery of God's triune nature. The nominalists kept on defending the rationality of faith; the difficulty of reaching a full rational understanding of the revealed truth they generally based on the limitations of the human mind.

Against the background of this developing new theory of knowledge by Ockham and the other Franciscan nominalists, it is not surprising that a new definition of the field of theology also surfaced. It was inspired by a widespread and profoundly Franciscan suspicion of the metaphysically foolproof causal system of scholasticism which embraced the whole chain of being, including God as the first and final cause. For the nominalists it meant applying a philosophical necessitarianism to God that allows no room for Him as a free willing Person. Not the Being but the Person of God defines the limits of all theological activity. In the final analysis theology has to do with God's promise, his will to commit Himself to us in a covenant (which the nominalists often referred to as a *foedus* or *pactum*) from which springs the whole history of salvation. His eternal decree of self-commitment has established the limits of theology. To overstep these boundaries leads to a sheer and fruitless speculative penetration of the inner being of God. In this respect the nominalists distinguished the domain of God's unlimited freedom and power (*potentia absoluta*) and his self-limiting commitment (*potentia ordinata*). The first marks the inaccessible realm where speculative reason oversteps its mark and is no longer guided by faith. The second is the domain of theology, properly finding its subject matter in the revealed will of God, in what God actually decided to do in creation and redemption. It is this dialectics of the *potentia absoluta* and the *potentia ordinata* that in the years to come would profoundly influence not only the theology of the Reformation, but its concept of God as well. Not for nothing did Luther claim two centuries later that he came from the school of Ockham.

Victorious at Oxford and Paris in the fifty years before 1350, nominalism spread during the latter part of the fourteenth century into most of the universities of Europe as the ruling way of theological expression. Many saw it as an instrument

of intellectual agnosticism and it introduced a lot of uncertainty. Wherever it was present it discouraged any attempt to attain a certain and true intellectual recognition of God, and eliminated as unnecessary any assumption that there exists an innate habit or capacity in the human soul for knowing God.

Despite the undoubtedly positive developments in the *via moderna* of the nominalists, there were serious embryonic problems. The most serious of these problems was the difficulty in keeping intact the tenuous bond between faith and reason. At the same time a new ideal of scientific knowledge slowly began to make its influence felt, threatening the traditional concepts of divine illumination, revelation and faith.

This development coincided with a new mental interest that was steadily growing, chiefly amongst the upper crust of the townsfolk in the cities rather than in the universities: humanism in the widest sense of the word. Later called the "Renaissance" from a French word that means "rebirth", it had discovered in the almost complete separation of the natural and the supernatural, nature and grace, reason and faith a very useful ally within academic and intellectual circles.

# 7 THE GOD OF THE RENAISSANCE

## 7.1 THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

The Renaissance is usually seen as a movement that started in Italy with the reawakening of a profound interest in classical Greek and Roman literature and culture, especially Greek culture, when after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Turks fugitives were driven to the West. However, it has been argued, not without merit, that the Renaissance is falsely so-called; it was nothing as sudden, or as definite as a rebirth; it was rather the culmination of a period of observable preparation on Italian soil, called by someone the “gradual blossoming of the Italian genius”

Already by the fourteenth century Italy had well nigh completed the assimilation of the various races, the Lombards, Normans, Germans and Greeks, that had made their home within her borders. A revival of native Roman and Latin culture coincided with this process. Petrarch (1304-1374), the Italian humanist at the papal court in Avignon, personified this early stage of Latin revival. To this was added the increasing influence of Greek culture, so that by the beginning of the fifteenth century the rulers of a city such as Florence could see the Florentine republic as reviving the virtues of Greece and Rome. From Florence to Rome, and from Italy to the rest of Western Europe, a new message started to spread, announcing that, in the words of the Greek philosopher Protagoras, humanity is the measure of all things.

In the upper echelons of society a new spirit of optimistic belief in human progress and development swept across Europe. They felt themselves to be rising from the stagnation of the previous age, as heralds of a new age of freedom, intellectual innovation and human progress.

The voyages of Columbus and Vasco da Gama coincided with these cultural developments that were opening up new horizons and revolutionising the imagination of artists, scholars and intellectuals. An unbounded, almost feverish, vitality took hold coupled with a sincere and refined appreciation of beauty in all its varied manifestations. The fullest possible development of all human skills and abilities had become the ideal.

In a few of the Renaissance’s greatest representatives this ideal of a universally developed person came very close to realisation. The outstanding examples are Leonardo da Vinci, the brilliant painter, engineer and explorer of nature, and of

course Michelangelo, who in his architecture, sculpture, paintings and poetry left us a heritage of unsurpassed beauty. The Renaissance was indeed a period that witnessed a virtual eruption of masterpieces, from the architectural wonders of the dome of Florence, St Peters in Rome, the Italian palaces and French castles to the sculptures of Donatello and Michelangelo, and the paintings of Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Dürer and Holbein: a harmony of form and colour with the breathtaking mastery of the palette and, as someone aptly said, “the silent poetry of the brush”.

In the popular philosophy of the day that inspired writers, poets, painters and sculptors as well as in the more formal philosophy of academicians it is very difficult to detect a clear pattern as far as the relationship towards the church and Christianity is concerned. In the fine arts Christian motifs are still dominant, despite many and various examples of themes taken from ancient Greek and Roman pagan cultures. This is exemplified in a painter like Raphael who, next to his *Transfiguration* could produce a *Galatea*, a work of art that has been called the greatest evocation of paganism of the Renaissance. In literature the Christian humanism of Erasmus and Thomas More contrasts sharply with the intolerant disrespect of Christian ethics of Machiavelli, and the agnosticism of a moralist like Montaigne. While the Florentine Academy of Ficino still tried to reconcile Christianity and Neo-Platonism, other philosophers were barely able to conceal their profound scepticism of the Christian religion behind camouflaged terminology. But despite these, and many other, ambivalences, there is one common thread that runs through this epoch of European history: the point of departure is no longer the spiritual realm dominated by the Church, but human nature and the world of which it is part.

The humanism of the Renaissance finds expression in many different ways, but interestingly enough, as far as Italy, the cradle of the Renaissance, is concerned, least of all in the realm of theological and philosophical thought. The reason is that the most profound thought of the time was not expressed in words, but in visual imagery. Two sublime examples of this are Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's frescoes in the room that was to be the Pope's private library. In the latter Raphael celebrates the god-like human intelligence, while the whole of the Sistine ceiling can be interpreted as an eulogy on the creation of Adam, who with a body of great physical splendour reclines on the ground and stretches out his hand so that it almost touches the hand of God.

In Florence the same thing occurred, but Florentine art more markedly expressed the attempts to find a synthesis between the classical Greek world and Christianity. Florence, however, distinguished itself in that it allowed this meeting between Christianity and the classical world to fashion for itself a philosophy in the already mentioned Florentine Academy of Ficino, where he and Mirandola - with the Greek texts of Plato and Plotinus available for the first time



- attempted to present the Christian message about God in terms of Neo-Platonism. Inevitably this led to a kind of mysticism reminiscent of the mystical theology of the early centuries of Christianity, but more clearly set within the mould of Renaissance humanism.

## 7.2 HUMANISM, MYSTICISM AND THE RENAISSANCE GOD

The Renaissance placed the human being at the centre of creation. For the Renaissance humanist the human being is both creature and creator. Human beings can form and shape, not only themselves, but also the world, thus demonstrating and affirming human individuality, potential, free will and, perhaps above all, the intellectual craving which is one of the fundamental characteristics of human nature.

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Savonarola's contemporary and head of the Florentine Academy, presents us with a curious blend of Christianity, Neo-Platonic mysticism and Renaissance humanism. In his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino points out that a harmony exists between the Platonic tradition in philosophy and the Christian religion, and he proposes that within this harmony each is to be used as an authority in its own way. He did this deliberately, declaring that Platonic philosophy is necessary to confirm the Christian religion, rendering it sufficiently rational to satisfy the sophisticated and sceptical minds of the Renaissance.

Ficino conceived of God as the source of all being, as Being itself, from which all things derive and to which all things aspire to return. In true Neo-Platonic fashion he speaks about creation as a succession of emanations that proceed from God, none of which, however, depletes the divine essence. All the orders of creation, including humankind and nature, are part of the chain of being that proceeds from God himself. The first emanation is the angelic mind, which corresponds to the Platonic *nous* or intelligence. This angelic mind Ficino identifies with the Logos of Christianity which, according to him, expresses the divine intelligence. Next of the emanations is the World-Soul and from it proceeds the souls of human beings and the things of the universe.

The return to its source and the mystical union with God is the ultimate goal of the human soul. In every soul there is a spark of the divine intelligence, which means that in every soul there exists a longing to return to God. Thus reason impels us upward to God. It invites us to advance to the world of pure thought as the summit of human consciousness. But because the soul is captive in the body and our senses accordingly tempt us downward, away from God, we must through contemplation withdraw from the senses, disengage, as it were, the soul from the body. In this way we ascend to union with God as the Creator and so achieve dominion over creation.

A subtle subordinationism crept into Ficino's view of the Trinity, when in reacting humanistically to the stylistic poverty of the Vulgate, he made bold to translate *Verbum* as *sermo*, thereby discarding the traditional conception of Christ as the Eternal Word (*Logos, Verbum*) in a philosophical sense as the Mind and Instrument of God, and substituting the idea of Christ as merely the voice of God. In this he started a train of thought that would equate the Word with the prophetic voice of God of the Old Testament, which in the long run would make it difficult to maintain the consubstantiality of the Logos-Son with the Father. Some of the representatives of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century drew this conclusion with an appeal to Ficino.

The most important philosopher and theologian outside of Italy to represent this period of a renewed interest in Platonism and Neo-Platonism is Nicholas of Cues (1400-1464), the German theologian who was also a cardinal and archbishop. But he is less confident about the human intellect than Ficino as far as the realm of faith and religion is concerned. In his main publication *De docta ignorantia*, literally meaning "about learned ignorance", he refers to the state which is attained when individuals have fully realised their own ignorance, and the inadequacy of the human mind and the method of human reasoning. He shares with William of Ockham a profound awareness of the inherent limitations of human knowledge in matters of faith. For a brief moment Nicholas seems to reintroduce the negative theology which, as we have seen, forms an intrinsic part of the natural theology of Greek philosophy. But he stops short of becoming a sceptic by stating that the incomprehensibility of God leads us to know that we do not know, and this holy not-knowing is an intuitive and mystical assuredness (about God) that transcends all reason.

A direct link between the nominalism of Ockham and a Renaissance thinker like Nicholas of Cues is hard to establish. Even if such a link exists, it is rather tenuous. But indirectly nominalism played a far greater role in preparing an intellectual climate for the development of Renaissance thought than is usually acknowledged. The reason for this lack of acknowledgement lies in the fact that it only became apparent in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the latent motif of the Renaissance came to full fruition.

What happened?

As we have seen Thomas Aquinas and scholasticism had tried to create a coherent system by bringing together nature and grace, reason and faith. Ockham ripped apart what Thomas tried to hold together. The knowledge of reason and the knowledge of faith became two separate things, which meant that in the final analysis faith could no longer dictate to reason. Although less certain, scientific knowledge could now stand on its own. It was no longer necessary to refer to the higher authority of faith. For the Renaissance scholars

and intellectuals with their optimistic view of the human race and their faith in the abilities of the human mind, this was a liberating experience. The intolerable shackles of medieval dogma imposed on the human mind for a thousand years in the name of theology could at last be shattered. They felt that they had been freed to walk forward in the light of their own reason.

The other side of the coin was that reason no longer seemed to be capable of affirming and demonstrating the truths of faith. The enthusiasm for reason of early scholasticism was seen to be foundering by the fourteenth century. Scholastics were retreating to faith, as a reasoned understanding of the divine seemed far from attainable.

It is clear that in such a spiritual climate profound changes would take place in ideas about knowledge of God, his revelation and the way it should be interpreted. Indeed, questions about God Himself began to surface. But they were all still very muted, because most of the Renaissance thinkers and authors were careful not to antagonise the Church. This often led to an inner conflict in many a heart and mind between the restrictive nature of Christianity as interpreted by the Church, on the one hand, and the humanist ideal of the full development of the human person, on the other.

In the final analysis the Renaissance represents the first phase in the secularisation of European culture. The extent of this onslaught was not immediately evident, because its effects were initially blunted by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, which the Roman Catholic Church set in motion. These religious movements more readily took hold of the ordinary masses of the people, while the Renaissance belonged too much to the upper echelons of society. But the groundwork was done for the Enlightenment, which was to envelop Europe and the Western World from the eighteenth century onward.

# 8 GOD AND THE EUROPEAN REFORMATION

## 8.1 ON THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION

### 8.1.1 Demographic, socio-economic and political changes

The sixteenth century was one of great complexity. The popular notion of this century as the period of one great Reformation movement which, having started in Germany with Martin Luther, rapidly spread across the whole of Europe is an over-simplification. There was not one but a plurality of reformations which interacted with each other. The nature of this variety of reform movements, despite their religious similarities, differed according to the geographical and local political context within which they occurred. Historical, social, political and economic factors and influences played a far greater role in shaping the Protestant pluralism of Europe than is often suspected. This, of course, does not minimise the basic religious character of the Reformation movement; it only emphasises that the roots of a particular religious phenomenon are complicated and multifaceted. Determining the broader context within which the various reform movements in Europe took place is therefore not an unnecessary luxury, but, as before, the context sheds a great deal of light on the experience of God and the theological reflection that follows such an experience within a particular period.

By the dawn of the sixteenth century Europe had just emerged from the shattering experience of the catastrophes of famine, war and, above all, the Black Death of the fourteenth century. By 1500 there was some recovery from the unprecedented population losses caused by the famines and plagues and a period of steady growth had started. This population growth was first of all reflected in the rapid process of urbanisation. Although the greatest part of the total population of Europe still lived in the rural areas, many cities doubled in size and all over Europe small towns sprang up, attracting peasants forced to abandon the land in favour of better-paying jobs.

This rapid urbanisation coincided with the development of a money economy as merchant bankers started to replace the small landholders and shop-keepers as the key economic units in society. They were the people who increasingly supplied the necessary capital for plants and raw materials, and hired workers to operate the plants. Many of these workers were skilled labourers from the guilds, but job opportunities were also created for the unskilled peasants who flocked to the cities and, excluded from the guilds, became dependent on lowly-paid jobs

that provided little more than the most basic resources for staying alive. Many were reduced to begging. The obvious result of this development of a capitalist economy was, on the one hand, the rise of bourgeois classes in the towns and cities, and, on the other hand, an increasing number of displaced and disaffected people. This last category did not only include peasants but also the lesser nobility, who quite literally became a superfluous people as the result of the inexorable erosion of feudalism. It soon became evident that both these two groups were susceptible to revolutionary tendencies.

New inventions by craftsmen and improved technologies in mining and shipping stimulated the economy, but nothing had more of an impact on the economic, social, cultural and, most importantly, religious life in the towns and cities of the Europe of the sixteenth century than the development of the printing press.

Amidst the famines, wars and plagues of the later Middle Ages it is easy to forget that this was also the period of expanding literacy and lay education. By 1500 there were already seventy universities in Europe, sponsored by monarchs and wealthy merchants, but the knowledge generated was mostly confined to elite circles. This was mainly due to the fact that scribes and monks during the Middle Ages had copied books on sheets of parchment, which made it an expensive process. This process was replaced by block-printing, but this mode of printing was also slow and incapable of mass production. The printing press with its movable metal type, introduced towards the middle of the 15th century by Gutenberg in the city of Mainz, in conjunction with an improved process of cheap paper manufacture, brought about a revolutionary change. The reproduction of multiple identical copies became possible and the floodgates opened. Books and pamphlets in hundred thousands of copies made their appearance and brought their message to the streets. Luther, for instance, wrote approximately 30 tracts between 1517 and 1520, which were distributed in 300,000 printed copies.

The effect of the general availability of the printed word can never be underestimated. It revolutionised society, with profound consequences for the religious life of its members.

### 8.1.2 Individualism, mysticism and the democratisation of piety

It has often been suggested that the late Middle Ages was merely a period of religious disintegration. This perception, however, is only partially true. The gradual collapse of the great scholastic systems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the pressure of the of the nominalists, on the one hand, and the rise of Renaissance humanism, on the other, did not lead to a general decline in interest in the Christian religion in Western Europe. On the contrary, it is now recognised that this period also witnessed a remarkable development which set the scene for the Reformation itself. A new vitality in Christian life emerged,

which expressed itself in the rise of piety as well as a theological awareness among the ordinary lay people.

One of the reasons given for this development is that increasingly widespread literacy and printing, along with Renaissance intellectual impulses, stimulated the formation of individual consciousness and the concomitant sense of individuality. This led to a growing individualistic piety that gradually became indifferent to the many external religious observances and rituals of official church practice. Although most uneducated people were satisfied with a sort of lay participation in the purely ritual sacraments of baptism and the last rites, for example, the rise of professional and literate groups throughout Europe in the late 15th century had a considerable impact on religious life.

It would be wrong, however, to see in this development a purely spontaneous reaction from a growing intellectual elite. There is clear evidence of deliberate attempts to stimulate the process and to bring about a close relationship between education and lay piety. The remarkable growth of interest in education in the monastic houses of this period, particularly those of the so-called New Devotion (*devotio moderna*), is indicative of these efforts.

The story of the New Devotion goes back to John Ruysbroeck, who died towards the end of the fourteenth century, but whose writings made their effect felt throughout the fifteenth century. Gerard Groote (1340-1384) carried forward his ideas in the eastern Netherlands, where Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods of the Common Life were founded at Deventer and a community of Augustinian monks was established at Windesheim. These laywomen and laymen worked for a living, took no monastic vows (in the beginning at least), but sought to pursue in common a life of service to God and to society. The noblest fruit of this new piety was a book whose circulation exceeded that of any other work of the Middle Ages: *The Imitation of Christ*, possibly written by Thomas à Kempis, who spent most of his life - he died in 1471 - in a monastery of the Windesheim congregation near Zwolle. His tracts and sermons dealt with prayer, contemplation, meditations on Christ and Mary, the mystical union with Christ, and the ethical problems of members of a monastic community.

