

The Living God

John de Gruchy

Being led into mystery ... is participating in something that transcends and ultimately overwhelms us as we struggle with matters of life and death, love and justice, faith and justice ... and in the process become more fully human.¹

Christian hope ... is not dependent on any inherent human capacity we may have, but on ... the cosmic mystery we name God disclosed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Christ as unfathomable love and infinite beauty.²

Our elder son, Steve, tragically died in a river accident on Sunday 21 February 2010. He was 48 years old and was, at the time of his death, a professor of theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In the weeks and months that followed, I sought the words to express my grief and, at the same time, developed a dogged unwillingness to surrender hope. I knew that the enemy of faith is not doubt, but an unwillingness to acknowledge doubt. I had also learnt over the years that hope is not wishful thinking or optimism, but a question posed by faith in a world that gives so much cause for despair and lament. Writing *Led into Mystery* was one of the ways I attempted to own my grief, to examine and express my faith and hope through an ongoing conversation with Steve, but it was also an experience of being led into this mystery. Much of the material that follows has its origin in *Led into Mystery*, but it also embodies further reflection on the issues as the months have passed, especially in the first essay, 'Owning Grief'.

1. Owning grief: a journey into mystery

To grieve is to be human. Owning grief is an intensely personal and often a lonely journey, but it can also be a communal experience in which one is embraced, and in which new relationships are formed and old ones deepened, not least with others who have also experienced the death of a

1 *Led into Mystery* 21.

2 *Ibid.* 214.

son or daughter. Children should not die before their parents die. But they often do, even in this day and age, at birth. Since Steve's death I have often thought of the many parents who daily grieve the death of their children in countless places where disease, war, terror and genocide have shattered their lives. Or the parents of those children who starve to death before their eyes on the barren landscape of perpetual drought. Or those dying painful deaths because drugs are unavailable to cure or soothe the pain. Or those who mourn the death of a loved one who committed suicide. The possible scenarios are endless. Each has to own their own grief. But I cannot begin to imagine how those do so who have no support, those who have lost all hope and those unable even to shed tears.

There are neurological explanations for the process of grieving. Traumatic experiences trigger off chemicals in the brain that enable us to cope. Tears are a biological reaction to pain as they are to ecstasy. This is part of being human and why repression of grieving and tears is unhealthy. We are preventing the brain from functioning normally. But grieving cannot simply be explained as the activity of molecules at work in the brain. Grieving is the activity of my 'self', or more meaningfully, my 'soul', understood not as a discrete ghost-like being located somewhere in my body, but in complex, dynamic and relational terms.³ This accords with the biblical view that human beings are constantly changing psychosomatic wholes in relation to God, the world and others. We grieve because relationships that give meaning to our lives come to an end as we have known them, even if they may continue in a new way and be restored in ways beyond understanding.

Grief accompanies us through life; it is part of the human condition. We grieve if we have hurt others, especially those we love. We shed tears when our children leave home, or when we move from a house of wonderful memories in which we have lived for years, or when we say goodbye to family and friends after holidays together, or when we say farewell to colleagues with whom we have worked over many years. George Eliot reminds us that 'in every parting there is an image of death'.⁴ For death is the defining moment of parting. Yet if we grieve in hope, we do not have to accept that our relationship with those who have died has ended.

The idea that the process of grief comes to an end, that there is some kind of final closure, is only partially true.⁵ Yes, there will come a time when the dead move beyond our horizon as our memory grows dim and

3 Ibid. 159–165.

4 Eliot 1985:70.

5 See Oliver 2013:11.

fails us, for grief is contingent on remembering.⁶ But we cannot disown our grief any more than we can get over loving someone we truly loved.⁷ If we truly own our grief, it becomes part of our journey in life, an expression of love that endures even though it changes character as we weave new futures and maybe enter new relationships. It is a journey into the mystery that lies at the heart of the universe to which we refer when we utter the word 'God', inadequate as it is to encompass all that it is meant to convey.

The early Christian fathers and mothers well knew that theology, like grief counselling, begins in silence, not in asking questions and demanding answers. Not the stony silence of hostility, or the silence experienced by those who are totally deaf, those unable to hear even the gentle song of a small bird at dawn. It is the silence that enables us to listen for the Word of grace. Grieving teaches us that listening in the silence to the heartbeat of those who weep, and discerning in their pain the heartbeat of the vulnerable God who grieves in solidarity with them and a world in need is the first step into the mystery of God embodied in human flesh.

