

THE REALITY OF GOD IN A GOD-FORGETTING AGE: TOWARDS A REVITALIZED VISION OF GOD FOR TODAY

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Introductory Comments

***Gottesgewissenheit*: God is not only dead,he is also, for that reason, forgotten.**

One can always count on German intellectuals to describe actual states of affairs in pithy, yet precise one-word summaries, especially where theology is concerned. Such is the case with Wolf Krötke's statement that, after the Nietzschean declaration of the death of God, we now live with the consequences of that characterization of Western thought in terms of our having forgotten God (*Gottesgewissenheit*) altogether.¹ Given the current context of Western politics, Christianity, the "pandemic" and secular culture in general, one could certainly say that this well describes the current *zeitgeist*. When Friedrich Nietzsche first uttered his *requiem aeternam deo*, he was not calling for the institution of a particular standpoint as an activist atheist, rather he was merely recognizing an impending state of affairs that the modern West was in the process of arriving at. Indeed, as he relates it in his parable of the "Madman," the realization of God's death was only just arriving and had not yet fully dawned on the hearts and minds of the cultured despisers of Christianity, that marked his own *zeitgeist*. The nineteenth century was an age just beginning to come to grips with living life without reference to God. In fact, as Nietzsche relates it, the Madman was thrown out of church after church for having gone in to them to announce the "death of God." In the end, after being thrown out yet again, he gets up, dusts himself off, and concludes that his age is not yet ready for the realization of that truth. But Nietzsche demurs, "What are these churches now but the tombs and sepulchres of a dead God?" What will we do, now that the earth has been severed from its sun, now that the "blood of the divine is on our knives," and the "stench of the divine putrefaction" is in our nostrils?²

¹ Wolf Krötke, "Gottesgewissenheit." In "Introduction," *Gottes Klarheiten: Eine Neuinterpretation Der Lehre Von Gottes 'eigenschaften'* (Berlin: Mohre-Siebeck, 2001).

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887), Walter Kaufmann, ed. (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), para. 125; 181-82. The story is recounted as follows: "Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not

What was most remarkable about Nietzsche's declaration was not that God was dead, but that we, Western rationalists that we had become, we had killed God! What is worse than killing God you may ask? It would be forgetting God altogether. It is in the forgetting of God that the full weight of Nietzsche's *requiem* finds its expression. It seems to me, when I consider how intellectually unreflective this age tends to be, that indeed, not only have we forgotten God, but we cannot even remember God. God has become a vague idea for most of us. Indeed, the invocation of God in our time is a risk that few are willing to venture in the public sphere for fear of trespassing on someone's sensitivities. Even when we might be emboldened to do so, we cannot quite remember who we, in the Christian West, thought God to be? Furthermore, when we do rediscover Christian theism, we find ourselves in great discomfort in affirming it, especially now given the onslaught of COVID-19 and its attendant sufferings. How, under the current conditions of God-forgetfulness, shall we invoke the name of God in any way that might offer some comfort and meaning to our lives?

The question of God at the turn of the twenty-first century: How should we speak of God?

The attempt to understand the nature and existence of God in the early twenty-first century was considerably complicated by the rise of a militant form of Islam, and its claim on the Abrahamic tradition. To secure a peaceful resolution in the midst of the clash of these monotheisms, Christian theologians and religious pluralists the world over rushed to affirm the singular nature of the monotheism shared by the respective Abrahamic traditions. That was despite a few discordant voices here and there trying to mark out what were actually quite clear distinctions between the monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It should be noted

night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. "How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us -- for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars -- *and yet they have done it themselves.*

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"

that the most discordant voices have been those of Muslim scholars (radical and moderate), who largely rejected the Judeo-Christian claims on the Abrahamic tradition, despite the fact that those claims predated Islam by multiple centuries.³ Subsequently a number of books were published detailing the “dangerous” nature of all such monotheistic claims and their implications for maintaining public security and peace.⁴ If the twentieth century was marked by the loss of influence of the Christian conception of God, due to the secularist institutionalizing of the conclusion of Nietzsche, then the early twenty-first century marked the decline of the influence of Judeo-Christian monotheism in the face of pluralistic attempts to address militant Islamic theology. What can we say about the status of speaking about the one God from a Judeo-Christian perspective in the contemporary context, marked as it is by the isolation of all these traditions, brought on by the COVID-19 situation.⁵

It could be said that the greatest challenge monotheistic traditions face today is not coming to an agreement on which tradition has the correct conception of God, but rather, how these traditions can affirm the relevance of the question of God at all. Churches, synagogues and mosques the world over have been shuttered, their relative flocks dispersed, and their collective theological voices largely muted. Part of the reason for this essay is to give some comfort, at least to Christians, that indeed we may still speak of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But it cannot come exclusively in the form of a reinstitutionalizing of what we in the West have called Christian “classical theism,” without some much needed corrections to its excesses.⁶ While classical theism must continue to have considerable relevance to the Christian way of naming and invoking God, in the light of our isolation from one another, the storied (or narrative) form of remembering God must now take prominence.⁷

³ See especially, Stephen Myongsu Kim, *Transcendence of God - a comparative study of the Old Testament and the Qur'an*, URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/28792>, 2009-10-29.

⁴ See especially, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why It Matters* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (NY: Atlantic Books, 2020).

⁵ This essay is not to be taken as a full response to the situation brought on by COVID-19 as it relates to the doctrine of God. My point here is that COVID-19 has raised the consciousness of the question of God and thus provides an opportune moment in which to bring that question to the forefront of Christian consciousness. It does not attempt a reinterpretation of Christian theism in the light of that situation directly. This is not a paper about COVID-19 and theology per se.

⁶ Of course, the possibility of an overcorrection, or a mistake in the opposite direction towards radical immanence has been part of the reason for the demise of God talk in the twentieth century. For an example of the tendency towards this overcorrection in Evangelical circles, see, John Cobb and Clark Pinnock, *Searching for an Adequate God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). In this dialogue with process theism Pinnock virtually surrenders the idea of transcendence since he thinks it renders an “inadequate and irrelevant” conception of God. (Forward)

⁷ As far as I am aware, the most substantial treatment of the doctrine of God that undertakes a thorough correction of “classical theism” while retaining its basic spirit is to be found in the corpus of Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2:1-2. It is, furthermore, the most extensive treatment of the doctrine of God in the modern era, (over 1600 pages), and to date its monumental contribution is still waiting to be realized among Christian theologians. We shall have some recourse to this in the third section of this essay. It is no exaggeration to say that it is the most important and comprehensive treatment of God since Thomas Aquinas and remains to be reckoned with. In Evangelical theology, other treatments

Remembering God as “the one who lives”; from a biblical-canonical context

In terms similar to the loss of the temple in ancient Judaism, wherein the Jewish people focused on the Torah, so too Christians must take refuge in the recounting of God’s dynamic action on behalf of his people and the promise that proceeds from the Gospel in the realization of this redemption.⁸ In short, and this is my fundamental thesis, Christian theism in the current age must seek to reassure the dispersed flock of *God’s living, dynamic reality* in such a way that God’s Being, perfections and nature are secured in a proper recounting of God’s actions, described in the biblical canon as a whole.⁹ In what follows we shall sketch this living-dynamic conception of God in the hopes of helping the Christian diaspora come to grips with God’s relevance in the current situation. If there is a summative phrase that represents this *dynamic theism* it would be “the Living God,” which, in the history of Christian classical theism and its subsequent deconstruction, has been lost sight of, and indeed could be one of the chief reasons for our God-forgetfulness.¹⁰ In fact, it can be demonstrated that in some ways, classical theism, with its emphasis on the inner life of God apart from his creation, both in terms of his being and perfections, can be faulted for this condition of late modernity. I shall make a brief case for this in what follows in Parts I and II. Our sketch of what I am calling ‘dynamic theism’ in Part III, can only be that, but it will set the tone for a further working out of a theology of God’s own life, as God gives Himself to creation for its redemption and sustainment. Under this living/dynamic/active conception of God we can see how properly, canonically, we can take comfort in proclaiming again God’s being and perfections.