Although the New Devotion was not primarily concerned with the education of ordinary people, it rapidly assumed a major pedagogical role in the fifteenth century. Inevitably, the piety of the New Devotion was transmitted in this education process. All indications are that piety and religion, even theology itself, became more and more lay-orientated in the period immediately preceding the Reformation.

This movement towards lay involvement, including the establishment of lay fraternities, accompanied an increasing tendency to reject theological speculation and vain curiosity (*vana curiositas*) in favour of a new authority: the

daily religious experience of the devout. Behind the rejection of speculation we find a new conception of Christian thought and an alternative ideal of Christian life, uncovering new dimensions in human experience.

Although the reaction against the metaphysical speculation of scholastic theology received a strong impetus from the lay movement of the New Devotion in the fifteenth century, its theological roots go further back in history, as we saw in the previous chapter.

In the universities the old way (*via antiqua*) of Thomism had already been undermined by Franciscan nominalism. The profoundly Franciscan aversion and suspicion of a metaphysically foolproof causal system which embraces the whole chain of being, including God as first and final cause, resulted in the liberating conception of God as a Person, free in his dealings with his creatures. The revealed will of God, what God actually decided to do in creation and redemption (*potentia ordinata*), is the domain of theology. Anything that surpasses this limit is idle curiosity and sheer speculation.

While this reaction was making itself felt within academic theology as taught in the universities, Bernard of Clairvaux, Jean Gerson and, above all, Bonaventura determined the content of the theological discussions and spiritual life in the intellectual world outside the universities. In this respect mention must be made of Gerson, who became chancellor of the University of Paris in 1395 and whose theological programme one can interpret as an attempt to bring back the main thrust of Bonaventura's tradition, accusing the Franciscan theologians of his day of having abandoned it. Indeed, it has been argued that the chief contribution of the Franciscans to the intellectual life of late medieval period was its spirituality, rather than any coherent theological system.

The anti-speculative character of Franciscan theology in general and the psychological rather than metaphysical basis of this theology in pulpit and confessional appealed to the ordinary Franciscan friars, who established themselves as the pastors to the plebeian city population. More than the scholarly Dominicans and even the Augustinian orders they understood the mentality of the lower strata in society - so much so they dominated the spiritual sphere outside the university halls. Brotherhoods and sisterhoods of organised lay piety sprung up as a midway between monasteries and the ordinary world of day-to-day life. Not inappropriately this development has been described as the democratization of mysticism and piety.

The new piety that spread across Europe was, however, more than only a Franciscan endeavour. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were also marked by an Augustinian renaissance. In the first instance this renaissance concerns the development of a form of academic Augustinianism at both Oxford and Paris in the first half of the fourteenth century. At the University of Oxford Thomas

Bradwardine called Augustine the “Doctor Catholicus” and interpreted him within the framework of the *via antiqua*. In Paris Gregory of Rimini succeeded in matching the central Augustinian theme of God’s primacy and the provenance of his grace with the theological achievements of the nominalist *via moderna*. The *schola Augustiniana moderna* - as this Gregorian tradition is generally known - adopted not merely the nominalist epistemology of the *via moderna*, but also certain characteristic aspects of its soteriology, notably the emphasis on God’s revealed *potentia ordinata* as its basis.

But Augustine’s influence was not confined to academic circles. As “Doctor Catholicus” he was not only considered the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, but also the measure of Christian experience. Within the circles of the New Devotion Augustine’s search for God in the inwardness of his own being through prayer and meditation, and through the Holy Spirit, the experience of God’s incredible love and condescension in Christ became the goal: a religion of true inwardness rather than of mere conformity to outward rites and ceremonies.

Although the New Devotion had attained extremely wide influence by the middle of the fifteenth century, it would be wrong to consider it the major force in European religiosity during the period that preceded the Reformation. Side by side with this piety of quiet inwardness Europe, and especially Germany, displayed a very different current of piety, marked by a frenetic preoccupation with the external forms of religion, motivated by an increasing sense of apprehension; the sheer misery of existence, and fear of death and the devil all added terror to daily life. From childhood the populace absorbed vast amounts of superstition concerning witches and dark powers, so much so that theologians wrote treatises on the cult of the dark powers (*maleficium*) and offered advice on the best techniques for identifying and disempowering witches. Finally, the thought of death, purgatorial pains and the universal judgment on the last day engendered an anxious concern for personal salvation: how can I please God? This was a sentiment shared by almost everybody, the New Devotion mystics included.

The growing individualism of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century piety found fertile soil in the rapid process of urbanisation and in increasingly widespread literacy. The other major “secular” influence in this regard was the intellectual impulses of the Renaissance contained in the writings of the humanists of this period.

Despite the fact that one of its most influential philosophers and theologians, Nicholas of Cues, was a German, it took quite a while for Renaissance humanism to make a real impact among the peoples of the countries north of the Alps. This was probably due to the entrenched position of medieval social and cultural



traditions in countries like Germany, England and France, compared to Italy. Nevertheless, the new art of printing made it possible for some scholars from these countries to gain access to the works of Italian humanists, while other wandering colleagues visited Italy, acquired a love of the classics, and on their return started to propagate the new learning. By the last decades of the fifteenth century humanism had become a powerful spiritual force in the northern countries.

Although humanism's initial influence was confined to the study of the classical languages, it soon started to infringe on the precincts of the theologians by criticising the speculative and dogmatic approach of scholasticism. This was done on the basis of a reading of the New Testament, not as a source for a comprehensive and consistent theological system, but as a record of the early Christian experience given in a specific literary and historical form. The humanists called for a return to the sources (*ad fontes*) with the view to recapturing the vitality of the experience of the early Christians and reinterpreting one's own experience from these sources.

The humanist emphasis on religion as something personal, interior and spiritual, rather than external religious observances or adherence and obedience to ecclesiastical structures, the "cult of the invisible", can be seen most clearly in Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536). At an early stage in his development Erasmus had been introduced to the inward, Christocentric piety of the New Devotion of the Brothers of the Common Life. This experience remained latent within him for the rest of his life and found expression in the moralism and intellectual mysticism that revealed the influence of Renaissance thinkers.

The influence of Erasmus and other humanists such as Johannes Reuchlin on the creation of a specific intellectual climate in the early decades of the sixteenth century cannot be underestimated. Despite the parting of the ways between Erasmus and Luther on the cardinal issues of sin and grace and the freedom of the human will, the anti-scholastic and anti-speculative character of Erasmian humanism contributed to the formation of a theological epistemological framework that would eventually become the hallmark of Lutheran and Reformed theology.

The eve of the Reformation is characterised by the confluence of many and varied influences of a demographic, socio-economic, technological and, of course, intellectual and spiritual nature. All these factors contributed to the formation of a theological methodology that would shape the idea of God in a decisive way. Although some of the roots of this new way of thinking go back earlier to the changes brought about by the nominalists, the developments in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries created the necessary spiritual and intellectual climate for bringing the basic nominalist emphasis of individuality

and its anti- speculative approach to theology as exemplified by the distinction between God's absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) to fruition. Placed within the new context of a spiritual and mystical revival within a fearsome world of misery, death and the devil, on the one hand, and a deep disillusionment with the ecclesiastical practice and politics of the day, on the other hand, these ideas became powerful intellectual tools to bring about a profound new way of thinking about God. The reformers willingly made use of these tools.

## 8.2 THE HIDDEN AND REVEALED GOD OF MARTIN LUTHER

If anything, Luther's theology tells us to what extent original thinkers - nobody doubts the originality of his theology - can still be dependent on the thought processes of those who preceded them, the historical and social context within which they live, and the popular trends in the society to which they belong. We have had a look at the major factors that shaped the period that led up to the Reformation. The picture that emerged is rather confusing, because it was indeed a period of profound changes on many different levels. But still, despite the obvious differences between these factors, each one of them contributed in its own way to the development of Luther's idea of God.

At the academic and intellectual level we have identified various movements: Ockhamist nominalism ,which was prevalent at many places of theological learning and the concomitant tendency to reject theological speculation; the Augustinian renaissance that incorporated certain basic tenets of nominalist epistemology in its own system, but that at the same time re-emphasised the primacy of God's grace in salvation; the old way of Thomistic scholasticism that was still a force to be reckoned with in the universities and the church; and, finally, the rising tide of humanism in the liberal arts and academic circles.

Luther's relationship to these movements was by and large ambivalent. While he, for instance, endorsed the anti-speculative side of the Ockhamist tradition, he, as a good Augustinian, completely rejected the "Pelagianism" of the Ockhamists and their emphasis on "doing the best that is in one" (*facere quod in se est*). His appreciation of the humanists' criticism of the scholastic form of instruction did not prevent him from engaging in a bitter confrontation with Erasmus on the issue of the freedom of the will. Here again his adherence to the Augustinian tradition made itself felt. These and other related issues would have a direct bearing on the way Luther thought about God and His relation to us.

On a more spiritual and emotional level Luther was exposed to the kind of piety described in the previous section. The mystic search for God in the inwardness of one's own being through prayer and meditation, which marked the Augustinian spiritual tradition, together with the very German piety with its anxious concern

for personal salvation brought about by the fear of God's judgement, could not but have a profound influence on a monk belonging to the Augustinian order. That it would finally manifest itself in the way Luther thought and talked about God speaks for itself.

Taking these and other factors in consideration, we will now be looking at Luther's view of God and knowledge of God from a number of perspectives: natural knowledge and faith knowledge of God, the mystical nature of the faith knowledge of God and the anti-speculative nature of faith knowledge. Finally, these perspectives lead up to Luther's own and, to some extent, unique description of God as both hidden and revealed (*Deus absconditus et revelatus*).

Despite the effort of many historians to minimise the influence of Ockhamist nominalism on Luther, there can be little doubt that, as far as knowledge of God is concerned, the roots of Luther's decisive break with the rationalism of medieval scholasticism go back to Ockham's distinction between the certainty of the knowledge of God as revealed by God Himself and the far less certain probabilities reached by reason in matters of faith. What Luther did was to radicalize the main thrust of the Ockhamist position by taking sin and human sinfulness more seriously than any Ockhamist did. In so doing he brought his views about the role of human reason in the so-called natural knowledge of God in line with his teachings about salvation by faith alone. In this regard his debate with Erasmus on the freedom of the will is of paramount importance.

In the early phases of the Reformation the humanists, including Erasmus, supported the general direction the reformers had taken, while Luther for his part used Erasmus's Rotterdam edition of the Greek New Testament with its annotations. Soon, however, the relationship between Luther and Erasmus started to cool down and in 1525 they clashed publicly over the issue of the freedom of the human will in salvation. Their debate not only involved the most fundamental discussions of human nature, but also, especially on Luther's side, a profound new way of answering the question: who is God?

Erasmus was of the opinion that people are essentially neutral moral agents with the innate potential to freely choose good or evil, as likely to love God as to curse Him. Luther, on the other hand, believed that people have lost their freedom of choice, being predisposed in advance by their innermost character to act the way they do.

Salvation hinges not on human activity, but on God's willingness to accept a sinful human being by grace alone. With Augustinian consistency Luther imposes this primacy of God's will and grace also on the problem of human knowledge of God. Linking the two, Luther holds forth in one of his sermons that when it comes to the knowledge of how one may stand before God and attain eternal life, it is truly not to be achieved by our work or power, nor to originate in our

brain. Reason and will are parallel to each other in this regard. The act of knowing is also influenced by the will, while the will is in bondage because of sin. As far as he was concerned, the humanists and the schoolmen understand the relationship between reason and revelation no better than that between human will and salvation.

Firstly, the idea that human reason is able to arrive at a natural knowledge of God is a fallacy. Although he believes in natural law and that human reason is able to discern principles of morality which conform to the will of God, however imperfectly, Luther stresses that any possible knowledge of God through creation is perverted by a human race fallen into idolatry. Commenting on the Epistle to the Galatians he says that everybody has a general knowledge, namely, that there is a God, that He created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked. But what God thinks of us, what His will is towards us, what He will do so that we may be delivered from sin and death, and be saved, this they do not know. Indeed, from this general knowledge of God has sprung all idolatry. We only know what we want to know about God, we construct for ourselves a God who conforms to our needs and expectations. In his *The Bondage of the Will*, directed against Erasmus, Luther puts it even more sharply when he says that reason does not necessarily even accept that there is a higher being. Reason can equally well conclude that there is no God at all or at least that God is not righteous. If only Adam had not sinned, we would have recognized God in all creatures; we would have loved and praised Him so that even in the smallest blossom we would have seen and pondered his power, grace and wisdom.

God is indeed in all creatures, but Luther refuses to regard these creatures as a starting point in the quest for God. The things made by God are masks (*larvae*) of God and in this life the masks can never be removed for us to see God face to face. Nobody can see God, in his naked transcendence, and live. God, therefore, must wear a mask or a veil in all his dealings with the human race to shield them from the unapproachable light of his majesty.

Despite Luther's emphasis on the transcendence of God, he stresses God's immanence in equally strong terms, so much so that he has been accused of coming too close to pantheism. He writes: "His own divine nature can be wholly and entirely in all creatures and in every single individual being, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself", but then he goes on: "...yet on the other hand (He) can be circumscribed nowhere and in no being, so that He actually embraces all things and is in all, but no one being circumscribes Him and is in Him". God is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that can be described or imagined. Despite God's presence in everything, this presence is inaccessible unless God reveals Himself to us in his Word.

Luther's criticism of reason in matters of faith can be exceptionally sharp. The best reason can do is to recognize God as a terrible, wrathful judge, who leaves us no place to hide, neither in this world nor in hell. Reason even knows that we cannot enter into heaven until we have gotten rid of sin. Such knowledge is written in the human heart. But the most important thing of all reason cannot see. It cannot see that only faith is right and good in the sight of God. Reason has no understanding whatsoever of justification by faith alone. Reason opposes Christ with his message of grace; it espouses the cause of Christ's adversary and prostitutes itself to the service of the enemy of God. Reason is "the devil's whore".

All this clearly does not imply that Luther completely rejects reason. He does not dispute the authority of reason in secular matters. But he is adamant that it is not possible to transcend natural logic to construct a logic of faith. Luther thus not only set aside any possibility of a natural theology on the basis of human reason, but he also rejects reason as a vehicle of theological speculation once revelation has been given.

The anti-speculative nature of Luther's theology and his idea of God goes back to the original nominalist distinction between the domain of God's unlimited power and freedom (*potentia absoluta*) and the domain of God's self-limiting actions in the history of salvation (*potentia ordinata*), which is the proper field of theology. Luther shared Duns Scotus's emphasis on God as "willing" in contrast to the God of "being", for the simple reason that Luther's own religious experience was one of a God who is will, not only cognition.

Luther employs the concept of the *potentia ordinata* of God as the order of redemption in Jesus Christ. He considers it enough to accept in faith that God in his mercy established this order to provide sinners with a refuge from damnation. Any attempt to uncover the naked being of God (*Deus nudus*) through speculative reason or religious ecstasy outside His revelation must therefore be rejected.

Nominalist theologians, however, did not always remain true to the original nominalist intentions and some of them, like Pierre d'Ailly and Robert Holcot, tried to construct what they called a higher "logic of faith". They accepted the wrongness of speculating about God outside of His revelation and believed that reason was powerless to penetrate beyond God's revelation, but once given this revelation, reason could set about analyzing it. Among scholastics it was especially the Ockhamists who speculated on the conditions of revelation, wondering what might have been if God had decided, as He was free to do, to follow other systems of salvation. Luther refuses to follow this route and to speculate on the inscrutable and free God who might well have established another order.

While d'Ailly and Holcot believed that reason could be very helpful in clarifying articles of faith and so demonstrate the truth of these articles on a rational basis by applying Aristotelian logic, Luther sees these efforts as a manipulation of revelation with reason in an attempt to make the thoughts of God conform to human thoughts, in the same way that they had tried to manipulate God's grace with the idea of a human free will.

Luther calls the speculation of scholastic theology a theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). It is a theology that tries to approach the naked being of God in its absolute majesty, but the dazzling glory of God would blind and terrify us if we could uncover it. God must hide his glory in his revelation. God revealed Himself in the hiddenness of the flesh. God became a concrete human being so that we do not have to search for an undetermined and vague type of god (*deus vagus*). The person who, therefore, looks for God outside of Jesus Christ will not find Him, not even in heaven. Reason must bow, and must confess her blindness, in that she wants to climb to heaven to fathom the Divine, while she cannot see what lies before her eyes. Using the metaphor of Ex 33:23, Luther concludes that we can only see God from the rear, that is, through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Here, and only here, do we discover God. It is perilous, he declares, to wish to investigate and apprehend the naked divinity through human reason without Christ the mediator. We have been given the Word incarnate, which was placed in the manger and hung on the wood of the cross. This word is the wisdom and Son of the Father. He that leaves this Son to follow his own thoughts and speculations is overwhelmed by the majesty of God. A true theology must be a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) as opposed to the theology of glory of the scholastics.

In His self-revelation God tells sinners all that they need to know, not all that they would like to know. God reveals Himself contrariwise (*sub contrario*), because He wants to be accessible to faith alone. In the alien work (*opus alienum*) of His wrath as it is manifested on the cross, God executed his judgement over us in Jesus Christ. Faith alone can recognize this. Faith discovers in the hidden God the revealed God, and in his alien work his proper work (*opus proprium*) of forgiveness, grace and love.