2. Mystery hidden and disclosed

The word 'mystery' has multiple, layered meanings. But it is also, as Karl Rahner tells us, 'one of the most important key-words of Christianity and its theology'.⁸ Doing theology, he says, is being drawn back into mystery. But it is not a short-cut way of solving problems, nor should we take refuge in mystery too soon when faced with the challenges presented to faith by reason and science. Rather, it is to acknowledge that doing theology is more than intellectual enquiry; it is participating in something that ultimately overwhelms us as we struggle with matters of life and death, love and justice, faith and hope. But the journey into mystery is not one that takes us into the realm of the ethereal. It is neither other-worldly nor ahistorical; it is being encountered by and engaging reality differently as human beings in solidarity with all creation, with all living beings, with God.⁹

My sense of being led into mystery began in a new way the day I sat beside the river right where Steve had drowned and where his body still lay trapped. But from early on my brain chemistry began processing and interpreting my experience in a particular way, calling forth a theological response. At one level, my response was simply faith seeking answers, and therefore no different from what we normally do when thinking

6 See Vanauken 1977:231.

7 See Verhey 2011:342.

8 Rahner 1975:1000.

9 Kelly 1991:335.

theologically, whether in the seminar room or in parish ministry. Of course, to begin with there was no systematic attempt to answer the questions, no possibility that I could stand back and reflect on the painfully raw data of my experience. The best I could do was to let the questions come and go, neither repressing nor trying to answer them, but bracketing them, putting them into cold storage and holding them in abeyance for the time being. I had to allow the resources of faith to hold me together rather than trying to make sense of what had happened.

The same is true for others who grieve. Even though we sit in silent solidarity with them as we must, questions are already implicit, even if not expressed. Why does God permit such suffering? Is this God's will? What is the meaning of life if it all leads to this sad conclusion? Is there a God? Why did she die so young? Did my sin bring this about? And, behind all these inevitable questions, did God raise Jesus from the dead? Is there good reason to love God, or only reason to despair and fear God, even hate God, even hate the word 'God' and all that it has come to signify? These are all important questions that take us to the heart of theological enquiry, but the answers of conventional wisdom are inadequate, especially when pronounced with dogmatic certainty and uncritical biblical proof texting.

Of all the questions, the most perplexing into which we are inevitably led in our grief is that of the mystery of God's agency and the mystery of evil. Why does God seem so impotent in the face of human suffering? Is tragedy God's will? There are reasonable responses to the problem that carry some explanatory weight. If God is God, then surely somehow, somewhere, amidst such tragic events, God must be present even if hidden, otherwise, as Desmond Tutu has said, 'God is God's Worst Enemy'.¹⁰ But there is no 'solution' this side of eternity,¹¹ for the problem 'remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive', or at the very least, a mystery 'impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind'.¹² That is why any attempt to justify God's permitting of human suffering, must begin with the suffering of God in Christ as the revelation of the mystery of who God is.

It has become commonplace to speak of the crucified God, the suffering God, the God who stands in solidarity with all who mourn. But how is it possible for the almighty creator of heaven and earth to be vulnerable and suffer? Before rushing into glibly attempting to answer that question, we would do well to remember that the idea that God could

10 In the first Steve de Gruchy Memorial Lecture, held in the Rondebosch United Church, Cape Town, 24 April 2012.

11 Hick 1968:398.

12 Ibid. 371.

suffer was a major problem for ancient theologians. This is neither the time nor place to engage in that debate. But at the very least, we should pause on the threshold of this perplexing question, for we stand before what is undoubtedly at the heart of the mystery of God. This was part of the reason why the church fathers spoke of the mystery of the triune God.

The narrative of the Trinitarian God paradoxically affirms God's freedom and power, and God's kenotic love and compassion as distinct yet inseparable. God is neither subject to the passions of the ancient divinities, nor incapable of suffering with humanity.¹³ The shift from a divinity who is impassive to the incarnate mystery of the crucified God provides a penultimate clue as to why God so often seems silent as we previously noted. God's silence is not the silence of absence or apathy, but the silence of one who grieves totally because God loves absolutely. It is part of the mystery into which we are led, the mystery of the cross as the outpouring of love. 'For God loved the world so much that he gave his only son' (John 3:16). How could God not grieve? In his poem written in prison, 'Christians and heathens', Bonhoeffer writes about how we all turn to God in our time of need, and how God in turn comes to us. But in the middle verse he says this:

*People go to God when God's in need,
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness and death.
Christians go to God in his hour of grieving¹⁴*

The journey into the mystery of God's grief and therefore love is integral to the journey of the 'self' or 'soul' from brokenness into wholeness, the reintegration of body, mind and soul in Christ. In other words, the process of grief should not be understood as something distinct *from*, but rather distinct *within* the journey of both life and faith, of dying and rebirth, of death and resurrection. A long and sometimes painful journey lies along what is sometimes described as the 'way of unknowing'.