Reaffirming God as the only possible theological foundation, in a “post-theist” age

Furthermore, I would argue that the grounds for such a renewal of theism are given as a possibility in the light of the late modern critique of the rational imperial project. To get there we need a brief description of how this *God-forgetfulness*

have since come to the fore that have been influenced by Barth such as Donald Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, in *Foundations in Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2 (Downers Grove Ill: IVP, 2000); see also Thomas Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (NY: Harper and Row, 1987).

⁸ It is well known in Jewish history that synagogue form of worship was centered around the Jewish Torah from its earliest inception as a way of maintaining the memory of Israel’s faith and the redemption wrought for her via the God of the Covenant.

⁹ In recent times biblical theologians, especially in the field of Old Testament Studies have urged Christians to rethink the emphasis on transcendence that emerged in Christian tradition in favour of a description of the being and attributes of God more directly informed by the dynamic, interpersonal and immanent God of the Old Testament as a corrective to classical theism’s excesses and over reliance on Greek modes of thought. See for example Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁰ The phrase, “the Living God,” while a rear designation for the Being of God in Christian history, is not without precedence. Irenaeus was perhaps the first to use the designation, though by no means the only one of the Fathers to do so, in the absence of the knowledge of the Irenaeus’ designation. In the eighteenth century it was Isaac Dorner that gave it prominence as a proper category for describing the action of God, from which we may derive his being and attributes.

became a spirit of the current age. Philosophers and theologians at the end of the twentieth century were beginning to become comfortable with what they termed as, the “post-theist” age, at the same time that the rational foundations of modern theological, philosophical and even scientific inquiry were beginning to show the signs of a failure of method in respect to its assumptions about how truth and the universe worked. The so-called “postmodern” critique of Enlightenment rationalism and the rational imperial self has brought a level of insecurity with respect to knowledge in general, such that new pathways have been opened to reconsider the possibility of speaking of God in a meaningful way. Time does not permit a full description of that critique of modernity here. However, in its wake, there has been a resurgence of interest in “metaphysical” methods for doing theology that are to be seen as having at least an equal voice in describing the foundations of the universe as we have come to know it.¹¹ The danger attendant with this “new metaphysics,” however, is that it fails to learn from the mistakes of the past in adopting certain ideas and philosophical conceptions that led to the loss of the sense of God’s presence in the world in the first place. Neither theology, nor the church, can be aided via a “new metaphysics,” that is really just a repristinating of the old metaphysics.¹² At the same time it cannot mean a further accommodation to the scientific idea of a closed universe, as with the nineteenth century after Immanuel Kant’s devastating critique of the old metaphysics. In our efforts to recast theism in a new light we would do well to briefly recount that history, and its subsequent cascading effects on the accommodation of Christian theism to a series of options that can only be described as “radically immanentist.” All of that was to the detriment of an affirmation of God’s transcendence.

I. The Status of the Question of God at the End of the Enlightenment

Classical theism before the Enlightenment

To begin, we need a basic definition of the “classical theism” that Kant and his followers critiqued.¹³ By “classical theism” we mean the largely medieval emphasis on

¹¹ The overarching term for this form of theism has come to be known as “Radical Orthodoxy.” Kant’s proscription against metaphysics has been overcome, they say, and the new physics as well as a new philosophical/physical understanding of causality has rendered Kant’s critique of metaphysical theism mute. While one should remain skeptical as to the complete success of this possibility for a new metaphysics, one cannot shake the feeling that, indeed, the God of the Christian faith, understood after the fashion of classical theism in some respects, is making a comeback.

¹² For a strident, and some would say fatal, critique of Radical Orthodoxy and all those who follow the “New Metaphysics” school, see Wayne Hankey ed. *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology Rhetoric and Truth* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017).

¹³ We cannot hope to be exhaustive here. We must paint in broad strokes without the convenience of documentation at every point. Suffice to say that Kant’s critique of the classical theism that, in his mind at least, emerges out of the Christian tradition from Medieval and Reformed scholasticism, can be found throughout the corpus of his works, but especially in his critical philosophy.

the Being of God as the highest possible expression of the name of God, defined as *ipsum esse subsistans*, or “Being itself.” The task of theology was to distinguish God’s Being from all other being in terms of his essence, existence and perfections/attributes. Following this pattern, especially after Thomas Aquinas, subsequent theologians stressed the transcendence of God in making this distinction, to the degree that God becomes unknowable, unthinkable and unspeakable.¹⁴ This approach to theism has often been termed “ontological,” given its preoccupation with the existence and essence of God’s inner life. There is much more to say but this should suffice as a basic definition for the purposes of this essay.¹⁵

The Enlightenment criticism of classical theism

Given the net negative return for the knowledge of God, since God is so ardently described in classical theism as beyond human experience or comparison, Immanuel Kant came to the conclusion on this basis that God was indeed unknowable, and thus the efforts to detail this metaphysically, in terms of his existence, Being and perfections were superfluous. Metaphysics as such was no longer possible, especially in the light of the discoveries of the empirical method.¹⁶ Since the knowledge of God was beyond human experience, God could not be

The best English editions of Kant’s works are as follows: P. Guyer and A. Wood, eds., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-). Its individual volumes are: H. Allison and P. Heath, eds., *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); K. Ameriks and S. Naragon, eds., *Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); E. Förster, ed., *Opus Postumum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); M. Gregor, ed., *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); P. Guyer and A. Wood, eds., 1998 *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); P. Guyer (ed.), *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P. Guyer, ed., *Notes and Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); P. Heath and J. Schneewind, eds., *Lectures on Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); A. Wood and G. di Giovanni, eds., *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ I have drawn this conclusion from the outstanding study of this trajectory of intellectual and theological history in Eberhard Jungel’s magnum opus, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundations of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Debate Between Theism and Atheism*, trans., D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), see esp. 49-67.

¹⁵ Other definitions exist as might be expected. This one has been informed by my own reading of Kant and theology in the Enlightenment, as well as post-Thomistic theology in the Middle Ages. See the following for a slightly different definition. Brian Leftow, *Classical theism. God, concepts of*, 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-K030-1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/god-concepts-of/v-1/sections/classical-theism>.

¹⁶ For an excellent summary of the consequences of British empiricism for the future of metaphysics, via David Hume, see Paul Studmann, *Empiricism and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Lexington Press, 2010). For the connection between David Hume’s empiricism and his having awakened Kant from his “dogmatic slumber,” see Abraham Anderson’s excellent analysis in, *Kant, Hume, and the Interruption of Dogmatic Slumber* (Oxford: University Press, 2020). Anderson writes: “I propose that Hume interrupted Kant’s “dogmatic slumber” by challenging, not the causal principle governing experience --the principle that every event has a cause-- but the causal principle extending beyond experience, which was supposed to be known by reason. This proposal allows us to understand why Kant presents ‘the objection of David Hume that first...interrupted my dogmatic slumber’, as an attack on metaphysics, since by metaphysics here Kant means a science of objects ‘beyond experience,’ that is, objects such as God” (Preface, ii).

known as a verifiable, analytic proposition of knowledge as such, rather only as a synthetic proposition *a priori*, that is on the basis of faith alone. Kant was trying to create a “space” for this faith that did not require of it a metaphysical defense, since none was possible. Following his devastating critique of the traditional arguments for the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, even in respect to the moral argument, at best he says, all we can do is raise “the question of God.” We cannot give it an answer, rationally, either in whole or in part, either in terms of non-personal or personal existence, and certainly not with perfections of that being.