It has been argued that Luther condemned three characteristic aspects of medieval religion as human attempts to have dealings with "God in his majesty" or with "the naked God", to the virtual exclusion of the revelation of God in Christ. These tendencies were the moralistic piety of popular Catholicism, the rational theology of scholasticism and the ecstatic religiosity of mysticism. There can be little doubt about Luther's opposition to the first two. Our discussion so far has made this clear. The third aspect, however, needs closer attention.

Recent research has rejected the idea of an amorphous and vague mystical theology and spirituality that manifested itself during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. Scholars now tend to accept three forms of mysticism, namely Dionysian mysticism, Latin mysticism and, finally, German mysticism. This corresponds with our own description in previous chapters of the two main streams of mysticism, the Dionysian intellectual mysticism of union with God and the mysticism of love of Augustinian origin which culminated in Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventura and Gerson. To these two is now added the German mysticism usually identified with Meister Eckhardt and Johannes Tauler. This addition is acceptable as long as we understand that the so-called “high mysticism” of Meister Eckhardt leans towards Dionysian intellectualism, while Tauler finds himself closer to Latin mysticism. Be that as it may, German mysticism, especially in the case of Tauler, had one distinctive characteristic that reflected the German religiosity of the day as we have described it above: a deep sense and spiritual understanding of temptation (*Anfechtung*) and of purgatory as self-despair.

How did Luther relate to these forms of mysticism?

His rejection of Dionysian mysticism is on record. Although he refers favourably at an early stage to Pseudo-Dionysius’ negative theology, he later closely connects it with rationalism. It was Dionysius with his mystical theology, and others who followed him, Luther says, that gave occasion for these speculations concerning the naked majesty of God and he goes on to exhort his readers to detest as a veritable plague that mystical theology of Dionysius and similar books. The mystical ascent is a false way to God, for God will not have us thus ascend, but He comes to us and has made a ladder, a way and a bridge to us. He comes first to us and we do not first ascend to heaven to Him. He sends His Son down into the flesh. His humanity is the way to the Father. Only the eyes that are fixed on Christ can attain the beatific vision of God which the mystics otherwise vainly sought, for to see His face means rightly to perceive Him as a gracious and good Father to whom we may look for all good things. But this only comes through faith in Christ.

Luther’s emphasis on justification by faith makes him judge more favourably the kind of mysticism which came to him through the general spiritual climate of the New Devotion. His regard for Bernard and Gerson from the Latin tradition and Tauler as exponent of German mysticism is well documented. The non-scholastic method and the personal treatment of the Christian faith that he found in these mystics appealed to him. Themes of passivity, suffering, self-denial and, above all, the anguish (*gemitus*), the pain of standing before God without any merit, on the one hand, and the transporting bliss (*raptus*) of God’s presence, on the other hand, were a welcome change from the Ockhamist moralism in which he had been trained. In a sense he viewed these things as the religious experience

brought about by faith, but not, however, replacing faith itself. These experiences are the result of an immediate God-relationship through the mediation of Jesus Christ brought about by faith. Luther is very careful not to place spiritual rapture before access to Christ through faith. With reference to the experience of the Apostle Paul recorded in 2 Cor 12:2, Luther insists on the priority of justification by faith through the incarnate and crucified Word over the rapture through the uncreated word. While not denying the possibility of the rapture of union with God, as in the case of the Apostle Paul, Luther is convinced that this union cannot be experienced through the senses. The primal human experience is that of *gemitus*, the crying need for the full manifestation of God. But still, he who cleaves to God abides in light; from this emanates a loftier perfection in this life so to be united with God that the whole soul with all its abilities and all its powers is collected into its Lord and God becomes one spirit with Him. The rapture of union with God is not ruled out by Luther; but it is grasped by faith and by faith alone.

The idea of rapture as used by most mystics implies absolute passivity. For them sheer passivity is typical of the last stage of true mysticism and refers to a spiritual state experienced by the elect and privileged few. Luther uses the term precisely because of its connotation of passivity, but he takes it and applies it to the life of faith as such and hence to all true believers. This is Luther's own particular type of democratization of mysticism and piety, reflecting in its own way a movement which started in the brotherhoods and sisterhoods outside the monasteries, as we saw in the previous section.

Whichever way we look at it, faith remains the key word in Luther's theology and his view of our relationship to God. Faith and a theology of the cross belong together.

But even faith and a theology of the cross are not able to fathom the depth of God's being. Despite God's self-revelation in the cross of Jesus Christ, He remains a hidden God. The hidden God is the God who is hidden in His revelation. The revelation of God in the cross lies hidden in its contrariety (*abscondita sub contrario*), so that God's strength is revealed under apparent weakness, and his wisdom under apparent folly.

The term "the hidden God" (*Deus absconditus*) that Luther uses as distinct from "the revealed God" (*Deus revelatus*) has a double meaning. Primarily it refers to the hiddenness of God outside His revelation in the human flesh of Christ. Luther speaks about God in this sense more specifically in connection with the doctrine of predestination. But secondly, it also refers to the fact that God, even in His revelation, remains hidden, in the sense that the self-revelation of God in the flesh can never be exhaustive.



The second usage of Luther's distinction between the hidden and the revealed God is doubtless the more important one within the framework of his theology. We find it in *The Bondage of the Will*, where it basically means that the holy, unapproachable majesty of God remains even in God's self-disclosure. God tells sinners all that they need to know, not all that they would like to know. Luther stresses this unapproachable character of God's being in particular when he speaks about the wrath of God. No matter how emphatically he places justification through faith alone on the basis of divine forgiveness at the centre of his thinking, the reality and the seriousness of God's judgement never disappear from Luther's reflections on the divine relationship to us.

The wrath of God is a reality and the only way we can escape this reality is to flee from it and to find our refuge in the love and forgiveness that have appeared in Jesus Christ. If we do not find our refuge in the God who extends his grace and love to us in Jesus Christ, the wrath of God will surely destroy us. In the alien work (*opus alienum*) of His wrath, faith must discover His proper work (*opus proprium*) of forgiveness and love.

It must be clear from the foregoing that Luther never speaks about God in static terms. Although he occasionally refers to the so-called attributes of God such as His power and His wisdom, it is the acting God of righteousness that holds centre stage in Luther's view of God. God is the righteous God who acts, either in the alien work of His wrath or in the proper work of His love.

It was Luther's very existential struggle with the concept of the righteousness of God that eventually led him to a theology of the cross and the dialectic of a hidden and revealed God. In his spiritual struggle with the fearful anticipation of God's coming judgement and in his anxious concern for personal salvation, Luther was by no means alone or unique. As we saw in the previous section, these were sentiments shared by many, reflecting their anxieties in a period marked not only by an awakening individualism, but also by a generally miserable sort of existence.

In the early stages of his theological development Luther's idea of the righteousness of God was clearly in the mould of the *via moderna*, which had as its fundamental presupposition the axiom that God has entered into a self-imposed limitation upon His actions, in that He has committed Himself to rewarding us with grace upon the fulfilment of certain specified conditions. Gabriel Biel, for instance, held that God, in His mercy, ordained entering into a pact with us, by which He is prepared to ascribe a much greater value to human acts than they are inherently worth. Luther's understanding of faith in this period corresponded with this presupposition. Once we are moved to repent and believe, God is able to bestow upon us the gift of grace. Although this may appear totally inappropriate by human standards of justice, it remains the

criterion by which God will judge mankind. The individual, when confronted with the judgement of God, is moved to repentance, faith and humility - and this response is the precondition of justification.

A ground-breaking change came about when Luther discovered for himself that the righteousness of God is the work of God within us, that it is no longer to be understood as something which a sinful human being is incapable of attaining, but as a divine gift which God Himself bestows upon us. This discovery led to one of the most original and creative aspects of Luther's mature doctrine of justification: the concept of the alien righteousness of Christ (*iustitia Christi aliena*). Whereas his mentor, Johannes van Staupitz, saw justifying righteousness as a righteousness which is inherent in us and which may be regarded as part of us (*iustitia in nobis*), Luther now came to the conclusion that God's righteousness which He bestows upon us in Jesus Christ is in fact alien and extrinsic to us; it is *iustitia extra nos*.

From here it is but a short step to Luther's mature theology of the cross and his concomitant concept of God as both hidden and revealed in His dealings with Christ. In God's judgement of Jesus Christ on the cross we see the alien work (*opus alienum*) of the hidden God's wrath, only to discover in it His proper work (*opus proprium*) of forgiveness, grace and love. Faith alone can recognize this. In this way, through faith, we flee from God to God. In this rather paradoxical formulation the dynamic of Luther's concept of God is brought to our attention more than anywhere else.

It is against this background that Luther is able to describe the nature of God as "a glowing oven full of love". Wrath does not belong to God's nature, but it is the shadow side of His love. Nevertheless His wrath is real, because without the shadow the light of His love and grace cannot shine forth.

Luther's concept of a hidden God not in but outside his revelation in Christ concerns the idea of a double predestination whereby some are predestined to eternal life and others to eternal damnation. In contra-distinction to the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ, this is the God who is permanently hidden from us. Here faith is forced to concede the existence of a concealed will of God. Luther's understanding of scriptural utterances in this regard - for example, Paul's treatise on the divine election and rejection in Rom 9 and a text like 1 Cor 12:6, which he interprets as an indication of God as the all-embracing cause of everything - leads him to the acceptance of a God that is unfathomable and unsearchable, despite his revelation in Christ. God's rejection means that for some His wrath is inescapable. Why God has decided accordingly cannot be explained. Looked at from this side, God is a hidden God, a hiddenness that even His revelation cannot disclose, a hiddenness not inside but outside His revelation. Despite the impossibility of adequately harmonising the idea of a divine rejection

with his thoughts on the revelation in Christ, Luther never gives the impression that the hidden God of the double predestination threatens the integrity and trustworthiness of the revelation. It is all a matter of the limitations of our understanding. That which goes beyond us is not meant for us. In his reply to Erasmus Luther says that God must be left to Himself in His own majesty, for in this regard we have nothing to do with Him, nor has He willed that we should have anything to do with Him. One who speculates about the hidden God soon starts to doubt; one who doubts does not believe, and one who does not believe is lost.

One would have thought that Luther, in his criticism of all kinds of speculation on the nature of God, could easily have used the distinction between the hidden and revealed God to overcome the intellectual difficulties created by the doctrine of the Trinity. This, however, did not happen. The hidden-revealed distinction was not intended to apply to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, but, in its original sense, to be a tool in his theological debate with Erasmus as a warning against attempting to speculate about God's unsearchable will. Nevertheless, it does not seem inappropriate to apply this distinction to the way in which Luther dealt with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Luther completely and totally affirms the substance of the doctrine of the Trinity as it was handed down to him. He accepts it, because he sees in the doctrine a true reflection of the teachings of Scripture. Luther explains in one of his sermons that when we say that we believe the divine majesty to be three distinct Persons of one true essence, it is not as if we have discovered this or attained it through human reason. No human wisdom has been able to conceive what God is in Himself, or in his internal essence. No, it is revealed from heaven above. Even so, he continues, we cannot expound this mystery by speculation and a pretence of great wisdom. To explain the doctrine of the Trinity, we must have a knowledge higher than any to which the understanding of a human being can reach. God's actual divine essence and His will, administration and works are absolutely beyond all human thought, human understanding or wisdom. They are and ever will be hidden to us. If anything is to be ascertained, it must be through revelation alone. But even then, despite the revelation God has given us about Himself, despite His accessibility through faith, God remains God. In this sense He remains the hidden God in His revelation.

In his concept of the hidden and revealed God Luther does far more than posit a dialectical way (amongst others) of approaching the theological problem of the incomprehensibility of God. The distinction rather encapsulates the central thrust of his theology of the cross and represents a decisive turning point in the way Western theology inquired into the unfathomable Being we call God.

### 8.3 CALVIN'S RELIABLE GOD

In a certain sense it is easier to analyze Luther's idea of God with reference to the circumstances of a specific historical setting that influenced it than to clarify Calvin's origins and early development. In contrast to Luther's frankness about himself and his own background and history, Calvin's dislike of self-disclosure is a serious obstacle in this regard.

Nonetheless, Calvin was exposed to the same broader influences recorded in the introductory paragraph on the historical framework of the Reformation (8.1). A few of these influences can be highlighted here: the mysticism and the religious experience of the New Devotion, more specifically within the circles of the Augustinian renaissance; the voluntarist and Scottish leaning within these circles; the anti-speculative character of nominalist theology of the *via moderna*, with its emphasis on the revealed will of God; and, on top of it all, evangelical humanism with its eclectic spirituality of persons such as Erasmus, Jacques Lefèvre l'Étaples and others. Finally, of course, Calvin was profoundly influenced by Luther himself.

In a narrower sense the respective intellectual, social and religious circumstances of the two reformers differed from each other and led to different emphases in their views of God.

In the first place there is the simple fact that the University of Paris and the University of Orléans, where Calvin received the greater part of his education, provided an academic and intellectual setting that differed in more than one respect from the places of learning associated with Luther, i.e. the University of Erfurt and the rural monastery and theological faculty of Wittenberg. Although the *via moderna* already had a strong foothold at both the Universities of Paris and Erfurt, Paris was, far more than Erfurt, a prime example of the transformation of the medieval university through the new humanism of the late Renaissance. This was especially the case at the famous Collège de Montaigu, where Calvin spent four years pursuing the licentiate in arts and where, significantly, Erasmus had studied a few decades earlier.

This direct influence of Erasmian humanism is perhaps the reason why Calvin never condemned humanism in general and, unlike Luther, never attacked Erasmus. Like many other students of his generation, Calvin was attracted to the novel evangelical humanism and the eclectic spirituality of Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre l'Étaples.

Renaissance humanists rejected scholastic education, which depended primarily on logic and the art of organising truth into rational systems of thought, and turned instead to rhetoric, the art of persuasion. This made a lasting impression upon Calvin, who recognized that the Bible is throughout a rhetorical document

and a work of interpretation, because bare history would not have been enough for salvation. Calvin therefore turned to the study of Latin, Greek and Hebrew as the languages in the educational programme of Christian reform inspired by Erasmus and l'Étapes under the slogan: back to the origins (*ad fontes*), in this instance the study of the fathers and the Bible. It is perhaps not correct to say, as has been suggested, that Calvin remained a humanist of the late Renaissance. More to the point is the suggestion that Calvin, more than Luther, is located precisely within the tension and conflict which existed between the Renaissance and the Reformation movements, and the conflicting ideas which these movements represented.

When we consider that Calvin's background reveals a far closer and a more durable relationship with the humanism of the late Renaissance than was the case with Luther, it comes as no surprise that Calvin had a greater appreciation of the role of the human intellect and reason in matters of theology and faith than Luther did. This soon becomes clear when we look at Calvin's thoughts on the possibility of a natural knowledge of God.

Within the circles of Calvin scholars and researchers there seems to be an ever-increasing tendency, although not without fierce opposition from some, to elevate Calvin's idea of a dual knowledge of God (*duplex cognitio Dei*) to either a controlling principle of his theology or the controlling principle. Without conceding that Calvin's theology can be analyzed from one controlling principle, it must be acknowledged that the first chapters of the *Institutes* give the appearance of constituting a kind of epistemological introduction to the contents as a whole. But in these same chapters it also becomes clear where the preponderance lies. Despite the legitimacy of a natural knowledge of God, it is, because of its limitations and imperfections, a phase to be left behind in our quest for a true knowledge of God, which can only be discovered in the Word of God.

There is nothing original or remarkable in Calvin's treatment of the possibility of a natural knowledge of God. In it he displays an appreciation of the contribution of the classical philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Cicero, especially Cicero, without allowing them to fully constitute or determine his views.

In his *Institutes* Calvin defines the "natural" knowledge of God as the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us, if Adam had remained upright. He clearly distinguishes this knowledge from the knowledge that we have of God through Jesus Christ. It is one thing, he says, to feel that God our Maker supports us by His power, governs us by His providence, nourishes us by His goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings - and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ.

Where does this simple and primal knowledge come from? Calvin again makes a distinction in this regard. All knowledge of God originates in God Himself, but it is worked by Him in two different but complementary ways, namely by implanting in the human mind by natural instinct an awareness of divinity, and by making Himself known in and through His glorious works of creation.

Calvin also calls this awareness of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*) the “seed of religion” (*semen religionis*). Both terms refer generally to a numinous awareness of God, and they are closely related to conscience, which Calvin sees as a moral response to God. In his commentary on John 1:5 Calvin writes:

“there are two principal parts of the light which still remains in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all human beings; next, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences.”

In the *Institutes*' discourse on the awareness of God in the human mind, the paucity of Scriptural references is quite remarkable. Calvin appeals to “experience” and refers, either negatively or positively, to classical philosophers. One of the authorities Calvin quotes in this regard is Cicero, “the eminent pagan (*ethnicus*)” who affirms that there is no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. Calvin's idea of a sense or intimation of the deity is indeed in accord with the presupposition of all the characters in Cicero's dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De natura deorum*).

However, as soon as Calvin starts to speak about the corruption of this knowledge of God and the hardening of the human heart, repelling all remembrance of God, Scripture plays a more prominent role. It is the ungodly people who - Calvin here refers to Ps 14:1 and 53:1 - extinguish the light of nature and deliberately befuddle themselves by denying God's existence. It is God's just punishment of the wicked that fatness envelops their hearts, so that in seeing they see not. The other possibility is that the ungodly fashion a God to match the absurdity of their trifling actions. This is nothing more than ignorance of God - with reference to Gal 4:8 - and a “misdirection of the seed of religion”. In this sense Calvin speaks of human nature as “a perpetual factory of idols”.