3. The way of unknowing

The way of 'unknowing' begins when it dawns on us that God is beyond our knowing, and therefore that the answers to ultimate questions are also beyond our grasp. To say that the answers are ultimately beyond our grasp

¹³ Hart 2003:166–167.

¹⁴ I have used an earlier translation of the last line, that from the 1971 enlarged edition of *LPP*, 349. In the new edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, it reads: 'Christians stand by God in God's own pain (Leiden)', 461.

is not the same as saying that there are no penultimate intimations that shed light on our path. Christian faith in the mystery of God revealed in Jesus is not irrational and blind. But it insists that reason cannot proceed without faith, and that faith needs reason to understand itself. Our enquiry into the questions of life and death in the penultimate and the insight that we are given now are connected to the ultimate, even though not yet final or complete. The meaning of life and death are inseparably connected; the meaning of death is discovered in the meaning of life. This is what eternal life as present reality is about.

There is a connection, then, between what reason illumined by faith enables us to discern now and the ultimate revelation of the mystery when we know even as we are known, for now '(w)e only know in part; but then we will know fully' (I Cor. 13:12). But it is only in the end that the mystery is revealed in its fullness, when we know even as we are known. But now, as we journey through life, the revelation of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ does not mean that everything we want to know is disclosed to us, but that everything we need to know for each step of the way is made known to us as we travel. That is why we can only be justified by the faith that we share with Abraham, who went out not knowing where he was going, but trusting in the God of promise and hope who grieves in solidarity with us.

The journey along the path of unknowing into this mystery is about lived theology, whether in ordinary time or on boundaries of human experience, and about being drawn painfully yet joyfully into the embrace of a love and beauty that is both disclosed yet always exceeding what we can fathom. Only this ultimate reality is worthy of the name 'God', and therefore of our worship, that which makes us 'pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe'.¹⁵ Only then, in contemplation and reflection, can we begin to discern honest answers to the questions that confront us through theological enquiry, but always knowing that those that trip off our tongues are inadequate, specious, and sometimes downright unhelpful and even hurtful. At best they can only be preliminary, penultimate. We know that, because our answers to the questions of others do not necessarily convince us when we suffer or grieve, so why would they convince anyone else who wants to know why God has forsaken them? It is only believers who can get angry with God and struggle with doubt. Atheists and agnostics who ask questions that imply God, meaning, purpose, are not true to their convictions and must surely be closet or would-be believers. But a genuine, lively faith in God does not answer all our questions; it makes them more complex, urgent and demanding.

15 Einstein 2002.

In owning my grief and counselling others, I soon discovered that asking questions led to more questions rather than watertight answers, and these became part of the quest, an opening up and a deepening of the mystery into which I was being led. Is this not Job's experience? In answer to his questions, God confronts him with even more, virtually assaulting his agonised consciousness with a torrent of demands: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... I will question you, and you shall declare to me' (Job 38:2–3).

Those of us who are theologically trained may think we know the answers until we shift from being Job's comforters to being Job himself, from sitting with others who grieve, to being those who grieve. Initially, we cannot even begin to answer the questions they are asking, not even for ourselves. We have to travel deeper into mystery with them as we listen to their anguished cries for answers and shed tears with them. And perhaps only when we have haltingly begun to own our own grief, uttered our own cries of desolation and shed our own tears do we really know that there are no easy answers. Somewhere deep within us we acknowledge that the profound and mysterious reality we have embraced in 'faith' was holding on to us. Christians refer to this as the mystery of God's grace disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, God remains an unfathomable mystery even when revealed, for what is revealed is what we need to know about God, not everything there is to be known, or that we would like to know. Jesus as the revelation of God is truly God but not the whole of God; in Jesus, God is at the same time hidden and revealed from the cradle to the cross.

Faith in God as an unfathomable mystery disclosed yet hidden in Christ implies a commitment to the journey into God as the one 'in whom we live, move and have our being'. This journey leads us more deeply into reality, not away from it, for whatever else the word 'God' may mean, it refers to ultimate reality. Such faith is therefore a commitment to love that has to be made every day within the realities of the world. It is not a certainty that we possess, but a certainty that comes to possess us, the mystery of grace that makes believing and loving possible in the first place.