Yes, to God but only under the conditions of radical immanence

Karl Barth once said that if the eighteenth century was the time in which humanity was coming to terms with its rational autonomy, scientific prowess and a positivistic outlook for a greater *humanum*, then the nineteenth century was the history of its coming to terms with human limitations in all these areas, especially reason.¹⁷ This was not just the case for the enlightened despiser of Christianity; these limitations, under the conditions of rational-scientific inquiry, were an all-absorbing concern for most Protestant theologians as well. After Kant, Christianity endeavoured to reconstruct a theism that followed the dictates of modern critical philosophy and scientific inquiry. Indeed, the two leading lights responding to the epistemological problem introduced by Kant were, on the side of philosophy, G. W. F. Hegel and, on the side of theology, F.D. E. Schleiermacher.¹⁸ Suffice to say that they endeavoured to explain God strictly within the confines of the human experience of the universe, without any appeal to that which might lie beyond it. If God exists, he must be explainable as a part of our experience of the universe, and not otherwise. Most often, this resulted in an interiorization of the being of God to humanity itself. In essence Barth was right to suggest that the reduction of Christianity after Kant amounted to its “anthropocentrization” and nothing more.¹⁹

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, (London, UK: SCM Press, 1972), 37f.

¹⁸ For Hegel see especially *The Phenomenology of Mind* (NY: Harper and Row, 1967); *The Philosophy of History* (NY: Dover Publications, 1956); *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (CA: University of California Press, 1988). For the principal works in which Schleiermacher attempts this accommodation, see his monumental, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and his magnum opus, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989). Obviously, we cannot herein go into great detail as to the structure and outcomes of Hegel’s philosophy and Schleiermacher’s theology and so we must be satisfied with giving a brief overall characterization of the effects of their thought here. However, it is certainly the overwhelming conclusion of the history of the thought of this era that these writers and their ideas, as described here, certainly led Christian theology in the direction of pantheism in subsequent generations, and that is more to the point of my essay.

¹⁹ For an excellent summary of Barth’s critique see *The Humanity of God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) and especially his identification of this problem with the theology of Schleiermacher. See his lectures on *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). See also his incisive essay on Schleiermacher in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 425-473.

Atheism, the death of God and the loss of transcendence

In truth, the atheistic nihilism instantiated in Nietzsche is perhaps the most honest position one could come to with respect to the relative theological achievements, or lack thereof, that are represented in both the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras. Again, citing Karl Barth's *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, it was indeed only "a few very short steps" from Kant, to Hegel, to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.²⁰ In fact, if one is truly honest about the eschatologically provisional nature of truth that attends Hegel's whole system, it was indeed a natural conclusion to come to when it failed to deliver that truth. At the end of the day, Hegel's absolute is Hegel's man and Hegel's man is Hegel's absolute. The same can be said for all of the philosophers and theologians of that era. Feuerbach was right when he criticized it all as "mere anthropology"; the projection of human wish fulfillment onto the plane of the divine.²¹ The consequence of such reductionist anthropocentrism was either radical immanence, or the death of God. These consequences set the twentieth century on a path towards consumptive secular atheism, the realization of which is now the contemporary reality of the modern West.

II. Theistic and Atheistic Models Emerging from the Post-Enlightenment Situation

Here I shall not go through all the options for theistic/atheistic description available since the nineteenth century but rather will characterize them under the larger categories that the variants often fall into. As noted above, given the Enlightenment critique of classical theism, Protestant-Liberal theology in the early modern period felt that it had the task of constructing a theism that would exclusively conform to our experience of the world. Various options emerged.

Spinoza, Hegel, Schleiermacher and the emergence of Pantheism

The earliest efforts at an alternative way to conceive of divinity suitable for a modern scientific world first come to prominence in the monistic/pantheistic philosophy of the Jewish philosopher, Baruch/Benedictus Spinoza, in his, *Ethics* and his, "*Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*." Spinoza would be one of the first modern philosophers within the Judeo-Christian world to categorically reject the transcendence of God. For him pantheism meant "monism."²² Monism, or

²¹ See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (NY: Harper and Row, 1990). See also Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (NY: Norton and Co., 1961) for a similar critique.

²² Benedictus Spinoza, *Spinoza Opera*, Carl Gebhardt, ed., 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925, 1972 [Vol. 5, 1987]); *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, *Tractatus Politicus*, and *Premiers écrits* (Presses Universitaires de France); *The Collected Writings of Spinoza*, 2 vols., trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Vol. 1: 1985; Vol. 2: 2016); *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley., 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001).

absolute “oneness” was an adaptation of Neoplatonic philosophy in which all things were explainable via the one and the one was only understandable in the light of all things. That is to say, the only possible explanation of the universe must confine itself to that universe and not to anything beyond it. Thus, the rejection of transcendence was because it was seen as an intrusion into the development of “universal reason.” While initially his ideas received scant treatment in the emerging idealist philosophical tradition of Western Europe, Spinoza soon became an authoritative source for subsequent philosophers equally interested in securing a theism that made sense in the light of the new rational and scientific discoveries.

Not the least of these included such luminaries as I. Kant, G. W. Leibniz, and G. W. F. Hegel. This would come to be one of the leading ideas in Hegel’s monumental system, in which universal reason becomes the unfolding of self-consciousness as Absolute Spirit, his most common designation for the “coming to be” of God.²³ Spinoza’s philosophy marks its end point in Hegel’s “absolute idealism.” However, it had no less representation in the monumental theological work of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who is perhaps singularly responsible for transporting this pantheism into the discipline of theology, in a way that would mark its subsequent development for generations to come. In fact, in many ways we are still doing theology after Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher reduced the knowledge of God to a “feeling of absolute dependence upon the divine,” the being and qualities of whom can now only be apprehended along the lines of this internal intuition.²⁴ This amounted to a radical internalizing of divinity, making it entirely subjective to feeling and in no way knowable as an external reality. Subsequent developments of theistic thought in the nineteenth century became almost completely beholden to this strain of pantheism. Here are a few of the most salient options that continue to have force as explanations of God.

The accommodation to pantheism in modern theology

Most theologians following in the wake of Spinoza, Schleiermacher and Hegel were uncomfortable with Hegel’s “absolute idealistic” pantheism so they sought to soften its tendency towards radical immanence and its denial of transcendence. They were also worried about the resulting tendency toward dialectical materialism in Hegel’s theological/religious reflections and sought to reclaim something of the classical theist emphasis on the “spiritual” nature of God, as a principle that was necessarily in and with the existence and process of the universe. Thus, these theologians often spoke of God as the “force” that holds the universe together.

²³ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (NY: McMillan Press, 1976); *Philosophy of History* (NY: Dover Pub., 1956); P. C. Hodgson, ed., *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (CA: University of California Press, 1988).

²⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher’s, R. Crouter, (trans.), *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13f.

Among these theologians we may place the likes of J. Moltmann and W. Pannenberg, two of the most influential modern European theologians who continue to have significance in Protestant-Evangelical circles today. However, on closer inspection, such *panentheisms* (the idea that God is inseparably in-and-with the world and the world is intrinsically in-and-with God) are merely trying to render moot the charge that they are only another form of pantheism, which is always an attempt to explain the divine as inimical to our experience, and thus our intuitions about the universe. This theological idea, they say, is confirmed in scientific theories such as general and special relativity, quantum mechanics and astronomical physics. Whole movements have sprung up declaring the possibility of such a scientific confirmation of the existence of God on that basis. This, they say, is the basis upon which theology and science can dialogue with one another. For the most part, in the West at least, Christian theism as a legitimate claim to the knowledge of God's being and perfections follows either implicitly or explicitly these alternatives for a theism of radical immanence. If classical theism is no longer considered a viable option, and the approaches to an "immanentist" reading of theism are just an admission that we are alone and without God in the world, then the only other options involve some form of admission with respect to Nietzsche's *requiem*. Indeed, such options for a theologically conceived *a/theism* not only exist, but they have become popular, even in some Christian communities.