The misdirection of the seed of religion occurs despite the overwhelming testimony to the contrary given by God in His fashioning of the universe and His continuing government of it. There is nothing in the universe that does not in some way or the other reflect the glory of God. What seems to impress Calvin the most is what he calls “the skilful ordering of the universe”. There is a need, he says, to investigate the motion of the stars, to determine their assigned stations, to measure their intervals, to note their properties. As God's

providence shows itself more explicitly when these things are observed, so the mind must rise to a higher level to look upon His glory. The heavens have a common language for teaching all alike and it is only carelessness that hinders even the most remote peoples from profiting, as it were, at the mouth of the one teacher. Finally there is the human being itself which - and here Calvin refers to Aristotle - is a microcosm, a rare example of God's power, goodness and wisdom, and which contains in itself enough miracles to occupy the mind.

It has been said that Calvin's extensive treatment of the problem of knowledge of God and his frequent use of the term "mind" must be seen against the background of a time when the capacity of the human mind was much in the forefront in humanistic circles. It is therefore concluded that Calvin as a humanist of the late Renaissance was not only, understandably, attracted to natural theology, but that his intellectualism sometimes also found expression in his theology as a rational quest for God. In this regard reference is made to his statement in the *Institutes* that the more anyone endeavours to approach God, the more he proves himself endowed with reason.

While Calvin's intellectualist approach must be acknowledged, it must also be emphasized that Calvin was well aware of the limits of the human mind, to the extent that it would appear to make natural theology virtually impossible. The "natural" knowledge of God that he speaks of is always something conditional, namely if Adam "had remained upright". When Calvin in Book 2 of the *Institutes* deals extensively with "understanding" as the most important natural endowment of a human being, he makes it clear that there is a vast difference between our understanding of "earthly things" like art and science and the "heavenly things", the pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness and the mysteries of the kingdom of God. When the mind rises above the level of the present life, it is especially convinced of its own frailty. The heavens are not transparent. The human mind, Calvin concludes, is more than stupid and blind in contemplating the heavenly mysteries. In this regard Calvin retells with approval Cicero's anecdote in his *On the Nature of the Gods* about Simonides, who, asked by the tyrant Hiero what God was, begged to be given a day to ponder. When on the following day the tyrant asked the same question, Simonides asked for two days more, and after having frequently doubled the number of days, finally answered, "The longer I consider this, the more obscure it seems to me".

Despite these negative sentiments, Calvin's appreciation of the classical philosophers in true Renaissance style is evident. Here Plato is singled out as the one who had come the closest to the truth. But even he could not dimly sense how human beings could be united to God. Calvin does not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers, but he likens them to a traveller passing through a field at night who in a momentary flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly

that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step.

Although Calvin's humanist background is more clearly discernible in his views on the natural knowledge of God than is the case with Luther, they both come to more or less the same conclusion and there is materially no real difference. However, when we move to the next step and ask about the role of reason and the human mind in knowledge of God that is the result of the guidance and teachings of the Holy Scriptures, the differences between Calvin and Luther become more marked. Again, these differences are not of such a profound nature that the two reformers end up, as it were, with views of God that are difficult to reconcile. Yet they represent two approaches from two dissimilar backgrounds.

As we saw in the previous section, Luther accepts the authority of reason in secular matters, but rejects the possibility of constructing a logic of faith as a vehicle of theological speculation. He is in fact deeply suspicious of the influence that reason can have in matters of faith. Although he acknowledges the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in the mind of the believer, he prefers to describe the relationship between reason and the experience of faith brought about by the Holy Spirit in contradictory terms. Calvin, by contrast, has a greater appreciation of the possible role of the mind in matters of faith, because he carried into exile the intellectual baggage of a humanist training which, broadly speaking, conceived a human being as somebody who, in terms of Renaissance Platonism, is a hierarchy of faculties governed by the mind.

Calvin is very clear about the importance of human reason and the mind. The image of God as it manifests itself in human beings consists in the reason they possess by which they distinguish between good and evil. The will chooses and follows what the understanding pronounces good, but rejects and flees what it disapproves. In this way, Calvin says, the understanding is, as it were, the leader and governor of the soul.

The fall of Adam did not change this order. Despite being corrupted by sin, the human mind still retained its leadership of the soul. This does not only apply to the natural quest for God which ends in the worship of so many false gods as the fabrication of the human mind, but also in the knowledge of the one true God, when, according to Calvin, Scripture - gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness - clearly shows us the true God. This happens in a twofold way. First comes that kind of knowledge by which one is permitted to grasp who the God is that founded and governs the universe; then follows that other inner knowledge whereby God is known not only as the Founder of the universe and the sole Author and Ruler of all that is made, but also in the person of the Mediator as the Redeemer. All this comes



about by the secret testimony of the Holy Spirit who convinces us that Scripture is indeed the Word of God.

Calvin's definition of faith encapsulates the foregoing in a very clear way: faith is a matter of both the mind and the heart. Faith, he says in the *Institutes*, is a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

From this starting point Calvin tries to develop a logic of faith, not in the sense of some who considered it legitimate to make logical deductions from God's revelation, but in the more immediate sense of faith being consistent and without contradictions. As faith is not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion, so it is, says Calvin, not content with an obscure and confused conception. It requires full and fixed certainty, such as we are wont to have from things experienced and proved. The truth of God remains in agreement with itself and it is certain that the Spirit does not contradict itself.

This certainty even applies when there are things about God we do not understand. Calvin's distrust of paradox is evident throughout his theology, but nowhere more so than in the way he deals with the concepts of God's absolute and ordained power. At the same time, however, in dealing with these concepts he clearly sets out the limits of human understanding and in this way tries to escape (not always successfully) the accusation of an intellectualist approach to one of theology's most thorny problems: the relationship between an all-powerful God, on the one hand, and the human world with its history of sin and suffering, on the other.

A brief discussion of Calvin's view of the absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) and the ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) of God will not only be able to assist us to come to a better understanding of Calvin's approach to the God question, but also to highlight one of the differences between this approach and that of Luther.

More than one scholar has pointed out that Calvin gives far more attention to the power of God in his governance of the world than to his deeds of creation. This is not surprising. In the final analysis God's governance is existentially far more immediate to us than his creation in the beginning, especially in times of profound changes and uncertainties such as the late Middle Ages with its famines, plagues, political upheavals and wars. But precisely because this is the case, the pitfalls are many for a theological approach that favours intellectual consistency.

In order to appreciate the subtle differences we encounter in Calvin's and Luther's handling of the problem of the power of God and providence, we must briefly recap the debates of the late Middle Ages in this regard.

As we have seen, when late medieval scholasticism refers to the absolute power of God, it speaks of his undetermined freedom to do as He likes. There is only one limit to his undetermined freedom: the principle of non-contradiction. God can do anything except the logically impossible. In this realm God is outside or above the law (*exlex*) in the sense that his actions are not defined by his will, his justice and his goodness. From this absolute power the schoolmen distinguish the ordained power of God, the actual choice God made, God's free commitment to a covenant with us from which the whole history of salvation springs. This is the realm in which God willingly binds Himself to his own justice and goodness, despite the fact that he could have chosen other possibilities.

Luther, as we have seen, breaks with these two orders of medieval theology. He is not willing to hand over theology to speculative reason on all the possibilities God could have chosen and rather deals with God in his relationship towards us. But Luther goes even further. He does not shy away from describing God's actions *de potentia ordinata* as contradictory. At the very heart of God's ordained order is the contradiction of God who reveals Himself in Christ *sub contrario*. However, despite Luther's insistence on dealing with the God question only on the basis of the ordained order, the danger is real that the idea of the absolute power of a God who in undetermined freedom can do as He likes slips in through the back door of Luther's hidden God, who is unfathomable and unsearchable.

Calvin, basically confronted with the same issues as Luther, follows a slightly different route. In the first place he completely rejects the notion of an absolute power of God as was put forward by the scholastics. Dealing with the thorny issue of predestination of God, Calvin assails the "Sorbonist" dogma that ascribes to God absolute power dissociated from justice. One might, he says, more readily take the sun's light from its heat and its heat from its fire, than separate God's power from his justice. He who severs God from law despoils Him of a part of his glory. Although God's rule is inscrutable and although the reasons behind God's providence have been hidden from us, one thing is certain: God's will is just and perfect.

To secure the notion that there is no arbitrariness in God and that He is completely committed to us in his ordained power Calvin emphasizes that there is not more than one will in God. There are not two contrary wills, a secret one that opposes an open one. He never pretends not to will what He wills. It is only to us, on account of our mental incapacity, that his will appears manifold, even though it is one.

When referring to God's providence, his election, justification and sanctification as it is manifested in the lives of true believers, Calvin retains the structure of the ordained order as the realm of God's free but totally dependable commitment that can never be endangered by arbitrariness.

In some recent works on Calvin's theology it has been emphasized that there are "two sides" to Calvin. On the one hand, there is the Calvin of the "ordained order" which we generally find in the *Institutes* and in his confessional, biblical and sermonic material. Here he is soteriological in his approach, focusing on the relation between God and us, and denying that we can know the essence of God-in-Himself. On the other hand, there is the Calvin who is disposed toward the more scholastic and rational line of eternal, doctrinal truth, emanating from God's essence as He is in Himself. This side in Calvin, it is stated, we mostly find in his polemical writings against "heretics", especially when dealing with the problems of providence, predestination and such matters, where he feels that the freedom of God to act according to his will is being undermined. Here he virtually reintroduces the concept of God's absolute power without naming it as such.

It is true that Calvin finds it hard not to succumb to the danger of defending God's omnipotence from the perspective of its absoluteness when, under the pressure of controversy, he feels that God's almighty power is threatened, or that too much freedom is given to human beings.

This becomes especially clear when we consider the way in which Calvin deals with the notion of predestination.

Calvin finds the cause of both election and reprobation in God's eternal will and decree. Not only election but reprobation itself he affirms to be a consequence of God's predestining selection and act. In this way he puts forward a doctrine of double predestination in the final edition of the *Institutes*. Nevertheless he is reluctant to develop a theological system based on the decrees of God. He places the doctrine within the framework of his discussion of justification, stressing it as grounds for assurance that God's saving grace is truly sovereign and cannot be resisted by human will and sin. It is a matter of assurance and comfort. For Calvin, therefore, the doctrine of predestination is not one of metaphysical speculation, but rather exists in a soteriological context. Calvin's rejection and avoidance of a speculative probing of God's decree concerning one's destiny are made abundantly clear when he writes that anyone who breaks into this place will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.

It is in this regard that Calvin speaks of Christ as the "mirror" of our election. If, he says, we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes

to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.

The concept of a double predestination, of course, raises questions about justice and the arbitrariness of God's actions. If, then, God's justice is questioned, he refuses to call God's actions outside the law (*exlex*) of justice, but maintains that God's justice cannot be measured by human standards, or even by any standard that God has given humankind. Here Calvin takes refuge in the incomprehensibility of God, the "labyrinth" he speaks of, and finally arrives at the same point as Luther's *Deus absconditus*.

Despite the forgoing, it is necessary to emphasize that Calvin never allows the incomprehensibility of God to endanger the trustworthiness of his promises to his children. To put it somewhat differently: God's almighty power, which is manifested inter alia in his eternal decree of election and reprobation, does not threaten his ordained order of salvation in history. On the contrary, he connects the two by stating that our experience is an index of his decree. We know God's decree by what we observe around us and by what we experience within us.

Calvin would never have conceded that his views on predestination were the result of a rationalist construction based on a philosophical idea of an omnipotent God as He is in Himself. For him it was no more and no less than the logic of faith, confirmed by our experience. He therefore repeatedly insisted that predestination is not a terrifying but a comforting doctrine for believers.

When Calvin tries to be consistent and without contradictions in his theology, we must keep in mind that the logic he looks for is the logic of faith. Calvin's so-called intellectualism operates within the realm of faith. His greatest concern is therefore not for consistency per se, but to demonstrate the reliability of God in his commitment to the believer and the trustworthiness of his promises.

Calvin's confidence in the almighty power of God as the basis of human salvation and his insistence on the reliability of God's promises in this regard permeate his theology at all levels. But it is very clear that he does not consider it something that can be proved intellectually; only faith can experience it.

It has been said that Calvin's experience of God is a speculative inheritance from Ockhamism, resembling the experience of the Italian humanists which begins with the recognition of God's transcendence and power and the total dependence of human beings on Him. Such a statement, however, does not do justice to Calvin's conviction that the believer's religious experience, and by implication his own, is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. In this sense faith experience confirms what God has promised.

Faith and experience are indissolubly linked. Referring to the goodness of God, he speaks of the feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always

attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt the goodness of God. According to the *Institutes*, it is a sweetness we truly feel and experience in ourselves .

Much has been written about Luther's personal and existential struggle with the concept of God's righteousness, the coming judgement and the quest for salvation: how to find a merciful God? In the previous section we devoted some attention to this personal side of Luther's development and the resultant emphases in his idea of God. Calvin's reticence about himself makes such an exercise in his case far more difficult, although not impossible.

It is a well-known fact that Calvin, in his famous letter to Cardinal Sadoletto, expresses his extreme reluctance to speak about himself. Nevertheless, when we read his introduction to his *Commentary on the Psalms*, we come across the remarkable testimony that he is able to give an exposition of the Psalms because in David's distress and lamentations he recognizes his own experiences in the reformation of the church. In the Psalms, says Calvin, we recognize the true meaning of prayer. From the depth of our despair we reach out to the promises of God and experience the assurance of his faithfulness.

In 1535 Calvin wrote a preface to the French translation of the Bible by Pierre Robert Olivétan. Both the content of the preface and the time it was written are significant for providing some insight into the state of mind of somebody whose theology and the influences he had undergone in the development of this theology are often analyzed as if he were a "thinker" rather than a person of flesh and blood, living in a historical context that affected him in a very existential way.

In the preface Calvin refers to the liberation of the children of Israel from Egypt; then follows a revealing sentence in which he states that God accompanied the children of Israel night and day on their flight, present among them as a fugitive Himself.

The significance of this sentence becomes clear when we consider the time and the circumstances under which it was written. This was a time marked by a continuing threat of persecution and which resulted in the social and political exile of the young Frenchman.

In 1525 the French parliament decided to act on pressure from the Sorbonne to suppress what was called "Lutheranism". From a network of secret messages we know that a stream of French refugees went to Zurich and Basel, all of them circulating through Strasbourg as the extra-territorial safe place of the French evangelicals. Calvin was one of them. He settled in Basel in 1535 for a short period of two years, where he wrote the preface referred to as well as the first edition of his *Institutes*. A refugee himself and in the midst of persecution,

Calvin discovered God as the first refugee, present among his fleeing children as a fugitive Himself.

The trauma of the exile experience of the French who had consciously embraced the Reformation can hardly be overestimated. Their exodus from France was also an exodus from the confessional into a new priestless life, where sins can no longer be left behind through the exercises of contrition and the sacrament of absolution. They were not only political fugitives, but fugitives from all those religious contraptions that had previously brought peace of mind and a good conscience. It is said that Calvin was a singularly anxious man. Whatever the personal reasons for his anxiety, it also reflects the anxiety of many who must have had the feeling of falling into a void. In this void Calvin discovered the presence of God, He Himself a refugee.

This spiritual experience of the presence of God in his (Calvin's) exile became a lasting impression that runs like a golden thread through Calvin's view of God: God remains faithful to his covenantal promises, He is immutable and consistent. For Calvin the reliability of God forms the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Calvin's positive mode of experiencing God as the reliable God of the covenant is reflected in the metaphors that he uses. One of his most favoured metaphors is that of a loving father. Calvin clearly recognizes that God's fatherhood is metaphorical. Scripture, he explains, compares God to earthly fathers not because He is similar to them, but because his incomparable love for us cannot be expressed otherwise. His experience of God as a loving father does not exclude experiencing God as a mother. In a sermon he states that God does not compare Himself only to fathers, but also to a mother, and when Calvin comments on Isaiah 42:14 we hear him say God compares Himself to a mother who singularly loves her newborn child, though she brought him forth with extreme pain. Though it may be thought that these things are not suitable to God, Calvin continues, there is no other way than by such figures of speech to express his ardent love for us.

The metaphor of God's nearness as a father and a mother does not breed a shallow familiarity. In a dialectical manner the nearness of God is juxtaposed to his transcendence, his inaccessibility, his remoteness from his creatures. Calvin's spirituality is suffused with a numinous awe of God and often finds expression in metaphors that emphasize the overpowering sense of God's power, the indistinct rumbling of thunder that fills us with fear. Only in Christ has God thrown a bridge across the gulf.

Calvin's use of metaphors is an acknowledgement of human inability to know God as He is in Himself. At the same time it acknowledges the reality of God's condescending love that accommodates itself to our understanding. When he comments on the Lord's Prayer (*Inst.* 3,20,40), and specifically on the opening

phrases “Our Father” and “in heaven”, Calvin points beyond their limited human meaning to the larger sphere of reality to which their accommodated language speaks. “In heaven” does not mean that God is shut up and surrounded by the circumference of heaven, as by a barred enclosure. God is diffused through all things. Yet in the crassness of our minds, we cannot otherwise conceive his unspeakable glory. The sublimity conjured in our minds by the word “heaven”, the most mighty, lofty, incomprehensible thing we know, raises our thoughts to God that we may avoid dreaming up anything earthly or physical about Him, or try to measure Him by our small measure, or to conform His will to our emotions.

For Cicero the universe was a temple. With Plutarch Calvin rather chooses as his ruling metaphor the theatre. The magnificent theatre of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, says Calvin, Paul calls the “wisdom of God”. Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God. But because we have profited so little by it, he calls us to the faith of Christ. Commenting on 1 Peter 1:20, Calvin continues that in Christ God so to speak makes Himself little, in order to lower Himself to our capacity; and Christ alone calms our consciences that they may dare intimately (*familiariter*) approach God.

In Christ, and in Christ alone, the almighty God and Creator of the theatre of his glory, made Himself known as the reliable God of the covenant whom we may approach as “our Father” and who cares for us like a mother.