The unending quest of science and the theological sense of being led along the path of unknowing into mystery are analogous and converge even though usually expressed differently. When Einstein says that the 'most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious', and that this is 'the source of all true art and all science', he is referring to that ultimate mystery which transcends art, science and theological enquiry itself. Being led into mystery requires openness to the possibility of such transcendence. When religion or science turn in on themselves, close the

door of the sanctuary or laboratory to mystery, lose their ability to wonder, their childlike capacity to trust, they become idolatrous, dehumanising, and destructive. 'The lack of mystery in our modern life,' wrote Bonhoeffer, 'means decay and impoverishment for us. A human life is of worth to the extent that it keeps respect for mystery'.¹⁶ To lose respect for mystery is to lose respect for life, for the creation, for the other, for God. It is to become cynical, nihilistic, incapable of hope, a washing of our hands from political responsibility and action. To respect mystery is to remain hopeful that what has been revealed will be fulfilled, even if in ways that take us by surprise, for that is the nature of mystery.

4. Grieving in hope

In *Led into Mystery*, I examine in some detail how I understand Christian hope, and how this connects to our life in the world and the struggle for justice and peace, and to the integrity of creation and the ultimate restoration of all things. Believing in the resurrection of Christ means that in the darkest times of personal tragedy or political violence, we affirm that God's purpose for the well-being of creation will not finally be thwarted. In exploring this hope, I also examine such notions as the immortality of the soul, the meaning of heaven and its connection with the earth, the resurrection of the body and political reality. This is not the place to repeat all that I say there, but what I say there provides the background for these final comments.

Paul's description of the whole creation groaning in labour pains waiting for the birth of a 'new creation', or a 'new heaven and a new earth' evokes in us an awareness that our grieving is cosmic in dimension. The whole cosmos, it would appear, is grieving its own degradation at the hands of humanity and, in doing so, recognises that its future well-being is bound up with the hope of humanity's redemption (Romans 8:18–25). This hope is firmly planted on the earth yet is cosmic in expectation, intensely personal but is at the same time interconnected 'in Christ'. Christian hope, in other words, is penultimately related to all our struggles for justice and peace in this world, and ultimately to the restoration of all things. It is only within this framework that we can make sense of the New Testament data and the personal confession of faith in the 'resurrection of the body and the life eternal'. The hope that is within us humans is profoundly related to the hope of creation as a whole.¹⁷

16 Bonhoeffer Letters and Papers from Prison 2007:360.

17 See Romans 8:18–25.

What happens to you or me, or anyone else after death, Bonhoeffer tells us, is not the central, framing question of the Bible.¹⁸ There are, he says, 'more important things than this question'.¹⁹ The Christian belief in the 'resurrection of the body' has to do with the continuity of identity in relationships within the context of a new creation, not with the resuscitation of our physical bodies of bone, flesh and blood in individual glory. John Polkinghorne, a physicist and a theologian, writes:

In natural terms, the pattern that is me, whatever form it actually takes, will be dissolved at my death, as my body decays and my relationships are reduced simply to the fading retention of memories by others. Yet it seems an entirely coherent belief that the everlastingly faithful God will hold that pattern perfectly preserved in the divine memory, and then embody it in the ultimate divine eschatological act of resurrection at the last day, as the new creation enters into the unfolding fullness of time.²⁰

If this is so, then 'God's remembering, recognizing, and relating to me' is, as Nancey Murphy says, 'essential to my post-resurrection identity'.²¹ But personal identity is meaningful only if it includes 'self-recognition, continuity of moral character, and personal relations, both with others and with God'.²² This is what the resurrection hope we have in Christ means for us.

The disclosure of God's mysterious purpose is the substance of Christian hope, as can be seen in passages where Paul speaks about the glory that is still to be revealed, and for which the whole creation 'waits with eager longing' (Romans 8:19). Likewise, to the Colossians, Paul writes about the 'riches of the glory of this mystery' revealed in the gospel, 'which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27). He also writes about our waiting in hope for the 'redemption of our bodies' which we do not yet see, and concludes with the rhetorical question: 'For who hopes for that which is seen?' What believers know is that what is not yet seen has already been disclosed in the gospel. But even then, it remains unfathomable mystery: 'For who knows the mind of the Lord?' asks Paul (Romans 11:34). His judgments are unsearchable and his ways inscrutable. There are things not revealed, things that remain hidden until the end. Yet the end has already been anticipated. The mystery still to be revealed will

18 See Wright 2011:197.

19 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 373.

20 Polkinghorne 2002:52.

21 Murphy 2002:213.

22 Ibid. 208.

not be contrary to that already disclosed in Christ; it will be the unveiling of that mystery in its entirety.