Alterity/radicality and the death of God in mid-twentieth century

In the mid 1960s and beyond, a form of the "death of God" theology emerged under the title of "alterity" or "radicality." The most able exponent of this form of "a/theism" was Thomas J. J. Altizer, especially in his, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. He was followed in these efforts by the likes of William Hamilton, and Bishop J. A. T. Robinson.²⁵ While the movement became popular in the English-speaking world, the foundations had already been laid for it in Germany through Luther's emphasis on a *theiologia crucis* and Hegel's determination that the atonement did actually involve the death of God. Subsequently, in the 1970s, a version of the death of God theology soon emerged at the hands of Jurgen Moltmann, in his famous book, *The Crucified God*.²⁶ While Moltmann was capitalizing on the death of God theology to emphasise the identity of God with our human suffering and even death, Altizer and company were working within the mainstream of Christianity in the West to help the church think through the meaning of the conclusion that "there is no God." Either way, God was absolutely

²⁵ Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966); William Hamilton *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (NY: Bobs Merrill, 1966); J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).

²⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

identified with human states of affairs. That is, as such, whatever remained of the “essence” of Christianity, it could only mark out for human experience the self-realization of alterity in its final form, namely as the consumptive self. Such were the main trajectories that the death of God theology followed near the close of the twentieth century, though there were other variations such as process theology and liberation theology.

A/Theism and the decentering of God and the self - Late twentieth century/loss of Self/History/Book

However, in its most representative form, the task of deconstructing classical theism in the light of the death of God was undertaken by a student of Altizer, namely Mark C. Taylor in his depressingly sublime work, *Erring: Towards a Postmodern A/Theology*.²⁷ This work stands as a monumental witness to what life is truly like in a world without God. Taylor takes his point of departure from Nietzsche. Now the consciousness of the *requiem Dei* is fully formed in the late modern human psyche, we can only, in theology at least, be engaged in the task of unfolding the consequences of the arrival of the consciousness of God’s death.²⁸ The fundamental argument of Taylor’s book is that, in the wake of the death of God, there is, subsequently in Western society, no possible affirmative ideology that can give meaning to our experience of life in the world. Since all previous ideologies, their self-informing power, their self-identifying narratives, and their self-grounding authorities, took the existence of God as their essential premise, now such efforts at self-grounding have been decentered, deconstructed, and emptied of their capacity to ground human self-understanding. Since Western societies had, by and large, defined human existence in the light of divine existence by means of a doctrine of the image of God, now, there is no image against the backdrop of which we may define our “selves.” This has led, naturally, to the loss of any sense of the self, since the basis upon which we constructed our “selves” no longer exists. The death of God involves the inevitable death of the self.²⁹ If the narrative-self was premised on a story about God’s establishment of the self, such narratives now bespeak the lie of the possibility of telling our story. We have no real history in which we can ground our relation to the story since history, too, was a construct of the divine essence, delivering to us God’s account of the providential care of creation. History understood after the fashion of a self-construction of God’s own self-confirmation, is equally at an end. God is dead, the self is lost, History is at an end and the Book is closed. There is now only the erring, meaningless, consumptive self.³⁰ This

²⁷ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Prelude, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19f.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34f.

wandering, “saunt-erring,” never grounded self can only eat drink and be merry for tomorrow it may die. If there is any meaning to such life it is only that it is “carnavalesque.”³¹ The consumptive self is such a self, because consumption seems to be the only half-hearted means of any self-meaning, worth and understanding. In the late modern period we live a life that is meaningless, a life that can only be given definition in the light of our birth and our inevitable death.³²

One would suppose that under the title of *a/theism* one might also characterize the option within modern secularism for old fashioned atheism, whether in the form of agnosticism or atheism outright. One would be right to include this category as a form of theistic thinking of sorts, for all atheisms need theism to form their most basic premises as counter proposals.³³ So much for the description of God-forgetfulness.³⁴ Let us now try to renew our memory of God in a fresh way, along the lines not of the death of God, but of the life of God.

III. A Modest Proposal for Biblical Theism in Classical Form

The inadequacy of late modern a/theistic models

This essay was written with the conviction that Western culture and Christianity is at a crossroads with respect to its formerly Christian foundations, and that it has been at that point since the Enlightenment. The future of that culture looks bleak from a human standpoint, and it does not bode well for the continuation of Christianity. There is also the conviction that the West is in the state it is in because, largely speaking, we live as practically as atheists, if not theoretically. *We*

³¹ Ibid., 149f.

³² Ibid., 168f.

³³ In the normal course of things, I would at this point conclude my basic descriptions of the forms of theisms on offer but in the process of researching this paper I stumbled upon what appears to be a new offering, or at least a new variant of radical immanence theology that might be another form of pantheism/panentheism. It is being referred to as “multiverse theism” because it is premised on the postulation, within astrophysics, of the possibility that multiple universes exist, the so-called multiverse theory. I only mention it here briefly as an illustration of the fact that, regardless of the advancement of our knowledge of the universe, the question of God not only persists, but intensifies. Regardless of whatever “satisfactory” explanation of the origins of the universe we may arrive at, and we have yet to, it would seem God will inevitably complicate our explanations. Leland R. Harper, *Multiverse Desm: Shifting Perspectives on God and the World* (NY: Lexington Books, 2020).

³⁴ To be sure, variations of atheistic thought outside the spectrum of the radical nihilism described above did arise and remain in force as a result of the demise of classical theism in the west. If time and space permitted, I would gladly render a concise description, in which I would characterise all such atheisms as attempts to explain reality on the basis of naturalistic thought, alone, championing as they so often do the sufficiency of such naturalistic, scientific explanations of reality. However, and here I cannot stop to demonstrate this at length, it seems to me that such atheisms, set pieces as they are to their secular underpinnings, are dying the death of that same secularism, which late modernity has been finding no more satisfactory than the classical theist explanation. We could run the gamut from the formal, philosophical atheism of Anthony Flew or a Kai Nielson, to the populist atheism of Christopher Hitchens, and find no deeper satisfaction in their accounts than we find in the more honest assessment of Nietzsche and Taylor. It seems to me that such attempts at explaining the non-existence of God are waning in terms of their influence. The late modern self, lost and bereft of meaning as it is, is still seeking a deeper meaning by-and-large, and secular atheistic theories have proven to be even less satisfying than medieval classical theism.

live as if God does not exist, as if he is dead and as if he is forgotten. That being the case, we are at a decision point with respect to attempting a “reinvocation” of God and God language in the current situation. It would seem also from the above analysis, that the attempts to retain a reference to the divine have not fared well under the “reductionist” positions of radical immanence, including pantheism, panentheism and the deconstructionist a/theism of alterity. If these are the only “theisms” Christianity is left with, it is better to be as honest as Nietzsche and admit that we are without God in the world, on the edge of a universe that takes no notice of the momentary form of consciousness called humanity, in its inexorable march into its unknown future determined by the physical laws that undergird it. However, it is also a fact that Christianity has nothing to lose by reinvoking a robust theism that reminds humanity of the personal nature of the God that Christianity proclaims.

Yet the seeming impossibility of returning to “classical theism,” as such

The late modern critique of the rational foundations of modern secular society does indeed offer space for this reformulation and proclamation of such a God. While this reformulation and proclamation may require a fresh invocation of the primary categories of classical theism, our intellectual journey since the Middle Ages has provided points of correction that can bring us into a greater appreciation for, and faith in a God who is not only transcendent but precisely in that transcendence, free to be with us, to identify with the human condition in the most intimate way, yet in such a way that the distinction between the creature and the creator provides the best possible solace for times such these. We cannot return uncritically to the strict classical theism, so metaphysically conceived by an Aquinas or of Reformed Scholasticism, as such. On the one hand, it does no service to either the church or humanity to reiterate a God so transcendent that we only increase the distance we feel from such a God in the late modern period. On the other hand, we cannot wish for a God so near to us that he turns out, in the end, only to be a magnified reflection of our own pale image.

A proper Christian theism will endeavour to seek the best possible balance between immanence and transcendence, in a theism that truly does relate a message of hope to a world that feels bereft of God. In fact, such a balance is available to us in the pages of the Bible. This is an account of God who is not only the all-powerful, inscrutable, unchanging creator of the universe, but also the God who in His righteous might possesses the freedom to be with us in love, indeed to condescend to us in the flesh of our humanity, such that the freedom to do so constitutes his freedom as very life, in and of itself. The image of God as “life-giving” is everywhere to be found in Scripture, yet one could count on a single hand the number of theologians who have made good advantage of it in offering a balance theism. Indeed, I have been able to identify only four who have made good use of that

declaration to that end, namely Johannes Dorner, Karl Barth, Thomas Oden and Donald Bloesch. A few of these best efforts will be exhibited in their influence on my thinking in what follows, which can only be a sketch of these gathered insights from theology and Scripture alike.