#### 8.4 THE GOD OF THE RADICAL ANTI-TRINITARIANS

In 8.1.1 we painted a complex picture of Europe in the throes of revolutionary changes on various levels. The most significant of these changes for the purposes of this book was the rise of piety and theological awareness among the ordinary people. We have called it a democratisation of piety with the emphasis by many on religion as something personal, interior and spiritual and an increasing reluctance to adhere to ecclesiastical structures. At the same time the increasing number of displaced and disaffected people, especially among the peasants, created an atmosphere of extreme dissatisfaction with the social order of the day and with the way in which the church was perceived to uphold the status quo.

Because the various reform movements had more or less a populist nature, it is easy to imagine the development of an increasing impatience among many at the pace set by the leaders. Profoundly disappointed with Luther, Zwingli, their clerical associates and their magisterial supporters, various groups of peasants, artisans and burghers withdrew into separatist conventicles. They wanted to return to what they considered the authentic roots of the Christian faith, cutting back through what one of them, Hubmaier, called the “mud holes and cesspools of human dogma”. Their quest was for the restitution of the New Testament

church and not the reformation of the existing one. They were determined to clear away the accumulated abuses root and branch.

Insisting on believers' baptism, they were dissatisfied with the Lutheran and Calvinistic forensic formulation of justification, stressing the need for regeneration, the drive of the Spirit and the quickening of the moral conscience. At the same time, driven by an apocalyptic sense of living in the last days, they wanted to dispense with earthly magistrates. Thus, branded as "Anabaptists" they were regarded not only as heretical, but also as seditious.

Usually these various local or regional movements of religious innovation, which remained neither in the Roman Catholic Church nor in mainline Protestant churches, are divided into three main groupings: Anabaptists, Spiritualists and Evangelical Rationalists under the collective term of the Radical Reformation. Many historians consider this Radical Reformation to have been the gravest danger to the orderly and comprehensive reformation of the Christian church in the first two decades after Martin Luther nailed his 95 Articles to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517.

Any exposition of the doctrinal basis of the Radical Reformation usually starts with their baptismal theology. There are good reasons for doing so. Their insistence on believers' baptism brought them into conflict with the centuries-old practice of infant baptism by the Roman Catholic Church and which was maintained as such within the mainline Lutheran and Calvinistic churches. What is more, some of the groups, by re-baptizing their believers, openly declared the churches practising infant baptism to be false churches denying the validity of their baptism. Despite the fact that baptism was considered to be of such extreme importance that re-baptism was considered a crime punishable by death, it was not the only point of controversy and conflict. Fundamental differences appeared in other respects, like the Radical Reformation's eschatology, their Christology and soteriology and their view of the Lord's Supper. Finally, in some circles the doctrine of the Trinity was attacked, partly as a consequence of the Christology peculiar to their radical persuasion. The doctrine of God was therefore not unaffected. To this we must now turn.

The view of God and of divine experience within the groups that formed part of the so-called Radical Reformation was of course not homogeneous. The rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was more or less confined to the Evangelical Rationalists. Nevertheless there were a few common peculiarities rooted to a large extent in the mystical theology prevalent at this time.

The first outstanding common characteristic of faith in the Radical Reformation is their insistence on a direct, unmediated appropriation of the Divine. The immediacy of religious experience which they attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit is constitutive of their spirituality. It is the Holy Spirit that gives direct



experiential access to the redeeming action of God. A recurring theme among the Radical Reformers is therefore the emphasis on the Spirit over against the letter.

The outstanding example in this regard is Sebastian Franck (1499-1542), who in 1529 joined the variegated company of sectaries in Strassbourg. Considered by most scholars an evangelical Spiritualist, he has now emerged as the basic figure leading to Evangelical Spiritualism being defined as a type in the sociology of religion. In his *Paradoxa ducenta octoginta*, a book that drew heavily upon the dialectical mysticism of Luther's *Theologica Germanica*, Franck calls literal Scripture "the sword of Antichrist" which kills Christ and gives rise to heresies and sects. Only the Spirit makes that which is written alive when it livens, interprets and applies the letter in our hearts. True Christianity is personal, individual and immediate without the help of external means such as audible prayers, preaching, ceremonies, sacraments and the ministry, he explains in the preface to a German translation from Latin of a book by an unknown author of Transylvania, held prisoner by the Muslim Turks. In this *Türkenchronik* he draws a comparison between the simplicity of the life and worship of the Turks and the complicated rituals of the Christians.

There is an invisible and spiritual church of individual believers baptized with fire and the Spirit and who live in a direct relationship with God. This spiritual church does not only include devout individual Christians, but also the saints before Christ and the good Muslims and pagans who responded to the inner Word of the Spirit.

Through the Holy Spirit and the immanence of God in the human soul, faith finds its completion in the mystical union with the Divine. This is the ultimate goal towards which the whole life of a Christian is directed, not only for Sebastian Franck but for many in the Radical Reformation, such as the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489-1561) and the Anabaptist Melchior Hoffmann (1495-1543 or 1544), both of whom ministered with Franck in Strassbourg between 1529 and 1533.

Despite this human deification through the unmediated oneness with God, the mysticism of the Radical Reformation has, in most instances, a clear Christological focus. In this respect their spirituality reflects something of the long tradition of the more Christ-centred mysticism which we have followed from Augustine, through Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventura to the New Devotion of Gerard Groote and Thomas à Kempis, and finally Luther himself. But it is a Christological mysticism of a peculiar kind. The believer is called to participate in the passion of Christ, because the cross is not something of a distant past. Christ is still crucified until the end of the world. His passion is a contemporary process and by participating in this process, through suffering, tribulation and

death, the soul surrenders itself and in surrendering itself finds its mystical union with God. They consider the Lutheran and Calvinist emphasis on salvation by faith alone as a relegation of the cross to a distant past, which does not lead to a life of perfection and deification. Most of them accordingly tend to reject the Anselmian soteriology of the satisfaction brought about by Christ through the vicarious nature of his suffering.

This Christological mysticism also finds expression in the rejection by many radical reformers of the external means of grace, such as for instance the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which is completely spiritualized. The Eucharist is seen as a mystical event of spiritual nourishment in which the believer inwardly feeds on the "celestial flesh" of Christ. The bread and the wine are no more than mere symbols in this event. In this way the true believer participates in the divine nature. The Eucharist thus becomes a means of progressive human deification and unity with God.

The expression "celestial" or "heavenly" flesh of Christ is peculiar to the Radical Reformation and has a very specific meaning, which would also directly impact on the doctrine of the Trinity.

The heavenly flesh or body of Christ means quite literally that Christ brought his own body with Him from heaven, which became visible through Mary. Clement Ziegler of Strassbourg who is considered to be the first exponent of this doctrine, speaks of two bodies of Christ stating that Christ would have been mortal and would not have been resurrected if the splendour of the first body were not there in the second body which Christ took upon Himself from the Virgin Mary. Although he accepts a corporal materialization in Christ's becoming a human being through Mary, he stresses the doctrinal tenet that the Son was born of the Father within the Trinity and that He had a body before the foundations of the world were laid.

Melchior Hofmann held that Christ brought his body with Him from heaven, taking nothing of the substance of Mary, passing through her "as water through a pipe". This is clearly a Gnostic concept, but it is doubtful that he had ever come across Gnostic texts on his own. It has been suggested by scholars that he could have seen about him iconographic representations of the Trinity which influenced his thinking in this regard.

A roughly contemporaneous woodcut shows the crowned head and upper half of God the Father, while what would be the lower half is taken up by a cloud-enclosed space containing a naked infant bearing a cross and preceded by the Dove as the Holy Spirit who effected the descent of the body of the Son into the womb of Mary.

Although it is almost certain that the idea of Christ's celestial flesh gradually developed within the context of the controversies on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the question on the nature of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, the impact of this idea went much further. It also influenced the thinking on the triune nature of God among some of them within the ranks of the Radical Reformation. Some form or the other of the subordination of the Son to the Father became a distinct possibility. To this development we must now turn as it brings us to arguably the most significant repercussion in the thinking about the nature of God from the side of the Radical Reformation.

For many centuries after the Council of Nicaea and Constantinople the doctrine of the Trinity had never been seriously challenged. The assault on this doctrine by groups within the Radical Reformation, more specifically the Evangelical Rationalists, was accordingly met with disbelief and outrage by Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants alike.

It would be simplistic in the extreme to attribute the opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity only to the development of the idea of the heavenly flesh of Christ. There were two other, more important, factors that led to a serious questioning of this doctrine among the Evangelical Rationalists.

The first we have already touched upon in relation to Sebastian Franck. Although grouped among the Evangelical Spiritualists, he voiced a concern that was taken up and responded to by the Evangelical Rationalists, namely the threatening presence of the Muslim faith in Eastern Europe through the military advance of Sultan Suleiman. We have already noted Franck's irenic attitude towards the Muslims and his inclusion of the good Muslims in the invisible church. As far as we know, however, he did not take up the challenge of the Muslims with regard to the unity of the Christian God. This was done by the Evangelical Rationalists. The first among them was Michael Servetus, to whom we shall return shortly.

Secondly, the quest of the Radical Reformation was the restitution of the New Testament church. In contrast to the mainline Lutheran and Reformed theologians the radical reformers showed very little loyalty towards the early Fathers and the ecumenical councils of the early centuries. Although the Lutherans and Calvinists scrutinized the whole of traditional Christian doctrine from what they believed to be a Scriptural and anti-scholastic basis, they still wanted to maintain their catholicity, not only by appealing to the early Fathers such as Augustine and others, but also by holding on to the doctrinal foundations laid down by the early ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. The radical reformers had no such scruples. They wanted to return to what could be considered a more simple and biblical interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, unencumbered by human philosophy. It may not always have been a conscious decision on their part to do away with philosophical

arguments. The truth of the matter is that they were far less philosophically sophisticated than the Fathers of the early councils. They did not always understand what these Fathers had tried to convey when they argued for the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son (Nicaea) and of the Holy Spirit (Constantinople).

Both of these above-mentioned factors - the challenge of Islam and the lack of philosophical sophistication - can be clearly seen in the thoughts of Michael Servetus, the most prominent opponent of the doctrine of the Trinity among the radical reformers.

Michael Servetus of Navarre is commonly held as the fountainhead of anti-trinitarianism. Born in the Spanish town of Villaneuva in 1509, Servetus had a deep passion for the restitution of what he considered the original true Christianity. Among the worst perversions of the Christian faith he numbered the doctrine of the Trinity. At an early age he wrote his theological treatise *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity* and soon afterwards his *Two Dialogues Concerning the Trinity*. All this started during the years 1528-1529 which Servetus spent studying law at the University of Toulouse. Charged with heterodoxy, he devoted much of his time to biblical studies in an effort to reinforce his own orthodoxy in respect to Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, theologically the main points of controversy between the Christian faith and the two Semitic religions of Judaism and Islam which, until the end of the previous century, had been prominent, especially in Spain. This research brought him to the discovery that the doctrine of the Trinity was nowhere clearly enunciated in the Bible.

Scholastic philosophy, he says in his *Concerning the Errors of the Trinity*, has introduced terms which are not understood, because they originate in Greek philosophy and they do not accord with Scripture. Worst of all, he continues, the doctrine of the Trinity “incurs the ridicule of the Mohammedans and the Jews”.

In the early 1540s he came to Vienne, near Lyons, as physician to the Catholic Archbishop, now calling himself Villaneuve. It is said that he went on a crusade of persuasion for his beliefs and that he singled out Calvin as the object of his endeavours. From Vienne he started a vigorous correspondence with the Reformer of Geneva, but to no avail. Calvin rarely wrote back and refused to be persuaded. He even sent a few pages of his *Restitution of Christianity* to Calvin. These pages were later used at his trial by the Catholic Inquisition of Lyons. When he escaped from Lyons, he was burnt in effigy, only to be burnt in the flesh by the civil authorities of Reformed Geneva in 1553 with the approval of Calvin, although Calvin pleaded for a more humane form of execution.

In the first phase of the development of his thoughts on the Trinity Servetus does not propose the complete rejection of this doctrine. He rather tries to replace

the Nicene and scholastic formulations by formulations that he considers biblically defensible. This brought him to a kind of modalism in which the unity of rule, the monarchianism of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, is put forward, an argument which, during the time that led up to the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, were used in defence of the unity of the Godhead.

Servetus maintains that the Divine being cannot be divided into Persons. All we can speak about is the different modes by which God rules and reveals Himself. In the first place God makes use of the Logos who existed before Christ, not as a Person, however, but as a thought which foreshadowed Christ. Taking quite literally Matthew's and Luke's account of the conception of Jesus, Servetus declares that Jesus was born of Mary as the natural and unique Son of God. To Him God gave all power on heaven and earth. In this way the fullness of God and all his properties dwells in Christ.

Servetus tries to defend his orthodoxy by stating in his *Dialogues* that Christ "really came down from heaven" and that He can be properly called God, but he refuses to acknowledge that the earthly incarnation of Christ through Mary had been preceded by the eternal generation of the Logos-Son. Finally, the Holy Spirit is a power - and not a Person of the Godhead - through which God relates to His creatures.

At his trial in Geneva Servetus was willing to admit that the eternal Word, generated before the creation of the world, might be called not only the Son of God but also the "eternal" Christ, so long as his basic proposition was safeguarded, namely, that there are not three Persons in the Godhead.

The trial of Servetus forcefully brought home to Calvin and his associates, notably from Bern, Basel and Zurich, that the orthodoxy of the whole Swiss Reformation was at stake in the eyes of the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics alike. Calvin himself had not long before been accused of being unsound in the doctrine of the Trinity. Nobody could afford that Geneva would appear to be less severe than Catholic Lyons in its condemnation and punishment of heresy with respect to the great conciliar dogmas of Nicaea and Constantinople. Rejecting all entreaties to repudiate his theology, Servetus was burned at the stake. In his last words: "O Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have pity on me!", he still refused to ascribe eternity to the person of Jesus Christ the Son.

The consequences of Servetus' execution were far-reaching for the Reformed faith, especially within Italian reformed circles and, through the Italians, eventually Eastern Europe, where churches of unitarian persuasion were established.

There was in Geneva a particularly large and enthusiastic congregation of Italians. Embracing the Protestant solafideism as well as the doctrine of

predestination mainly associated with Geneva and the Reformation in Switzerland, they had fled Italy for Geneva. Among them there were a number of well-educated men - lawyers, physicians, former clerics and others of station and substance - who can be described as representatives of the rationalists within the Radical Reformation. They, as well as the whole Protestant community in Geneva and elsewhere in the Diaspora, were appalled by Geneva's action against Servetus. One of them, Camillo Renato, openly excoriated Calvin for going beyond Jesus, who sought out the sinful, and also beyond Paul who, for the worst of sinners, recommended no more than excommunication.

However, for obvious reasons neither Renato nor any other person from the Italian congregation openly supported the ideas which had led to Servetus' downfall. Still, their indignation at what had happened to Servetus should also be seen against the background of a feeling prevalent among the Italian rationalists that the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity had become a coercive ecclesio-political tool of the Swiss reformation and that Christ's mercy had been encapsulated within the rigid confines of dogmatic formulation.

Explicit support for Servetus did not take long to appear, most importantly from Matthew Gribaldi (1506-1564), a professor of civil law at Padua, and George Blandrata (c.1515 - c1585), a Piedmontese physician.

In an *Apologia* written by a certain "Lyncurius", most probably Gribaldi himself, a scathing attack was directed against Calvin and at the same time the oldest fully explicit presentation of Servetian thought was given. As far as his own thoughts are concerned, Gribaldi declares in his *De vera cognitione Dei* the three Persons to be three distinct Gods. The first and the highest is Jehovah, the Son and the Spirit being subordinate Gods. The divine seed of the Son or the Word took form as a human being in the womb of Mary without, however, taking a human nature from her. In this we find a definite appropriation of the doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ prevalent in the Radical Reformation.

George Blandrata, an elder in the Italian congregation in Geneva, soon became a major figure in that section of the Italian Diaspora destined to move, within the Evangelical Rationalism, all the way to explicit Unitarianism. Reprimanded by Calvin, he left the Italian congregation to avoid further altercations with Calvin and eventually in 1558 arrived in Poland, where he soon became embroiled in a new controversy.

The controversy started with a certain Francis Stancaró, a Hebrew scholar and a monk from Venice, who, although never considered a heretic, was constantly to be found in the midst of mounting theological tension. After having stirred up a debate with trinitarian implications in Transylvania (Hungary), he arrived in Poland at more or less the same time as Blandrata. He immediately carried on from where he left off in Transylvania by stating that the divine nature of Christ

should be excluded from his redemptive work. According to him, the exclusion of the divine nature of Christ from his redemptive work safeguards the divine majesty of the Son, at the same time maintaining the doctrine of the Trinity inviolate. He charged that Lutheranism in general, and Melancthon and Osiander in particular, subordinated the Son to the Father in an Arian fashion by allowing the divine nature of the Son to participate in the mediation. Christ can be considered the mediator between God and humanity only according to his human nature. The mediator had to die and the divine is not capable of death.

Blandrata turned the confusion created by the Stancaró controversy into inchoate Unitarianism by advocating a return to the simple language of the Bible and the Apostles' Creed and abandoning the philosophical vocabulary of the scholastics concerning the Trinity. He maintained the adequacy of Scriptural language with that of the Apostles' Creed for expressing all necessary theological truths, thus paving the way for some of his followers to reject as papists the words "Trinity", "Person" and "essence". On the basis of Matt. 28:19 one of them, Gregory Paul of Cracow, ended up with a form of tritheism that eventually became Unitarianism in so far as God the Father and the Creator was seen as the supreme God with the Son as a lesser God than the Father, precisely because He was a mediator in his divine nature no less than in his human nature and could not have discharged this office if He had been in his deity equal to Him with whom He interceded.

The same thing happened in Hungary, where the controversy occasioned by Stancaró was destined to move very quickly all the way to explicit Unitarianism.

The ease with which Unitarianism got a foothold in Hungary can partially be explained by the historical context within which the Reformation came to Hungary. After the defeat of the Hungarian army in 1526 by the Turks under Suleiman I, the central part of Hungary, the Danube basin and its largely Magyar population, was governed by the Turks. In the western and northern parts the Roman Catholic Habsburg dynasty was still in control. The Reformed movement established itself most quickly and firmly in those regions not directly under Habsburg control and where the Catholic hierarchy was not able to exercise its legal authority over the churches effectively. The establishment of the Reformed faith in its Helvetic form in a region under the political control of the Turks created fertile ground for anti-trinitarian sentiments. Just as in the case of Servetus, Muslim proximity seems to have stirred up apologetic tendencies among the Christians. One incident in the history of Hungarian Christianity highlights the tensions and the fierceness of religious feelings generated by the close contact between Christians and Muslims. Here on the Muslim frontier of Christendom a Calvinist-Unitarian debate was arranged in which death was the penalty for the losing side. When the Calvinist side won, one of the Unitarians was duly hanged. Eventually at a public disputation it was agreed that the

execution of the Unitarian representative had been inhuman. The Calvinists involved were imprisoned and later released on the payment of a large ransom.

Hungary passed through more than one Reformation phase. A Lutheran phase was followed by a Helvetic phase and finally a Unitarian phase, when a large number of Transylvania Protestants became Unitarian. In this process Francis David (1510-1579) played a leading role.

David took up the pen against Stancaró and his rejection of the Reformed confession of Christ as mediator both according to his divine and human nature. Soon, however, he was drawn more and more towards anti-trinitarianism, mainly under the influence of George Blandrata. At a joint synod of the Transylvanian and the Turkish Hungarian churches Blandrata, as before in Poland, requested that philosophical and theological terms be eschewed in favour of biblical and apostolic language. When this was agreed upon, Blandrata and David expressed high regard for the Apostles' Creed and acknowledged the equality of the three Persons; but they rejected the term and the idea of a common *substantia* or *essentia* on the grounds that along with the three Persons it made for a papal and idolatrous quaternity. This rejection of the divine *essentia* they confirmed in their own issue of the Heidelberg Catechism. Soon, however, they went further and came up with an Arian statement of faith maintaining that there is but one God the Father, that the Son is subordinate to the Father and that the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the power of God at work.

For them the eradication of the doctrine of the Trinity constituted the consummation of the Reformation and at the Synod of Nagyvárad in 1569 they tasted the first fruits of their efforts when the schism between the Trinitarian and the Unitarian Reformed Hungarians became definite and scarcely a Magyar family of importance, including the royal family of Transylvania, remained outside the Unitarian fold.

This account of the aftermath of the Servetus debacle will be not complete, however, without reference to another Italian rationalist of the Radical Reformation, namely Faustus Socinus, who became the father of the Socinian movement in Poland.

Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), the nephew of another well-known rationalist, Laelius Socinus, was born in Siena. Pursued by the Inquisition he fled to Lyons, but he also made contact with the Italian congregation in Geneva, probably in 1562. Soon afterwards, in his first publication, a commentary on the Prologue of the Gospel of Saint John, he enunciated the basic theme of his Christology in defining Christ as divine by office rather than by nature. This was in full agreement with his rationalist point of departure: the Bible reader must look for the rational sense of Scripture. It is contrary to reason, argues Socinus, to believe that an undefined Word (Logos) existed before time. This latter view was



accepted under the influence of Platonic philosophy, while the Gospel contains clear and simple ideas. When the Word is called “God” in the Prologue, it is done metaphorically and hyperbolically, in order to stress the rank and meaning of Christ.

Having denied the essential deity of Christ Socinus gives a monarchian solution to the problem of the unity of the Godhead by stating that Christ, though wholly human, is nevertheless true God, because the Father shared his power with him at his ascension and assigned to him adoptive deity. He is therefore entitled to divine adoration. This was denied by Francis David, who spoke persuasively on the idolatry implicit in the worship of Christ as a human being. Blandrata sought the aid of Socinus, who had in the meantime settled at Basel, and prevailed upon him to come to Transylvania with a view to arguing David back to the propriety of worshipping Christ.

Apparently unsuccessful, Socinus left Transylvania for Poland, where his theology was destined to reshape the anti-trinitarian so-called Polish Brethren in Poland into a new school of Christianity, producing in 1604 the Racovian Catechesis in which, among other things, Socinus’ Unitarian views find expression.

In 1658 the diet of the Commonwealth of Poland passed a resolution prohibiting anti-trinitarianism under penalty of death. This signalled the end of the anti-trinitarians. The majority of Polish Brethren accepted Catholicism; a minority chose emigration. The main body of emigrants went to Transylvania, where the anti-trinitarian church continued to function officially.

# 9 ORTHODOXY AND THE RETURN OF THE GOD OF SCHOLASTICISM

## 9.1 A PERIOD OF RELIGIOUS CONSOLIDATION

The sixteenth century was one of the most tumultuous periods in the entire history of Christianity. In a few decades the magnificent and towering edifice of the corpus Christianum of medieval Europe crumbled and finally collapsed. The convulsed nature of this period was emphasized by the almost complete fusion of religion and politics which inevitably led to armed conflict, especially in Germany, where the princes and cities had been ranging themselves on one or the other side of the religious divide. The Peace of Augsburg (1555), which stipulated that the princes, both Catholic and Lutheran, would be free to determine the religion of their territories (the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*) could not last, not only because the Calvinists had not been included, but also because freedom of religion now only extended to the rulers. Thus, early in the seventeenth century, started the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648) when England, the Netherlands and Denmark joined forces with several Protestant princes against the Catholic Hapsburg Ferdinand II of Spain. It developed into one of the most devastating wars on the European continent, surpassed in its destructiveness only by the two great World Wars of the twentieth century.

The Peace of Westphalia (1648), which brought the Thirty Year's War to an end, was more favourable to the Protestants than conditions a few years earlier would have warranted. While the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* still had some validity, Catholic princes were required to permit Protestant worship in their realms and Protestant princes were to do likewise with Catholic worship. The same provision for reciprocal toleration applied between Lutherans and Reformed.

The religious wars, the Spanish inquisition, the persecution of the Reformed Protestants in France and their steadfast resistance were symptomatic of the irrevocability of the religious fragmentation of Christendom in the West.

With this new situation came the consolidation of the new religious movements of the sixteenth century, including a revitalized Roman Catholicism. On the Roman Catholic side the Thirty Year's war found solid support in most of the Latin countries. Secularized as its civil rulers had become, the Roman Church still spoke to them with a clear voice.

The rejuvenation and consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church had already started in the sixteenth century, when in Spain Isabella inherited the crown. She was a determined champion of reformation long before Luther's protest. Her programme, however, did not include the reformation of doctrine, but only of customs and morals. Doctrinal deviation was severely punished by the Inquisition under the Dominican friar Tomás de Torquemada, who was known for his uncompromising love of orthodoxy. The moral reform was strengthened by the founding of new orders, especially the Jesuits under the leadership of Ignatius of Loyola, who hoped to respond to the new times with new solutions. The Jesuits met the challenge of the Reformation head-on in polemics and finally persuaded Pope Paul III to convene the Council of Trent which - in a period that stretched from 1545 to 1563 (during most of that time it was in recess) - responded to the various issues raised by the Reformation and set the tone for Roman Catholicism for the next four centuries. Apart from making the Vulgate authoritative in matters of dogma, declaring that tradition has authority parallel to that of Scripture, challenging the Protestant views on grace and justification and affirming the seven sacraments, the prelates who attended the Council promoted the study of Thomas Aquinas, making his the dominant theology in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, despite the theological changes in the previous two centuries and the Protestant onslaught in the decades preceding the Council of Trent, Thomist scholasticism again became fully entrenched in Roman Catholicism.

While the Roman Catholic Church and theology entered the seventeenth century with a new-found confidence and vibrancy, Protestantism did not come into this era with anything like the same confidence, lacking the unity, discipline and sense of purpose that its rival showed. Protestantism was broken up into the Church of England and three main parties, Lutheran, Reformed and the survivors of the despised and persecuted Anabaptists. Because of these divisions one gets the impression that it had been easier for the theologians of the various parties to agree on what they perceived as the errors of Rome than on a positive common doctrinal platform. Generally speaking, theologians showed more skill in demolishing the arguments of opponents than in comprehending their own faith.

The sixteenth century had been a period of enormous religious and theological vitality. Theologians of the following century lacked the creativity of the earlier generation. They rather defended the teachings of the Reformers, and did so zealously. The goal was to uphold and clarify what others had said before them. The dynamic religious thinking of Luther and Calvin was accordingly arrested by a concern for whether or not particular formulations were true to the original authors. The concept of truth became more and more static. Good Protestants, whether Lutheran or Reformed, were judged by their willingness to assent to

statements of truth in propositional form. Certain central statements of faith were even seen as the key to the interpretation of the Bible.

In line with such an attitude the confessions of faith that developed during this period became more and more yardsticks of correct Christian thinking and less and less guides in matters of faith and bulwarks against distortions of the biblical message. People were asked to believe the confessions instead of using the confessions as frame-works within which their faith could mature.

However, seeing that these confessions developed in the midst of controversies, they played a decisive role for both Lutheran and Reformed theologians to come to the self-understanding that they were desperately seeking. This was inter alia the case in Reformed circles in the Netherlands, when the Arminian controversy with regard to predestination and free will led directly to the Canons of Dordt in 1619. In England again, in the struggle between the throne and the Parliament on matters pertaining to church government, Parliament convoked a body of theologians to advise it on religious matters, from which resulted the Westminster Confession of 1647. These two confessions presented the definition of Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth century.

Likewise, but significantly earlier than in the Reformed tradition, the Lutherans arrived at the Formula of Concord in 1577 as a result of attempts to force different factions within Lutheranism to an agreement. The dogmatics, systematized confessionally in the Formula of Concord, represented the Lutheran consolidation of the Reformation that made possible a Protestant self-understanding capable of holding its own against a redefined Roman Catholicism. Out of this new understanding grew the Lutheran scholasticism of the seventeenth century.

In the struggle to come to a clear self-understanding in the midst of controversy the Protestant theologians made use of the weapons already available. These weapons were provided by the scholastic methodology and set of presuppositions inherited from the Middle Ages and re-introduced by a revitalized Roman Catholic Church and its conscious return to the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. Of significant import was the re-introduction of the logic and metaphysics of Aristotle. On the side of Reformed theologians Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), for example, rather uncritically upheld the authority of Aristotle in philosophy, while most Lutherans like Johann Gerhardt were also doing theology on the basis of Aristotle. Thus, while in content Protestant scholasticism was radically opposed to Catholicism on crucial issues, in its tone and methodology it was very similar to the Catholic theology of the time.

It is, however, important to note that the scholasticism of the seventeenth century found itself in a different position to that of medieval scholasticism. In the Middle Ages rational propositions about God and rational discourse about

revelation were in conformity with the climate of opinion of the period. Reason made room for revelation, and revelation did not see itself in conflict with reason. In the seventeenth century scholasticism, especially Protestant scholasticism, had to argue its case. A new scientific view of the world was gradually becoming dominant in this period. One of Luther's contemporaries, Copernicus, had begun a scientific revolution that, through Kepler, Galileo and Newton, was to bear fruit in nearly every area of thought. It soon became clear that this new worldview was not compatible with that of the Bible. At the same time the philosophical trend of the day was almost exclusively rationalistic.

A real secularism was on its way; but through a revived Roman Catholicism, Christianity still spoke to Europe, and was still heard. The Roman Catholic Church even succeeded in holding the allegiance of such modern philosophers as Descartes and Pascal, even when authorities denounced their work. Protestantism was less successful in this regard. Their theologians in their own way helped Protestantism to understand itself, but they did poorly in dealing with the new questions that were to dominate the next development of European culture. The Enlightenment and the rationalistic religion of the following century would indicate the extent of their failure.

It is difficult to find a reason for the relatively greater success of Roman Catholicism to maintain its authority in the midst of a steadily growing secularism. One answer could be that after the Peace of Westphalia stability was at a premium. The quest for stability was pursued consistently. The general temper of the times encouraged men and women to seek a comfortable and prosperous life, enlightened in outlook yet buttressed by traditional authority, a role the Roman Catholic Church was all too willing to play.

Protestant confidence, however, gradually increased, especially through the appearance of strong political leadership in Prussia and by the rise of William of Orange in the Netherlands. The flourishing economic life of northern Europe, and the entry of England and Holland into the business of overseas expansion, helped to strengthen Reformed Protestantism. The Reformed theologians therefore represented, particularly in the latter half of the seventeenth century, a movement often defensive against intellectual secular forces coming from outside, but yet at the same time a movement that became increasingly vital and strong in facing the future.

Against this backdrop to spiritual and intellectual developments in the seventeenth century we must now ask the question in what way these developments produced new theological insights, if any, into the doctrine of God, or alternatively, what view of God was congruent with this period of orthodoxy.

## 9.2 NATURAL AND REVEALED RELIGION

The first indication we have of the turn towards scholasticism and the Aristotelian theory of knowledge by Protestant theologians in the seventeenth century has to do with the way in which they dealt with the concept of a natural knowledge of God.

We know from our discussions of medieval scholasticism, especially with reference to Thomas Aquinas, the important role that the idea of a natural theology had played in the doctrine of God. For Thomas and many other scholastics natural theology formed the basis and substratum upon which the supernatural, revealed knowledge of God could be built. In the sixteenth century the Reformers neither rejected nor neglected the idea of a natural knowledge of God, although both Luther and Calvin made significant changes to the original scholastic version, emphasizing the inadequacy and defectiveness of such a knowledge.

In the case of Calvin, who gives much more attention to this doctrine than Luther does, we discovered a further deviation from the scholastic version with its Aristotelian theory of knowledge. Calvin moves away from Aristotle in the direction of Plato when, quoting Cicero as one of his authorities, he speaks of an awareness of divinity implanted in the human mind by God.

The doctrine of innate ideas is rooted in Greek philosophy. The problem with regard to the possibility of acquiring knowledge was held to be very difficult to explain. Plato solved the problem by means of his doctrine of reminiscences: before the soul was joined to the body, it had beheld the ideas in all their beauty, and in its memory it had stored away deeply the imprints of these ideas. Augustine moved in the same direction, although, strictly speaking, Cicero was the first to fully broach the doctrine of innate ideas. It is in this regard that he was quoted by Calvin.

The Reformed theologians who followed in the footsteps of Calvin towards the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century still held on to the concept of innate ideas, including the idea of God. Hieronymus Zanchius (1516-1590), for example, rejects the view of Aristotle and, in agreement with the Stoics and Cicero, teaches that the ideas held by all are innate, not furnished by experience; after all children know at once that "three is more than two". Amandus Polanus (1561-1610) who wrote an extensive study in dogmatics, *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, which was published in 1609, also supports the doctrine of innate ideas, despite the fact that he had already started to teach the rudiments of Aristotelian logic in Basel. He says that right understanding consists in true knowledge of the will and works of God and also of the divine order and judgement written upon the human mind by God. The author of this

knowledge is the Logos, a knowledge which is increased by means of the contemplation of the works of God.

However, when Gisbertus came onto the scene and started to play an influential role in the Reformed world, Aristotle re-emerged as the philosopher whose logic and theory of knowledge undergirded theological thinking. Voetius upheld the authority of Aristotle in philosophy rather uncritically, opposing Descartes in a series of polemics. He emphatically denied Descartes's doctrine of innate ideas, accusing Descartes of unduly minimizing the value and certainty of knowledge derived from the senses.

With Aristotle back, the emphasis now shifted to natural reason, which allows us to conclude from our sensory experience of the visible world as God's work to its invisible originator and ruler. At the same time conscience teaches that God is someone that loves and rewards goodness, abhors and punishes evil, and to whom we all are absolutely responsible. Thus Johann Heidegger, the Reformed theologian from Zürich, refers to the "countless and pregnant proofs by which reason incontrovertibly" maintains that God is the rewarder of good and the punisher of evil without the help of any revelation or tradition.

Of course all these Reformed theologians emphasize the insufficiency of natural religion for salvation. It can only make us inexcusable, for not accepting revelation. Yet what natural religion teaches about God, although imperfect, is not therefore untrue. This knowledge, says Johannes Coccejus (1603-1669), professor at Bremen and Leiden and well-known for his theology of the covenant, is true, although it is not adequate. The things known of God by means of natural reason are devoid of falsehood, even though there is more in the actual fact than can be perceived by us.

Revealed religion and natural religion are so related to one another that the former is the confirmation of the latter. Yet Voetius is adamant that it must by no means be concluded that reason, the faculty of the rational soul in man by which he apprehends and adjudicates upon things intelligible, may in any way be the principle of knowledge by faith. Reason remains only the instrument or means by which we may be led to faith; it is not the principle on which dogmas of faith are proved or the foundation on which they rest.

Lutheran orthodoxy followed more or less the same Aristotelian route. While Melanchthon originally taught a knowledge of God innate as well as acquired and that the vestiges of God which can be observed in all his works are insufficient for a knowledge of God if the mind did not also have a certain idea or preconception of God, Gerhardt, Quenstedt, Hollaz, Jaeger and others agreed in this that a natural knowledge of God does not consist of an idea "impressed on the mind", present in us prior to any use of the reason. The natural knowledge of God is derived from the vestiges of God that can be observed in all his works. All

of them defended the legitimacy of a natural theology, and some, like Jaeger and others even gave it a distinct and separate place in the system of dogmatics, thus imitating the schoolmen of the Middle Ages.