Towards a biblical correction of “classical theism” via “living/dynamic theism”

Donald Bloesch begins his discussion of what he calls dynamic theism as follows.

The living God of the Bible is not static being but act in being. He is not immobile but free to interact with his creation. God is in movement but not in development. He acts, but he does not become other than he is. One could perhaps say that God is the unity of potentiality and actuality in the dynamism of an unceasing becoming, but God remains eternal being even as he freely relates to himself and to his creatures.³⁵

This is a precise definition of the dynamic theism I am proposing. It avoids at once the setting up of a dualism, either within Nature or within the inner life of God, that predisposes theology towards a radical immanence or a *remoto dei* theism. He further elaborates that the Christian faith, properly understood from Scripture, has always sought to avoid such platonically driven polarities. Indeed “God’s own inner history is a history of action. He is not pure essence—unmoved and unmoving.”³⁶ Nor is he being “as” act, but rather “being in act.” Indeed, “God does not tower above the world of temporality and materiality in sublime detachment.” Instead, God lives in and with his creation, intimately, while at the same time bringing it to its consummation according to his divine purpose. However, Bloesch sees the danger in stressing this immanence, and astutely warns us that here we cannot go the way of Hegelian pantheism, which can only conceive of God strictly in terms of “divine action, revelation, creation, reconciliation, [and] redemption,” such that God becomes “a graven image as soon as he becomes identified with one single moment, made absolute, of this activity.”³⁷ God is God apart from his act of creation and redemption as well. Biblical theology maintains that “God even in himself is act as well as being, that his being is dynamic, not static.” Furthermore, God is eternally in relation before he acts in creation. “God’s being is in his action, even though we must not say that God is obliged to act in a particular way. God does not become a

³⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *God, the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

living God by going out of himself; his creation and redemption demonstrate that he is eternally, a living God.”³⁸ Together with Barth and Thomas Torrance, Bloesch affirms that,

God’s *energeia*, or Act, inheres in his Being, and means that God’s Being is in his Act and his Act is in his Being. He is not Being which also acts, but Being which acts precisely as Being, for his Being is intrinsically active, dynamic Being. Hence, there can be no thought of knowing God in his Being, stripped of his Act, behind the back of his Act, or apart from his active Reality as God, for there is no such god.³⁹

This would amount to the suggestion of a God beyond God. Bloesch goes on to suggest that, properly speaking, Christian theology does not only see God in terms of “life-force,” but that he is one who lives and acts. He is, as such, not merely identifiable with the force that holds the universe together. “God is a personal being who is ever active, a being who constantly intercedes and intervenes, a God who pursues fallen human beings into the darkness. God is not the world, and yet the world is included in his vision and exists under his direction and control.”⁴⁰ Here Bloesch is following Barth, whose treatment of this theme no doubt deeply influenced him.

Barth’s exposition of the Being of God under the category of “life” is without doubt the most significant correction of classical theism in the Western tradition, though he does not refer to it as “dynamic theism.” In this respect he is following the influential Protestant theologian of the nineteenth century, J. A. Dörner, in his *System of Christian Doctrine*, wherein Dörner states: “God is Living and may not be thought of as ‘mere being in repose’” or merely as idea or thought. He is rather “absolute life” and as such has the fullness of the potentiality and actuality of life in himself. “He bears within himself an inexhaustible spring, by virtue of which he is life eternally streaming forth, but also eternally streaming back into himself.” His life is not transient, nor exhausted in self-emptying in the process of his vitality, but rather “is a sea of self-revolving life; an infinite fullness of undulating force.”⁴¹ Dörner thinks this to be the most biblical designation as an essentialist description of God’s Being and in his notes he lists many scriptures that range from Gen. 16:1 through to 1 Cor. 15:45f. Therein God is understood to have life, not just in contrast to idols,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. Here Bloesch is citing Thomas Torrance, Barth’s erstwhile translator who shared a similar outlook but never did develop a doctrine of God along such lines. See his, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University of Virginia Press, 153).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ J. A. Dörner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1880), 259f.

but in the very essence of his being as such.⁴² However, as with Bloesch and Barth, Dorner is interested in preserving this designation from being read as a unity of creator and creation, insisting that “as absolute life he is absolutely exalted above passivity or diminution or transitoriness, as well as above increase; he has absolute sufficiency in Himself, for he has life in himself, essentially.”⁴³ Dorner makes the observation that the essence of God, understood along the lines of the principle of life, means all of the perfections of God are determined by this life and not vice versa. This is a significant distinction as we shall see below. But for Barth, this designation of God as life, while it does correct the excesses of the designation of God as *being itself*, did not go far enough in terms of that correction.

Barth on God as life

Barth begins his exposition of the being of God under the general concept of “the reality” of God, by which he means that God’s being can only be understood in terms of real act. The designation of this action, verbally as opposed to nominally, is the essence of the term “Living God” and it is in this way that “God is.” His basic statement is perhaps the most circumspect summary of the Being of God ever offered in modern theology. It reads as follows:

When we ask questions about God’s being, we cannot in fact leave the sphere of His action and working as it is revealed to us in His Word. God is who He is in His works. He is the same even in Himself, even before and after and over His works, and without them. They are bound to Him, but He is not bound to them. They are nothing without Him. But He is who He is without them. He is not, therefore, who He is *only* in His works. *Yet in Himself, He is not other than He is in His works. In the light of what He is in His works it is no longer an open question what He is in Himself. But in His works, He is Himself revealed as the One He is.*⁴⁴

That is to say, the Being of God cannot be apprehended or understood in absence from its connection to his works. God has his Being in act and thus they (his Being as works) can only be understood as identical to one another. God is who he is in his act and his act is who he is.

⁴² See for instance, Ezek. 1:1f; Rev. 4:1f where Ezekiel’s vision of God is given theological meaning in Rev. 4 as the essence of God in life giving power. We shall return to this passage in our final section of this paper to round our basic sketch of dynamic theism. See also: Gen 16:14; 24:62; 25:11; I Sam. 7:36; 2 Kings 19:4; Ps. 42:2; 84:2; Jer 10:10; 23:36; Matt. 22:32; Jn. 6:63-69; Acts 14:15; I Tim. 3:15; 4:10; 6:16; 2 Cor. 3:3; 4:16; Rom. 9:26; Heb. 10:31; Rev. 2:8; 7:2; 12:13.

⁴³ J. A. Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, Vol.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1880), 260.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God*, eds. & trans. Bromiley, and T. F. Torrance (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 2:260.