### 9.3 PREDESTINATION AND THE ALL-POWERFUL GOD

The emphasis on the human reason as the vehicle by which a true, although inadequate, natural knowledge of God is acquired is of course not the only field which demonstrates the return to the scholastic way of thinking about God. The Reformed and Lutheran treatment of the so-called attributes of God is a typical example. Even the medieval Aristotelian philosophical terminology returns. God is *actus purissimus et simplicissimus* (purist and most single activity); God's nature is most single *essentia* (essence), which admits of no composition or division; in God there is no *accidens* (accident), for everything is essential in God, etc.

Amandus Polanus, in his *Syntagma theologiae Christianae*, is perhaps one of the outstanding examples of this scholastic discussion of God's nature with the linguistic and theoretical tools of Aristotelian metaphysics. The essential attributes of God, he says, are really his very essence and not parts of the divine essence. Any essential attribute is the actual essence of God whole and entire, so that God's essence and God's essential attribute are not one thing and another, but one and the same thing. Whatever God is or does in Himself, He is it or does it in Himself by one and the same act, which is His essence. Thus by one and the same act He is single, infinite, unchangeable; by one and the same act He lives, knows, wills and animates. His essence is whatever He is. His essence is wise, his essence is good, his essence is powerful, his essence is merciful. God's essential attributes are *actus* (activity), exactly as God is purist and most single activity. Without essential divine attributes God cannot exist, lest He exist without Himself; for He Himself is *ipsissima sapientia, bonitas, potentia* (wisdom itself, goodness itself and power itself).

Of these attributes, the power of God is perhaps the one that deserves a closer look, because in dealing with the power of God the Protestant theologians of the seventeenth century reintroduced a theme that had become familiar within the scholasticism of the late Middle Ages, but in such a way that it became an issue peculiar to the seventeenth century, especially within the circles of Reformed orthodoxy.

In chapter 6 we dealt with the nominalist introduction of the distinction between God's absolute power and freedom (*potentia absoluta*) and his ordained power (*potentia ordinata*) which, as we have seen, is held to be the proper object of theological reflection. Luther followed the example of the nominalists and steered away from speculative thinking about God's absolute power and



freedom, relegating it, together with the idea of predestination, to the darkness of the hidden God. Calvin, on the other hand, maintained that there is only one will in God. However, when he deals with the difficult question of predestination, he does not position it within the doctrine of God. As we have seen, in the definitive 1559 edition of the *Institutio* Calvin treats predestination as a separate theme at the end of the section dealing with the doctrine of the appropriation of salvation. His approach is unquestionably pastoral and predestination is not fundamental in the sense that all other doctrines are deduced from it. The same applies to Bucer, Bullinger, Olevianus and Ursinus in the time of the Reformation. Given faith and conversion they reasoned back to election and used this doctrine as a means of comfort and assurance. The life of faith was indeed the condition that gave rise to the doctrine of election, but the fact of election was the source of every spiritual benefit.

Despite Calvin's doctrine of a double predestination, his pastoral approach from the viewpoint of the appropriation of salvation clearly reflects a willingness to avoid unnecessary speculation about God's absolute power and to remain within the confines of the ordained power as revealed to us. The Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century, however, made a fundamental break with this tradition. Instead of reasoning back from faith and conversion to election and using this doctrine as a means of comfort and assurance, they derive it from the idea of God, according to an *a priori* method of approach. Predestination, as an eternal decree of God, is now positioned within the doctrine of God, the same order that had been followed by medieval scholasticism.

It is significant that this *a priori* order was usually followed by Reformed theologians, while Lutherans, Arminians and Roman Catholics adopted the *a posteriori* order. For them (the Reformed theologians) the emphasis did not fall upon the anthropological or soteriological significance of predestination, but upon its theological meaning: God's glory. God's glory, not the salvation of the human race, is now considered the chief purpose of predestination.

Hieronymus Zanchius (1516-1590) of Heidelberg and Neustadt is one of the best examples in this regard. Before his conversion to the Protestant faith he had developed scholastic theological interest under the influence of Thomism and the revived interest in Aristotelian logic at the Italian school of Padua. These influences he carried over into his Reformed writings, in which he developed a metaphysical system, starting from the presupposition that God is both the efficient and final cause of all that takes place.

Within this framework predestination becomes an essential part of the causal system and belongs logically within the doctrine of God. Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629) from Basle, in his *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, gives us a further example of this development. He starts off with a chapter on the essence

of God, which is followed by chapters on the Persons in the Godhead. He then deals, firstly, with the divine decrees in general and, secondly, with predestination in particular. Only then follow reflections on creation, the fall, original sin and the Person and works of Christ.

Wollebius calls predestination a special decree of God by which He has ordained that the glory of his grace, mercy and justice shall be revealed in rational creatures, whether elect or reprobate. This decree is absolute with respect to its efficient cause (*causa efficiens impulsiva*), which is neither the faith of the elect nor the sin of the reprobate, but the absolutely free will of God.

In the same way Polanus sees God's free will or the *decretum Dei absolutum* as the efficient cause of predestination and the glory of God as its end. This does not only apply to God's act of election, but also to his act of reprobation. According to Heidegger, the purpose of reprobation is twofold: the supreme end is the glory of God reprobating; the subordinate end is the righteous condemnation of the reprobated to death for their sins.

Indicative of the type of theological discourse among theologians of reformed orthodoxy when they reflected upon the freedom of God's will and predestination is the debate that started between supralapsarians and infralapsarians during the time of the Arminian controversy in the beginning of the seventeenth century at the University of Leiden in Holland. Arminius (1560-1609) taught at Leiden and made no secret about his leanings towards the Pelagian emphasis on the free will of man and consequently put forward the idea that God elected on the basis of his foreknowledge of the individual's decision whether to accept God's offer of salvation or not. In this he was strongly opposed by his colleague Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) and eventually, at the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), Arminianism was rejected, Gomarus (who by then professor in Groningen) vindicated and the orthodox view on predestination confirmed. It was during this period that the question arose about the order of the decrees of God's eternal council and the supra-infralapsarian debate became quite an esoteric phenomenon among orthodox Reformed theologians.

According to supralapsarians, the double predestination of election and reprobation occurred prior to God's decree that encapsulates mankind's fall into sin. Infralapsarians insisted that the decree of predestination follows on the decree of the creation and the fall into sin. The Canons of Dordt clearly soften the doctrine of predestination in the direction of infralapsarianism. At the same time the Synod depicts the doctrine of God's special decree (*decretum Dei speciale*) of predestination as one of those doctrines which must be set forth with quite unusual circumspection and care; it must be handled only within the limits which God has fixed in the revelation of this mystery. The Canons of the Synod of Dordt explicitly say that:

“this doctrine of divine election has by the most wise counsel of God been preached through the prophets, Christ himself and the apostles, alike under the Old Testament and under the New Testament, and thereafter entrusted to the memoirs of sacred literature; so also today it is to be propounded in the Church of God for which it was peculiarly designed, religiously and holily with the spirit of discretion, in its own place and time, all inquisitive spying of the ways of the Most High being ruled out, and this to the glory of the most sacred divine name and the lively consolation of His people.”

It is worth noting that Gomarus held strong supralapsarian views and only accepted the Canons of Dordt because he believed that Dordt only tried to give a popular exposition of a very difficult theological problem. At this time it also transpired that Dordt never explicitly rejected supralapsarianism.

The orthodox view of God that prevailed in seventeenth-century Reformed Europe found its confessional expression in the Canons of Dordt: God is the God of eternal decrees and of absolute power. On the surface we have here a rather austere view of God. The above quotation from the Canons of Dordt, however, clearly shows the orthodox theologians would not have taken kindly to such a criticism. They keep on referring to the “mystery” of election and reprobation, and are at pains to emphasise that in this mystery of predestination God testified to the power of the benefit of His grace and of the judgment of His righteousness. Christ is after all the foundation of the election, they would keep on saying. Christ is rightly called the cause of the election (*causa electionis*), just as He is literally the medium of it.

We find a similar development in the English reformation. The early English reformers of the sixteenth century regarded the doctrine of unconditional predestination as essential to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In this they were not only influenced by the notable Augustinian theology prior to the Reformation, of which Thomas Bradwardine was the best representative, but also by continental theologians who had been major figures in the development of Reformed theology and who were now invited to England, like Martin Bucer, perhaps already the most influential of them and who was now granted the Regius professorship of divinity at Cambridge, as well as Peter Martyr, who was made professor of divinity at Oxford. For both these theologians, following Calvin in this regard, predestination is rooted in the Reformed theology of grace. Because salvation is entirely by grace, God’s will alone is the cause of all who believe and are justified. Predestination is therefore the guarantor of justification and redemption by God’s grace alone. Both these theologians integrally related predestination, justification and sanctification to a whole

“order of salvation” (*ordo salutis*) in which predestination stands at the beginning. Peter Martyr thus emphasized the profitability of this doctrine to the godly, bringing them the assurance that their salvation was reliable and certain, being in the hands of God.

This pastoral and soteriological approach of predestinarian grace, however, which had been adopted by the leadership of the Church of England, was increasingly hardened into a scholastic theology of divine decrees, although it never lost its focus on the practical piety of seeking the assurance of salvation on the basis of predestinating grace. William Perkins (1558-1602), an English theologian of European reputation, may well have been the most important figure in the emergence of Reformed scholasticism in England. Like the continental Protestant scholastics, Perkins linked predestination directly to the doctrine of God. From the decrees of the Almighty God follow everything else in the order of salvation, as well as in the order of damnation which, from the decree of reprobation, leads to the actual suffering in hell of the damned, just as election leads to the glorification of the blessed. Perkins devoted considerable attention to the defence of the doctrine of reprobation. Reprobation for him is that part of predestination whereby God, according to the most free and just purpose of His will, determined to reject certain people unto eternal destruction and misery, and that to the praise of His justice.

At this stage, however, it is important to remind ourselves that for Perkins, as well as many other scholastic theologians of this period, the experience of predestinarian grace conveyed, as a phenomenon of individual religious experience, an undergirding assurance and certainty at a time when it seemed to have been most needed. This led to a specific form of piety and experience of God in Puritan England, which we shall deal with in the following chapter as part of the Pietist reaction to Protestant scholasticism.

Predestination, election as well as reprobation, in England as well as on the European continent, points to the absolute power of God to do according to his own decree, since the divine decree is the being and will of God Himself. It is unconditioned by anything else, absolute, eternal and unchangeable.

Just as predestination became a part of the doctrine of the decrees of God within the Reformed orthodox theology of the seventeenth century, providence followed a similar route. Although providence may be conceived as a continuous world-creation, it must be fixed in relation to the conception of the eternal decree of God. God’s providence, says Johannes Braunius in his *Doctrina Foederum Dei sive Systema Theologiae* of 1688, is nothing other than the most effective volition of God, by which He willed from eternity that such should be the case. They all agree that the theistic idea of God leads of itself to the conception of providence.

Just as in the case of predestination God demonstrates in providence that He is all-powerful. It is the power of God, by which God resolved by Himself from eternity how, when and with what object He was to create things one and all and the way in which He was to govern them when created. But providence is not to be confused with predestination; while providence extends to all God's things and works, and predestination only to rational creatures, predestination is born out of providence and both find their proper place within the decrees of God. Thus Gulielmus Bucanus in his *Institutiones* of 1609 distinguishes two parts of providence, namely one as a kind of eternal and unchangeable disposition, which has decreed to rule all things after their creation and to guide and lead them to their ends, and the second as the actual and temporal administration of the whole world by which God wisely, freely and powerfully steers rules and controls the separate things created by Himself, and directs them to their ends. Hence, the providential activity of God, by virtue of his divine essentiality, is absolutely independent and omnipotent.

Not for one moment did the Orthodoxy of the seventeenth century doubt that God's absolute power manifested itself in his providence and that this could be seen by everyone. This conviction is summarized by Heidegger when he says that the truth of providence is confirmed by the nature of God as well as by the state of created things, by the order and harmony of the world, by prophecies, by revolutions in empires, by God's judgements and benefits, by the sense of conscience, by manifest types, by the agreement of nations and philosophers. To God's nature it belongs that He is the first cause of everything, the highest truth and wisdom, the highest power, and the highest good.

# 10 THE IMMUTABLE GOD OF PIETIST PURITANISM

## 10.1 THE COVENANT AND THE PRACTICE OF PIETY IN ENGLISH PURITANISM

The grouping together of Puritans and Pietists in the same chapter is not without problems. One of the main objections to this classification could be with reference to the difference in attitude towards the place and role of doctrine in the life of the church. Pietism has always been fundamentally more or less irenic in matters which concern the correctness of doctrinal formulation and definition. Historically its main interest was focussed upon the deepening of the devotional life of the believer and it shied away from doctrinal controversy. In this regard Pietism continued in the tradition of medieval mysticism. Puritanism, on the other hand, is called by some a doctrinal movement, generated by the revival of a Calvinistic Augustinianism in England and the rediscovery of God's sovereignty. Less favourably, others sometimes accuse Puritanism of a rigid dogmatism.

There is no doubt that the Puritans were orthodox in their theology and faith, and it would have been easy to have dealt with them in the previous chapter as an example of Reformed orthodoxy as it manifested itself in England and subsequently in New England, but for the one important factor that comes into play when dealing with Puritanism: its fervent devotion and extraordinary emphasis on the practice of piety (*praxis pietatis*). Puritanism endeavoured not only to preserve but actually to strengthen the experiential element in Protestantism which was so obvious in Calvin. It is in this regard that the Puritans showed close affinities to similar developments on the European continent which came to be known and categorized as Pietism.

The roots of Puritanism go back earlier than the seventeenth century. It can be described as a reform movement of churchmen in the (Anglican) Church of England during the latter half of the sixteenth century. They were representatives of a more aggressive Protestantism, which did not find the idea of a broad, national and comprehensive church favoured by Queen Elizabeth I of England sufficiently reformed. Broadly speaking, this movement had a dual purpose. In the first place they struggled for the strengthening of Calvinism that had during this period made its home in England and the concomitant amendment of the forms of worship, and church governance in the direction of Presbyterianism. Secondly, they increasingly exerted pressure toward a pattern

of Calvinistic piety with a fundamental characteristic of a rigid adherence to the text of the Bible, a persistent emphasis on the need for a profound experience of salvation and an ethical code that hovered in the vicinity of perfectionism.

In this period Pietism was no more than a spiritual undercurrent. The development within Protestantism toward orthodoxy as described in the previous chapter was paramount and fast gaining momentum. Pietism only announced itself sporadically in certain individuals within the circles of orthodoxy. The outstanding example in this regard is William Perkins, whom we dealt with in the previous chapter and who is considered to be the very centre of an early group of pietistic Puritans.

Perkin's understanding of Christianity was without doubt that of his orthodox contemporaries with their emphasis on the hard doctrine of double predestination, treating this doctrine as part of the doctrine of God. Nevertheless, Perkins's main theological concern is not an elaboration on the theme of predestination. Although he gives us in his famous work, *Golden Chain*, a diagram that graphically describes "the order of the causes of salvation and damnation according to God's word", his central concern is the salvation of human beings. At the same time he occupies himself with the practical aspects of Christian life. By far the largest part of his *Golden Chain* deals with the practice of piety, the *praxis pietatis*, which would later become one of the outstanding characteristics of Pietism.

The two pillars of Puritan thought, the sovereignty of God in his divine activity of election and the human response to his/her election through a life of devotion and practical piety already discernible in the thinking of Perkins, progressively became dominant in Puritan theology of the following decades. On the one hand, there was the unshakeable conviction that the ultimate human destiny is divinely and unconditionally determined by God's eternal decree; on the other hand, they affirmed the human responsibility of a vital faith and an active obedience to the law of God. God is not only the sovereign God who elects, but He is also the God who has given His law and who expects His law to be obeyed by those He has elected.

The piety of the Puritan community in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century had its centre in the majesty of the divine law. The way in which they applied the law to daily Christian life makes it clear that the scholastic methods used by Puritan theologians by and large reflect the climate of orthodoxy in which they lived, being themselves representatives of orthodoxy as far as doctrine was concerned. The methodology of making logical deductions from given principles, in this case the will of God as revealed in Scripture, led them to a form of casuistry yet unknown in reformed Protestantism. Through careful exposition of Scripture they were able to apply the law of God to every

conceivable condition of human life, underscoring their perception of God as a sovereign God of order. The manner in which they prescribed the keeping of the Sabbath is perhaps the best known of the Puritan ethical codes that resulted from this methodology.

A judgment of rigid dogmatism and oppressive legalism on the Puritans of the early seventeenth century would have been fair, but for the softening of these traits by a profound experientialism drawn from the wider movement of Pietism. For the Puritans obedience to the law of God represented the ethical fruits of evangelical faith and experience, each true believer called upon to move progressively toward the final goal, everlasting life. But at the same time this faith experience could also manifest itself in a deep sense of the believer's inability to keep the law of God and the need for assurance that God remains faithful. Thus the believer is again directed toward the sovereignty of God's grace and the affirmation of a predestination that proclaims the intimacy and final efficiency of God's choice. It is this interaction between piety and orthodox doctrine that, in the final analysis, characterize Puritan spirituality and, above all, the Puritan vision of God. God is the Law-giver who demands an orderly life of obedience, but who, at the same time, gives comfort and assurance to his children on the foundation of his eternal and unchangeable election.

Theologically the Puritans expressed the relationship between God's sovereign election and human piety by their concept of a covenant. To a large extent the covenant became the most outstanding mark of Puritan thought.

Covenant thought provided a pattern of thinking in which the conflicts between the ideas of God's sovereignty in his predestination and the freedom of the human response could be dealt with to some extent. One important aspect of a covenant is mutuality. Parties to the covenant are bound by mutual obligations and conditions.

Taking into consideration the Calvinistic background of Puritanism, the preponderance of God's promise and obligation in the covenant is not surprising. At all times the emphasis falls upon God's final and decisive action in the covenant, fulfilling all conditions of the covenant, including the faith and the subsequent obedience to the law of God that the covenant requires. Through God's own action the terms of the covenant are met. His grace is enabling and efficient to see to the fulfilment of the covenant conditions.