This means that we cannot discern the being of God in any other way than by looking where God Himself gives us Himself to be seen, and therefore by looking at His works, at this relation and attitude—in the confidence that in these, His works, we do not have to do with any others, but with ... His Being as God.⁴⁵

In this way we understand that God has his being not only as act, a designation that Aquinas uses to describe God as *Actus Purus*, but in act, which ties God much more essentially to his action, effectively unifying in an indivisible way, God's being and act. Throughout this section, Barth sees himself defending a more biblical, "orthodox" theism against the direction of post-Thomistic theism and Reformed scholasticism in terms of their tendency to reduce God to absolute simple Being, with an inclination towards a nominal but not an active existence. This was a Being who was abstract, and shorn of his direct personal relation to creation, via his action, (whether intended or not). Barth writes:

We stand here before the fundamental error which dominated the doctrine of God of the older theology and which influenced Protestant orthodoxy at almost every point. For the greater part this doctrine of God tended elsewhere than to God's act in His revelation, and for the greater part it also started elsewhere than from there.⁴⁶

This error made it impossible for theology not only to conceive of God as personally related to his creation in an essential way, it also prohibited a properly relational doctrine of the Trinity from emerging, as it prefers an immanent (God's unknowable inner life), understanding of the Trinity that proceeds out of a static, ontological account of God's Being.⁴⁷ Not only did this open up the doctrine of the Trinity to severe attack in the Enlightenment, it also led to an immobile account of God's being in which he was merely a "prisoner of his own glory." In Barth's mind, this was a preference for a philosophical account of God as opposed to the more active account of God's self-revelation in Scripture. For Barth, such a biblical account will entail the doctrine of the Trinity from the outset, since it is the substance of the self-designation that proceeds from the saving acts of God in Scripture. He writes:

In all the considerations that are brought before us ... we must keep vigorously aloof from this tradition, remembering that a Church

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

dogmatics derives from a doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore that there is no possibility of reckoning with the being of any other God, or with any other being of God, than that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as it is in God's revelation and in eternity. So then, as dogmatics describes and explains God as the One who is, it cannot make any free speculations about the nature of His being. Whatever may be the standpoints and ideas that are adduced, in this context it has always to win and explain their particular sense in the light of this revelation—the revelation of the being of the triune God in Scripture.⁴⁸

Following Barth here we must observe that the “reality of God” is demonstrated in the strict adherence to the inseparability of his being from his acting, and vice versa. God's self-revelation in his act of redemption is essential to his being as such and cannot be transcended, or in some idealist way separated from that essence. His act is inimical to his essence. This act is summarized and realized in history as the event of the Incarnation, towards which the Old Testament points and from which the New Testament proceeds. The birth, life ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father are the acts that at once open up and make it possible for theology to designate God's being in action. As such, God is, preeminently, the “Living God.”

The definition that we must use as a starting point is that God's being is *life*. Only the Living God is God. Only the voice of the Living God is God's voice. Only the work of the Living God is God's work; only the worship and fellowship of the Living God is God's worship and fellowship. So, too, only the knowledge of the Living God is knowledge of God.⁴⁹

Whereas in the history of theology from time to time, the designation “Living God” was often applied to him as a figure of speech, in scripture its application is decidedly not metaphorical, but no less “essential.” Everywhere in scripture the designation not only means a description of God's relationship to the world, but it is almost always a direct reference to “himself as he really is.” This is true of the description of God's own self in the phrase, “As I live,” or “As the Lord God lives” (Job 27:1-2), which is “the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 262.

significant formula for an oath in the Old Testament.”⁵⁰ Where such metaphors are used, they signify the essence of God as “living.” He is, for instance, “the living fountain” (Jer. 2:13; 17:13) or the “the fountain of life” (Ps. 36:9). According to John 5:26, “the Father has life in himself.” Consequentially, in Trinitarian terms, Christ is “the author of life” (Jn. 5:27; Acts 3:15) or very essence of “life” as a principle of self-existence (see also Jn. 14:6; Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4; 1 Jn. 1:2). Of course, we cannot pass over the fact that he is also “eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:20), and as such is “alive for evermore” (Rev. 1:18). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is also designated as life, according to John 6:63 and Romans 8:10. These texts, and many others could be added, were the reason the Holy Spirit was designated as “the Lord, the giver of Life” in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE. In the Old Testament, the distinguishing feature elevating the One God of Israel over all others is his, “having Life,” in contradistinction to the gods of the nations, who “have no life.” (Jer. 10:14; Acts 14:15).⁵¹ These brief citations are only a small sample of the many texts that elevate the principle of life to the status of an “essential” description of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A fuller exposition is not possible at this point, but the trajectory has been established as a serious descriptor of the divine being.

However, as do Bloesch and Dorner, Barth has a caution on this designation, one that reiterates the danger of identifying God with his creation. He writes:

God’s work in the creation and preservation of the world can also up to a point—but only up to a point—be described in this way. But the particularity of His working and therefore of His being as God is not exhausted by this dialectical transcendence which, however strictly it may be understood, must always be understood with equal strictness as immanence. On the contrary, without prejudice to and yet without dependence upon His relationship to what is event, act and life outside Himself, God is in Himself, nevertheless, free event, free act and free life.⁵²

Because he is this essentially, he can freely choose to be this from himself actively, but not by necessity, rather as an act of divine freedom.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 263.

⁵² Ibid.

If indeed it is the case that we understand God's relation to his creation along the lines of his redemptive acts, as witnessed to in scripture, then properly speaking, the precise way in which he relates to his creation cannot be seen only as metaphor, simile or anthropomorphism, for the sake of explaining his essential nature as absolute, immaterial Spirit. Such a hermeneutical recourse is an impulse in the direction of the Neoplatonic desire to protect the simple existence and essence of the "one" God, and as such is foreign to scripture. This was, says Barth, one of the fatal errors of the "older Orthodoxy" (Catholic theology after Aquinas), that led to an overemphasis on transcendence. Rather, "it is not a mere simile in Holy Scripture when God is described as wrath, mercy, patience, repentance, pleasure, pain, or the like, or as remembrance and forgetting, speech and silence, coming and going, presence and absence."⁵³ Indeed, in classical theism, when God's actions are described as such, it seemed to make it necessary to apply such hermeneutical categories as metaphor or anthropomorphism to render them harmless to the transcendent theism that is its deeper concern. There is a certain sense in which, "not only some but all human standpoints and concepts, even those used by Scripture, are 'anthropomorphisms.'" It is, then, quite arbitrary to describe these creaturely designations of God's Being or emotions in a special way as *attributa metaphorica*, "so that they have first to be divested of their full meaning to make the truth of God visible."⁵⁴ However, such methods applied in the older theology "are especially adapted to describe the special life and being of God," along Platonic and Aristotelian lines, with no interest in preserving their connection with the redeeming acts of God, as recorded in scripture, which is the essence of his self-revelation as life. In fact, what is described in these anthropomorphic/anthropopathic designations is "the saving contradictions of God" that are nevertheless inimical to his self-revelation,

which is more than a mere difference that can be removed dialectically [through the invocation of metaphor, anthropomorphism, anthropopathism]. ...It is the undialectical transcendence, the free achievement, the free act, the free life of the divine being. And it is not something that can be juggled away by a new idealistic interpretation if, at this point, we are really to speak of the being of the triune God in His revelation" as act, and not some Neoplatonic 'One.'⁵⁵

Much more could be said with respect to the being and essence of God described under the concept of life, but we must move on in the interest of a short

⁵³ Ibid., 265.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Here, Barth is citing the Catholic theologian, Polanus.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

biblical demonstration, of what we have said thus far. Before we do, however, it is necessary to comment briefly on what the designation “Living God” will mean for the description of his many perfections/attributes/qualities, or whatever term you prefer to use. I prefer to describe God’s Being as having many “perfections” because the idea of “perfection” can be more closely related to God’s “life” than the rather abstract word, “attributes.” While classical theism tended to submerge the perfections of God under an overwhelming preference for describing his essence as absolute simplicity, Barth and others saw this as a further abstraction in the direction of a description of God that was foreign to the Bible itself, a move that further indemnified theology toward an absolute transcendence.

How then should we think of the perfections of God as they relate to the concept of “the Living God”? On this front, multiple corrections to classical theism are needed, but time does not permit detailing them here. Rather, we shall note a few simple principles to keep in mind, as we turn briefly to Ezekiel 1:1f. and Revelation 4:1f. to illustrate how we may correct classical theism via a biblical reading of the designation, “the Living God.”

Barth’s most basic description of the Being of God, under the concept of the reality of God as the “living” one is that God is the one who “loves in freedom.” Therefore, all his perfections are those that flow out of this loving, active self-revelation. Thus, there is no knowledge of God apart from the knowledge of the perfections of his loving being and there is no knowledge of his perfections apart from his Being as free, loving act. The basic problem with the classical theist position, with respect to speaking of these perfections, was that for too long theology was caught up with resolving the Greek problem of the “one and the many.”⁵⁶ This was a problem stemming from the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides and his famous two ways of understanding reality.⁵⁷ This problem involved the subsequent philosophical tradition, following Plato, in an attempt to understand the basic unity of the universe by means of the contemplation of the world of multiplicity and change in which we live.