In all this the covenant provides an instrument of assurance. God is not capricious. He is the reliable, unchangeable God who will never alter his act of election.

For Stehen Charnock (1628-1680) the eternity of God is the foundation of the stability of the covenant, the great comfort of a Christian. His covenant can have



no foundation, but in His duration before and after the world. The Bible, says Charnock, speaks of God's eternity not only with respect to his essence, but also to his federal providence, as He is the dwelling-place of His people in all generations. Next to the power of God we come, necessarily by reasoning, to acknowledge the eternity of God. If we say God is eternal, we exclude from Him all possibility of beginning and ending, all flux and change. There is no succession in the knowledge of God, for all things are present to Him. There is no succession in the decrees of God, although there is succession in the execution of them. If God were not eternal, He could not be immutable in his nature. The eternity of God is a shield against all kind of mutability.

Despite this one-sidedness in the covenant there is a deep personalism in the covenant relationship. God's covenantal actions lay claim to a personal response. The covenant requires human participation.

The idea of the covenant as a means of comprehending the relationship between God and his people had never played such a significant role in the history of theology and for the most part almost disappeared in the centuries before the Reformation. It has been argued that this concept was revived in the Swiss-German Rhineland cities of Zurich, Basel and Strassbourg and eventually in Geneva, where Calvin emphasized God's absolute initiative in the covenant and the sovereignty of grace. The Rhineland theologians led by Zwingli, Bullinger, Oecolampadius, Bucer and others were more inclined than Calvin to look at the human side of the covenant, interpreting the divine-human relationship as grounded on the divine law and human obedience to the law of love for covenant fulfilment, although none of them denied the primacy of grace.

It was this difference in emphasis concerning human participation in the covenant that was conveyed by Rhineland reformers to the English shore. Bucer, inter alia, invited by Thomas Cranmer to come to the assistance of the English Reformation, taught at Cambridge, where he died in 1551. By the mid-seventeenth century the Rhineland view had triumphed and became the interpretive scheme of the covenant used by most Puritan theologians

By this time, however, the social and political scene in England was changing rapidly, bringing about a great degree of instability. With the death of Elizabeth in 1603 the crown passed to James I. The Puritans repeatedly clashed with him, partly on political issues, for they were a growing force in Parliament, partly on religious grounds because the sovereign not only encouraged all kinds of activities, including sports and dancing, on Sunday but also sought to restrict preachers to topics which seemed to him non-controversial and forbade them to deal with predestination. With the succession of his son, Charles I, things came to a head. His contention that a king ruled by divine right, uncontrolled by his subjects, eventually led to an open war with the Parliament which consisted of

representatives from a growing urban middle class, many of the lesser country gentry of Puritan persuasion as well as independent and separatist religious groups. In 1649 the civil war ended in the triumph of the Parliamentary armies under the command of Oliver Cromwell and the execution of the king.

This period was one of the most tumultuous and unpredictable periods in the history of post-Reformation England. The country was not only divided in religious matters, but also torn politically and socially. It also suffered the instability, enmity and hardship that civil war always engenders. The uncertainty and distress of it all negatively affected the religious life of the nation. There is no doubt that the rigours of their ethic as part of the covenant concept and the assurance of God's faithfulness played a significant role in carrying them through these difficult years, but at the same time we must not forget that the very foundation of the social fabric was shaken with consequences for the intellectual and moral life of the English nation. When all objective standards and a moral authority based upon the law of God began to be questioned, uncertainty started to creep in. To what extent could a piety of obedience to the law give the necessary assurance that God was indeed on the side of the faithful? Something more was needed, a direct and unequivocal experience of God's favour rooted in his election. This called for a new and special relationship with God.

As time passed, Puritan piety was progressively freed from the trammels of the law and replaced with a piety centred in an immediate relationship with God. A deeply mystical tone started to emerge.

This new development did not come about as a result of political and social circumstances only. The fact of the matter is that the roots of the new mystical type of religious experience can be found in the orthodox orientation of Puritanism, namely in the predestinarian thinking that had become the distinctive feature of its theology.

Predestinarian thinking has been regarded in different ways. First and foremost it has been equated with a view of God that over-emphasizes the absolute power of God over against his other attributes. It has also been regarded as having functioned as an aid in the emergence of a more disciplined, middle-class society, as having abetted the transition from a more supernaturalistic world view to one that accepted a greater degree of orderliness and rationality. This became apparent in England where the sacramental perceptions of Catholicism, as they still manifested themselves to a greater or smaller degree in the Church of England, came under attack by the Puritans with their predestinarian thinking as a powerful tool in the battle. At the same time, as seen above, it brought some vestiges of certainty, discipline and orderliness in uncertain times.

Although the idea of predestinarian grace became part, even the kingpin, of an intellectual system in the theological thinking of Orthodoxy and Puritanism, it

would be wrong not to recognize the type of spirituality that it produces. Predestination is an astonishingly inward doctrine which, taken seriously, gives the whole of the believer's life and religious experience an undergirding assurance that no other doctrine can match entirely. Despite the fact that the concept of predestination brings the individual theoretically into the sphere of a hidden God, there is in his or her experience an immediacy to God that defies all possibilities of explanation.

The Puritan movement, in its various stages, had evinced itself to be a movement towards immediacy in relation to God. It is said of the Society of Friends (the Quakers), considered by some as the culmination, almost the natural outcome, of certain tendencies in Puritanism, that they "scoffed at the imagined God beyond the stars". They, however, admitted to no attempt to seek communion with God except as within the bounds of God's revelation through Christ. In this sense they followed the Christ-centred mysticism that we discovered in Bonaventura, Bernard of Clairvaux and others during the Middle Ages. George Fox (1624-1691), founder of Quakerism, and many others of the early Friends, had a vivid sense of a deep and personal union with the risen and living Christ, but there is evidence that some of them took a direction that brought them very near to an identification with the Divine on the basis of their experience of the indwelling Christ and a concomitant doctrine of perfection.

It is true, of course, that in the Reformed doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit room had been made for the phenomenon of religious experience at its most intimate level and most Puritans were not concerned to deny or controvert the classic exposition of this doctrine. Their concern was rather to draw out its implications for devotion, faith and practice. This led, apart from the mystical communion with God, especially in prayer, to an exceptional emphasis on the Fatherhood of God.

Prayer and the Fatherhood of God go together and throughout Puritanism God's Fatherhood was a favourite and insistent theme. The word "Father", says Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), is an epitome of the whole gospel. Joshua Sprigg for his part draws attention to the neglected (Johannine) saying of Jesus: "I say not that I will pray for you, for the Father Himself loves you" and calls it the glory of their Orthodox Divinity that the Father Himself loves them.

The repeated use of the word "familiar" in Puritan writings about prayer points in the same direction. Here again it is Sibbes who was able to articulate the Puritan spiritual boldness in approaching God as their Father. There is, he affirms, an inward kind of "familiar boldness" in the soul, whereby a Christian goes to God.

Prayer then, constant, unceasing prayer, was to Sibbes and many other like-minded Puritans, the very essence of Christian life. The end of the Christian's striving was communion with God, the loving Father, and the means was prayer.

This mysticism within the circles of those Puritans who shunned the excesses of some of the more enthusiastic Friends and remained true to the Calvinistic tradition is perhaps the best epitomized by the writings of Joseph Hall (1574-1656), who was one of the great men of his age. Though he became a bishop of the Church of England, he lived and died a Calvinist, known for his devotional works.

He describes the *via mystica* under the headings of entrance, proceeding and conclusion, and in this description he calls upon the great masters of mysticism such as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventura and Gerson. Whatever way is chosen, the ultimate goal is union with God. This union leads to absolute self-resignation and a "familiar, yet awful, compellation of God".

It has been pointed out by some historians that there even was a mystical core in Cromwell's religion. According to them, he cannot be understood without an appreciation of his devotional life, with its full assurance of the nearness of God through the Holy Spirit. Cromwell himself said that true knowledge is neither literal nor speculative, but inward, transforming the mind to it; it is uniting to, and participating of, the Divine nature.

The assertion of Puritan mysticism has not gone unchallenged. With some degree of justification it has been said that the classic mystic in Christianity normally worshipped in an atmosphere of rich symbolism, while the Puritans preferred plainness in worship. Again, the mystics we have encountered in the course of this narrative were all persons with a highly developed imagination, using all kinds of metaphors as means whereby to describe the ascent to, and ultimate union with, God. The Puritans, on the other hand, checked the imagination on the same grounds that they rejected images of God. Such images they considered a dishonour to God, who was beyond imagining. Yet, despite these differences between Puritan piety and the mysticism as we have come to know it in the centuries leading up to the Reformation, it cannot be denied that Puritan piety essentially developed into a movement towards immediacy in communion with God, and it would indeed be strange if mysticism were to find no place in it.

## 10.2 ORTHODOXY AND DEVOTION ON THE CONTINENT

The spirituality engendered by the Puritan movement was not restricted to England. Apart from developments in the new world of North America, Europe and more specifically, the Netherlands underwent the influence of pietist

Puritanism in a memorable way. The result was that the churches planted in the Dutch colonies became the inheritors of a spirituality informed by Puritanism.

The situation in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century was quite remarkable. England was torn by internal strife and civil war. The situation in central Europe was even worse. Devastated by the Thirty Year's War the German population suffered staggering losses through battle, disease and deprivation. Even whole villages disappeared. By contrast the people of the Low Countries, having overthrown Spanish domination, lived in peace and prosperity. Soon the Netherlands developed into the intellectual centre of the Western world.

In this period the northern provinces became overwhelmingly Calvinist as a result of the migration of Calvinists to the north, while Catholics moved to the south, where they succeeded in welding together the political unity, which is now Belgium. The result of this development was that the Reformed sections of central Europe looked to the Netherlands for intellectual and theological leadership.

The heavy scholasticism of Reformed Orthodoxy became dominant in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. As we saw in the previous chapter, the threat of Arminianism had been warded off at the Synod of Dordt. It is possible to argue that the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the predestination which had been accepted at this Synod became the point of departure of the church's thinking about God. From this starting point the truth about God is set out in carefully reasoned propositions. Thus God became more and more the sovereign austere God of a rigid scholastic system of thought. The result could have been a complete spiritual and ethical sterility in reformed Holland with grave consequences for the life of the church in the seventeenth century. Reformed Pietism, as it manifested itself in English Puritanism with its emphasis on a direct experience of God, saw to it that this danger did not fully materialise.

It is of course a simplification to give only Puritanism the credit for this. The reason is more basic; we find it, paradoxically, in orthodox Reformed theology itself, a spirituality common to both Puritan England and Reformed Holland. As we have argued, the doctrine of predestination has an experiential side to it that is often overlooked. It is an inward doctrine in the sense that it gives the believer a religious assurance of an unshakeable decision of acceptance by God with the concomitant feeling of immediacy to God. The pietist emphasis on religious experience was therefore not alien to Reformed orthodox spirituality.

The dormant spirituality of religious experience in Reformed Holland received a strong impetus from the close relationship between Reformed theologians in Holland and Puritan England. This relationship has been well documented by historians. Not only did quite a large number of Puritans escaped to Holland

because of persecution in England, but there is also enough evidence of direct contact between the leaders of a pietist revival in Holland and Puritan theologians. Willem Teellinck (1579-1629), who is considered to be the father of the pietist movement in Holland, visited England on a regular basis, where he came under the influence of the puritan “Second Reformation”. Guilelmus Amesius (1576-1633), the most prominent theologian of the first generation of pietists in Holland, was born in Norfolk, England and studied under William Perkins at Christ’s College, Cambridge. Persecuted, he fled to Holland, where he eventually became professor in theology at the University of Franeker in 1622. Both Teellinck and Amesius introduced a new English Puritan phase in what was then called the “Nadere Reformatie” in Holland. During this phase it became quite popular to study “practical theology” in England. No wonder, because for theologians like Teellinck and Amesius theology simply meant a life of devotion.

The emphasis on the devotional side of theology was strengthened by the idea of the covenant.

As we have already pointed out, the covenant concept is not an innovation of English Puritanism, but had its origin on the Continent among some of the Reformed theologians in the Rhineland. It therefore speaks for itself that the covenant concept formed part of reformed theology practised in the Netherlands, but with an emphasis that differed from that of the Puritans. In line with the orthodox point of departure as it was taken up in the Canons of Dordt, God’s sovereignty overshadowed the covenantal idea, whereas in Puritanism the human side came more to the fore. This human side of the covenant harbours within itself a profound personalism in as much as God’s covenantal actions require not only a human response in more general terms, but also a very personal response. This personalism of a covenantal theology strengthened the mysticism inherent in the theology of predestination of the day.

The outstanding example in this regard was Johannes Koch (1603-1669), the already mentioned Coccejus. He developed a fully-fledged federal theology.

There are a few important aspects of the theology of Coccejus that deviated from the orthodox Calvinist approach of those theologians responsible for setting the tone at Dordt. He gives the idea of the covenant a novel turn in as much as he distinguishes various progressive stages in the history of the covenant, which culminated in the covenant’s fulfilment in Christ. Coccejus therefore favours a Christ-centred approach to the interpretation of the Bible, de-emphasizing the Old Testament and thereby departing from the orthodox view of theology as a logical system, developed on the basis of proof texts.

Coccejus did not follow the emphasis on God’s sovereignty and on the doctrine of predestination as was the case with his opponents, led by Voetius and Gomarus.

Because of this he became a controversial figure on the theological scene, but before serious actions could be taken against him, he died of the plague.

Despite the contentiousness of his theology, Coccejus was one of the theologians in seventeenth-century Holland who succeeded in giving theological expression to the more emotional type of spirituality that already had taken hold. The face of God of the covenant suddenly became less austere and the pietist ideal of an intimate, even mystical, relationship with Him, more and more an openly recognized spiritual reality in the religious life of reformed Holland.

The influence of pietist Puritanism was not restricted to the Low Countries but also extended to the Lutheran world of Germany. The impact on Lutheran theology, however, was less and did not succeed in having any real effect on the doctrinal concepts of Lutheran orthodoxy within which the doctrine of God functioned.

The person through whom Pietism was introduced to Lutheranism was Phillip Jakob Spener (1635-1705), a man whose name has been most often associated with Pietism. Biographers and historians of Lutheran Pietism have called him the “father of Pietism”, but his indebtedness to the spirituality of Puritanism is not often mentioned. The fact of the matter is that Spener grew up in an environment in which Puritan piety set the tone, that he travelled extensively in Reformed territories and that he attended services of the popular pietist preacher who dominated the Geneva scene, Jean de Labadie (1610-1674), originally a Jesuit priest who converted to the Reformed faith and who played a significant albeit controversial role in circles of the “Nadere Reformatie” in Holland. In his autobiography he confesses that his spiritual life was deeply influenced by Lewis Bayly’s *Practice of Piety* and his own *Pia Desideria* (*Pious Desires*) makes this fact abundantly clear.

Spener, however, considered himself a good Lutheran and revered the Lutheran tradition and considered the Lutheran symbols as the best possible expression of the Christian faith, a convenient summary of biblical truth which had the approbation of his church. His departure from orthodoxy was therefore not on the level of doctrine. Together with other early representatives of the pietistic movement within Lutheranism, he believed it was their task to add to the Lutheran reformation of doctrine a reformation of life. Spener’s most radically differed from orthodox theologians when he spoke about the necessity of a holy life. He believed uncompromisingly that sanctification is just as important as justification. The individual believer must respond to God’s grace and bend his will toward a life of holiness.

The influence of Spener and other pietist theologians never reached beyond the emphasis on a devotional life to any significant degree. The way in which orthodox Lutherans articulated their view of God remained intact and true to the

confessions. The accepted phrases of Lutheran teaching remained sacrosanct. The essence of the Christian faith came to be regarded as consisting in a series of rationally ordered propositions and faith to be the personal assent to these propositions.

The combination of orthodox faith and pietist spirituality as it manifested itself in Puritan England, Reformed Netherlands and Lutheran Germany brought to an end the final phase of the development of the orthodox idea of God in Protestantism. Substantially Pietism added very little to the doctrine of God in its narrow sense. It endeavoured to preserve the experiential and mystical element which was so obvious in Luther and Calvin. Nevertheless, this development was essential in providing orthodox Protestantism with the spiritual power to withstand the initial onslaught of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Orthodox Protestantism with its reintroduction of scholastic rationalism in Reformation theology would never have been able to withstand this assault on its own. Faith in a theological symbol or a doctrinal proposition is after all dead - even if it is a proposition about God.



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## THE MANY FACES OF GOD

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# The Many Faces of God

Jaap Durand

Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, theologians and philosophers have brought about profound changes in the discourse about God. The orthodox image of God developed in the previous seventeen centuries in Roman Catholicism as well as within Protestantism has come under great pressure, but it would be wrong to think that this image is no longer relevant and that only a few conservative Christians hold on to it. Many millions of Christians of all different denominations and persuasions live by it as part of a spiritual and doctrinal heritage that has developed over centuries, although with many false starts, corrections, variants and even contradictions. The historical, social and political context and other non-theological factors often played an important and sometimes even a decisive role in this process. It is no wonder that the route followed by the Church and the thinkers in her midst twisted and turned in such a way that one gets the impression God has many faces. Nevertheless the continuity in the orthodox idea of God is quite amazing.

The many faces of God tries to follow the story of this development from the very beginning when the Christian religion took root in the Greek world of the first century until it reached some form of maturity within Roman Catholicism during the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent which confirmed the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and in the Lutheran orthodoxy and the pietist Puritanism of reformed Protestantism towards the end of the seventeenth century.

Jaap Durand is a retired professor of Systematic Theology who taught at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. The author of a number of books on theology he is also the recipient of honorary doctorates from several universities.