The resolution of this problem led ultimately to a conception of God as absolutely simple *idea* that defied all explanation, from the point of view of our participation in a world of multiplicity. Thus, when Christian theology began to speak of God’s many perfections, a problem arose with respect to the single essence of God. Classical theism was somewhat invested in maintaining the absolute simplicity developed in Platonic thought that had been adapted to Christian theology as an explanation of God’s simple,

⁵⁶ CD 2:1, 324.

⁵⁷ We no longer have access to it except via a few citations from the pre-Socratics, Aristotle and Plato’s commentary by the title, *Parmenides*.

essential oneness. In its attempt to protect this absolute simplicity, classical theists insisted that such perfections in the being of God were not to be read as eternal distinctions in his essence, but rather as accommodations of the self-revealing God to human understanding, such that while these distinctions help us in our knowledge of God, God himself does not need them since he is essentially one and these perfections participate in that single essence, absolutely.

Barth sees here, and rightly so, another attempt to smuggle in a foreign conception of God's being in the interest of maintaining the principle of transcendence. Against this Barth proposes that the Christian doctrine of God must allow that these perfections accrue to God's being as eternal distinctions from the divine point of view. Says Barth:

In this connection our primary affirmation must be that here too it is a question of nothing else but, of God Himself. But because we are thinking of God Himself, we are thinking of the One who at the same time, in confirmation and glorification of His oneness, is also many. We are careful not to say: 'all.' There is much which God is not. God is not creature. God is not sin. God is not death. But He is many, not merely something, not merely one. He is who He is and what He is in both unity and multiplicity. He is the One who is this many, and the many who are this One. The One is He who loves in freedom. The many are His perfections—the perfections of His life.⁵⁸

As such, these perfections are not to be explained away as mere accommodations to human finite mind in God's self-revelation. Citing Augustine's *De Trinitate* and Anselm's *Monologion*, Barth believes that these theologians would have nothing to do with such a reduction of God's perfections to his simple existence.⁵⁹

Once again, the solution for correcting this false tendency in classical theism is to think and speak of God's perfectionh not exclusively in the light of his absolute unity except that it points us to the biblical oneness that also allows for a manifoldness in God's being, that is, as a relation, a life in himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his redemptive act(s) in Scripture.

⁵⁸ CD 2:1, 325.

⁵⁹ Ibid. In point of fact, says Augustine, "With God, being is what being strong or being just or being wise is, and his substance would be of the signified, if one were to say anything of that simple multiplicity or multiple simplicity." Anselm follows suit writing; "For it belongs to God to be what he wills, and to will what he knows. Just as it is unlawful to think that the substance of the highest nature is something in comparison with which, not-itself were better, so it is necessary that it be whatever it is altogether, ...than not-itself. Thus, it is necessary that it be living, knowing, powerful and all-powerful, true, just, blessed, eternal and what is absolutely and in the same way better than not-itself."

To speak of God's attributes as we must and may do, ...means therefore to speak again and this time properly, in concrete definition, of His being. It is impossible to have knowledge of God Himself without having knowledge of a divine perfection, and it is impossible to have knowledge of a divine perfection without having knowledge of God Himself—knowledge of the Triune God who loves in freedom. For as the Triune God, both in regard to His revelation and to His being in himself, He exists in these perfections, and these perfections, again, exist in Him and only in Him as the One who, both in His revelation and in eternity, is the same.⁶⁰

As Barth sees it, Scripture clearly reveals a God in which multiplicity and unity are essential to His self-revelation, and the one cannot be abstracted or explained away in the light of the other, in the interest of preserving a Greek conception of single, simple, transcendent essence.

The unity which is to be predicated of God must with equal necessity, because it is in reference to God, signify the plurality. Every individual trait which is to be affirmed of God can signify only the one, but the one which is to be affirmed of Him must of necessity signify also every individual trait and the totality of all individual traits. Every distinction in God can be affirmed only in such a way as implies at the same time His unity and therefore the lack of essential discrepancy in what is distinguished. But again, it would not really be the unity of God if no distinctions were recognized and confessed. Our doctrine therefore means that every individual perfection in God is nothing but God Himself and therefore nothing but every other divine perfection. It means equally strictly on the other hand that God Himself is nothing other than each one of His perfections in its individuality, and that each individual perfection is identical with every other and with the fulness of them all."⁶¹

Therefore, God has his life eternally in the multiplicity of his perfections just as he has his life eternally in their unity. He knows himself, in all power, wisdom, love and justice as the one who is all and has all of these distinctions. In the Old Testament, his distinctions are never separated from the affirmation of his oneness; they are rather summative of who he is in His

⁶⁰ Ibid., 324.

⁶¹ Ibid., 333.

distinctions and oneness, as we can observe in many passages.⁶² This way of reading the divine perfections allows for a much greater degree of understanding for the *dynamic life that God is in himself*. It is no longer enslaved to a Platonic reading that has to diminish the multiplicity of such distinctions to an absolute transcendence of the One God. “God is the being of all beings, the law of all laws, and therefore the nature of every nature. In Himself, then, He is rich, multiple, individual and diverse. He does not need to become this by entering into relation with His creation.”⁶³ They are perfections in himself, not abstracted imperfections in humanity first. When we read them off the pages of Scripture, they should inform our conception of the “Living God” as such.

We have now enough of a theological basis in our presentation of a proposal for a more dynamic theism to illustrate briefly how this looks from a biblical standpoint. Here we do not need to be exhaustive, though it would be interesting to develop a full theological/exegetical treatment of dynamic theism at length, perhaps even a biblical theology of such. Here we simply need to confirm this connection between God’s essential Being and perfections in terms of the concept “Living God.” There are many places one could go, especially in the Old Testament, but I have chosen to alight briefly on Ezekiel’s vision of God contained in Ezekiel 1:1-28, which is confirmed as such a vision in the New Testament, in Revelation 4:1-11, following Ezekiel, in some cases, word for word. This vision of God illustrates well the free relationality and interplay of being and distinctions as conceived of in the life of Yahweh in the Old Testament. It is at once descriptive of a God who is not only all-powerful, sovereign and the sole source of the universe, but also of a God who is multi-dimensional, dynamic and engaged in his creation in an essential way, as an essential being.

A brief sketch of how we may reinvoké the God of the Bible; (Being, perfections)

There are two prominent visions of God in the Old Testament that come from prophetic literature and that are cited or alluded to in several passages of the New Testament. The most well-known of these is Isaiah 6: 1-13, a vision of God that

⁶² Ibid. Barth adduces the following to support his case here. They are worth repeating. *Totus ipse sibi et ipsi similis et aequalis est; totus quum sit sensus et totus spiritus et totus sensualitas et totus ennoia et totus ratio et totus auditus et totus oculus et totus lumen et totus fons omnium bonorum**. His whole self is alike and the same as itself, even though the whole is sense and the whole is spirit and the whole is sensuality and the whole is thought and the whole is reason and the whole is hearing and the whole is an eye and the whole is light and the whole is the fount of every good (Irenaeus, *Adv. o.h.* II, 13, 3). Καθ’ ὅλον γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῦ τῶν ὑψηλῶν τούτων ὀνομάτων διεζευγμένων τῶν ἄλλων ἀρετῆ κατὰ μόναν ἐστίν; Apart from its unity with all the others, no one of the divine perfections will be good and hence divine (Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 20).

⁶³ Ibid., 334.

at once reminds one of the theme of transcendence, but that does attend descriptions of God in other places within the Old Testament.⁶⁴ We also should be reminded here that this is not a case of reading the immanence of God over against the transcendence of God as they occur in the Old Testament. Rather, it is a task of seeing how, just as an aspect of his transcendence, God is free in himself to relate himself to creation in the most intimate way; thus, our appeal to the second prophetic vision in Ezekiel 1:1-28, which presents a much more richly textured interplay between a transcendent God and his creation. It is, to say the least, a complex passage and we cannot reproduce it here, so allow me to briefly render its basic content, keeping the context in mind as much as possible.

The text itself presents a picture of God that is abundant in movement and life and God is the sole-source of that life. The chapter has an *inclusio* that begins with vs. 1-3, wherein the vision(s) of God are announced, as the prophet shares in the experience of the exiles by the river Kaber. The summary of the *inclusio* comes in vs. 28 with the declaration of the foregoing vision as “the appearance of the likeness of the Glory of the Lord.” Everything that goes on in between is an elaboration of the vision of God as at once comparable and incomparable. At the center of this vision sits the four “living” creatures with the four faces which, according to Walter Eichrodt, represent the four corners of the earth, but are to be understood as the universe itself.⁶⁵ Sitting above them, and yet not to be identified with them, is the Sovereign Lord who is unlike any other. These beasts move to and from, throughout the world, at the behest of the one who sits enthroned above them (vs. 26). Along with the four creatures the prophet envisions four wheels, one within each another, again moving as commanded by the sovereign one and in concert with the four beasts, (vs. 15-21). The heavenly expanse, “sparkling like ice,” sits above the earth and within it sits the high and exalted one, “like that of a man, but from the waist up, ‘glowing’ as if like intensely heated “fiery” metal, with “brilliant light surrounding him,” as radiant as a “rainbow” (vs. 25-28).

⁶⁴ We also considered here an exposition of Isa. 40: 1-31 as an excellent example of the interplay between God’s transcendence and immanence, vis his being and perfections. One could also add Job 23-27, especially 27:1-23. See also, Isa. 55: 8-10; 2 Chron. 2:6; Jer. 23:24; I Ki. 2:6; 8:27; Ps. 97:9, and *passim*. There is no doubt in this author’s mind that much of the emphasis on the immanence of God in the Old Testament is to be read in the light of the equal and more substantial emphasis on his transcendence, but that one cannot be read in absence of the other. For an excellent treatment of the influence Judaism has had on both Christianity and Islam in this respect see Stephen Myongsu Kim, *Transcendence of God - a comparative study of the Old Testament and the Qur’an*, URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2263/28792>, 2009-10-29. See also E.M. Zuesse, *Transcendental experience in Judaism*, in Dowdy, E., ed., *Ways of transcendence: Insights from major religions and modern thought*, (Bedford Park: The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1982), 24-47. For a recent example of a biblical scholar who reads the Old Testament almost exclusively along “immanentist” lines see John Goldengay, *Old Testament Theology*, Vols. 1-3 (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2016). See also his *Biblical Theology, The God of the Christian Scriptures* (Downers Grove Ill: IVP Academic, 2016). In both works as a whole, Goldengay offers problematic interpretations that aim at reducing the sense for God’s transcendence in the Old Testament.

⁶⁵ Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel; A Commentary, OTL* (Philadelphia: Westminster-John Knox Press, 1970), 49.

The passage is suffused with the comprehensible, and yet incomprehensible, connections between the transcendent Lord and the creatures who share in the energy of motion and life that emanates from the enthroned one. Indeed, their designation as “living creatures” is no doubt a reference to the life that comes from, and shines throughout the four corners of the earth, in their vital connection with the divine one. The four creatures and their causation of life, and the motion of the wheels within wheels are superintended by a sovereign Lord who is their sole-source. Walter Eichrodt comments: “While they are related to the world, the world ruler has no dwelling within the world, but is enthroned in other-worldly glory *above* the dome of the heavens.”⁶⁶ As with Isaiah 6, the description of the enthroned Lord is muted, no doubt in respect for his lofty and inaccessible status. The reference to the “rainbow,” however, is certainly a reference to the covenant of God with the people of Israel (via Noah) and through which all the nations would be blessed.

The cumulative effect of all the details of the vision is clearly evident to the consciousness of the prophet. It serves him in point of fact, to raise him from his present state, and the oppressive feeling of being without any expedient, [brought on by means of his exile] by showing him the power hidden behind the curtain of earthly reality.⁶⁷

At this moment in Ezekiel’s life and in the life of Israel, the divine power is set to carry out his inconceivable activity “in the face of all opposition.” This power is itself symbolized by the fullness of life, movement, brilliance and “glory” that is represented in the sovereign one. This Lord comes forth in “inconceivable power” from an equally inconceivable place and displays himself to be not just the God of Israel, but the eternal Lord of the whole universe and all the nations. His high being “bursts all human measurements,” as Eichrodt says, and brings forth the promise of justice and redemption through the covenant.⁶⁸

This prophetic vision of God is confirmed in the New Testament as a somewhat embellished reiteration of this passage in Revelation 4: 1-11, where the basic meaning of the text, namely the life-giving rulership of the sovereign Lord, is affirmed and now elaborated as a direct vision from the throne room of heaven. The one sitting on the throne defies description in the same way as the one in Ezekiel, only now there are 24 elders joining the four beasts giving glory to “the Living God.” Here also, there is a reference to the vision of God in Isaiah 6, combined with the title, “Lord God Almighty,” since in the new aeon we may more directly name this

⁶⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

glory. All of creation gives glory to this one “who lives for ever and ever,” created all things, and is the source of their lives, their very “being.”

Both passages represent the dynamic actuality that flows from the sovereign Lord of Glory, yet both passages include the participation of creation, in and with the sovereign Lord, and both passages represent well the multiplicity and plenitude, yet the oneness and unity, of that glory. As points of departure for a description of the “Living God,” in all his splendor and perfections, I think we can agree that they would serve theology well. But, as with the vision of God in Isaiah 6, there are many other locations in which the canon can help us understand more concretely how the transcendent Lord is nevertheless, in an essential way, connected to his creation as the “Living God.” In the words of J. A. Dorner, commenting on Ezekiel’s vision:

“[A]ll this is mere fore-court of the divine sphere, -- the innermost circle is reserved for God as Living Spirit. --If we approach him from the side of the world, this heavenly fulness of life already appears to be the Godhead. ...As absolute life he is absolutely exalted above passivity, diminution, transitoriness or increase/decrease. He has absolute sufficiency in himself for he has life in himself.”⁶⁹

This being the case, we may derive his perfections in like manner. If he is absolute life, he is the power of absolute life, not merely potentially so, but actually so. We can call God almighty because he is not only the master of the universe, but also the power of his own self-existence. “If He is almighty by virtue of his omnipotence and without limitation of it, he can freely determine to condition his actions by those very same causalities he has created, upon whom he bestows the possibility of free determination.”⁷⁰ This is the way that scripture conceives of the perfections of God. God may be subject to space and time by an act of his will in his self-determination to be with his creature, but these are not thereby a demonstration of his confinement to that space and time; rather, they are a demonstration of his sovereign freedom to love it, even as he stoops down to it. God’s transcendence is demonstrated in his freedom to stoop down, and in doing so to be with us in our suffering. This is the God whom we need to remember today, the God who is life, and who loves in freedom. May his name live forever!

Conclusion

If Charles Taylor is right about the death of secularity in his magisterial book, *The Secular Age*, then Christianity may once again have the audacity to speak of God as a dynamic-living reality. To be sure, we cannot entertain the mistakes of the

⁶⁹ J. A. Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 1, 260.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

classical theism of the Middle Ages, in its stress on transcendence to such a degree that God is no longer relevant to the human situation. Indeed, as Barth never tires of saying, Christian theology, and therefore Christian theism, is always about balancing the counter-poles of the Divine-human relation. What is patently clear is the bankruptcy and utter futility of late modern **agnosticism, atheism** and **“God-forgetfulness,”** especially in the current age. If Christianity is to speak meaningfully of God today, then it needs to anchor our relative experience of the world in an “all-encompassing vision of God” as the one who lives. And if the question, where we may find the most direct access to this Living God is asked, one need only to point to His Incarnation. Indeed, Christology is the lynch pin of Christian theism, properly understood in its biblical mode. But that is another paper for another time. Suffice to say that, to know Jesus Christ is to know the Living God.

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