In prison, Bonhoeffer came to accept the fragmentary character of life and his impending death. He also discerned that 'that which is fragmentary may point to a higher fulfilment, which can no longer be achieved by human effort'. That was the only way he could think about the death of so many of his former students in the war.²³ In doing so, Bonhoeffer refers to Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation in a passage to which I have frequently returned since the death of Steve:

Nothing is lost; in Christ all things are taken up, preserved, albeit in transfigured form, transparent, clear, liberated from the torment of self-serving demands. Christ brings all this back, indeed, as God intended, without being distorted by sin. The doctrine originating in Ephesians 1:10 of the restoration of all things – re-capitulatio (Irenaeus) – is a magnificent and consummately consoling thought²⁴

In the end, Christian hope is the anticipation that the fragments of life, the fragments that we are as human beings, the fragments that we become in death, will be brought to completion as we are finally led into in the ultimate mystery of an unfathomable love that embraces us in life and death. That is our hope, a hope that does not repress grief, does not exclude tears, does not deny pain, but enables us to see beyond them and live in anticipation with the whole of creation of the magnificent work that God is yet to do. Hope is, after all, imagining something different to despair and death. If our belief in God means anything at all, it will transcend all expectation and open up a totally new dimension to our relationship with those we continue to remember and love within the memory and love of God. Only then will the mystery into which we are being led be fully and finally fulfilled. And only then, as John on Patmos perceived as he gazed into the mystery of God's future for us, will 'mourning and crying and pain be no more' (Rev. 22:4).

5. God as ultimate mystery

If theology ... is about our knowledge of God and ourselves, it is appropriate that I should end this collection of essays with some reflections on the subject. At the outset, let me say that our knowledge of God is not the outcome of reason, however important that is for understanding; it is a knowledge that derives from faith questioning itself. Faith is not blind;

23 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 301.

24 Ibid. 230.

it is always open to scrutiny, but it is not a mental exercise objectively pursued and scientifically verified. It is a life lived in commitment, not to a vague, nebulous idea, or a system of religion and philosophy, but to the claims made by the mystery we call 'God' within a particular mythos or narrative, a transcendent Word that gives meaning to life. But who is this God in whom we questioningly believe and therefore trust?

6. Imaging God

The *concept* 'God' has a history.²⁵ Of course, it is our *understanding* of God which evolves, not God, just as our understanding may also regress. This was in Nietzsche's mind when he castigated the *Christian* God as the 'God of all the dark corners and places, of all unhealthy quarters throughout the world', and went on to declare that 'it even represents the low-water mark of the descending development of the God type' because it came to represent the '*contradiction of life*, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!²⁶

The God revealed to Moses at the 'burning bush', as told in Exodus 3, is beyond human control or imagining. God is who God is, 'I am who I am' – YHWH. But even though image making, as the first commandment insists, is idolatrous, the Bible describes YHWH in a wealth of metaphors or verbal images which enable us to grasp imaginatively who God may be in relation to ourselves and the world in which we live. It cannot be otherwise if we are to speak of God.²⁷

The name of God is essentially a revelation of the character of God, a subject that has become a burning issue today. To put it starkly: is the Christian God the same God as Allah? Many Christians and Muslims would categorically answer in the negative. But this response is based on misunderstanding and ignorance, and it is dangerous.²⁸ According to the Abrahamic traditions, there can only be one God, and while there are undoubtedly different understandings of God within the Abrahamic family, these have more in common than the differences that distinguish them. What is more important than whether the God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is the same God is whether the God who is *actually* acknowledged, worshipped and obeyed is true or false. The God who is used to justify terrorism or crusades is an idol; the God who is merciful, compassionate, just, beautiful, and loving, according to the core convictions of the Abrahamic traditions, that is, the God Christians believe is also disclosed

25 Armstrong 1993; 2009.

26 See theses 17–18 of 'The Anti-Christ', Nietzsche 1968:128.

27 See McFague 1982.

28 Volf 2011.

in Jesus, is the true God. But can we ‘prove’ the existence of such a God, or is it only a figment of our imagination?

The arguments for and against the existence of God as traditionally understood are much the same today as they have been over the centuries. The argument *against* is that there is no empirical evidence for the existence of God, and all claims to the contrary can be falsified by reasoned argument. God is purely a figment of the imagination. The argument *for* begins, though certainly does not end, with the insistence that while the existence of God cannot be empirically verified, nor can it be disproved, and that generally the God who is disposed of in this way cannot possibly be God. But what does it mean to say ‘God exists’ if God is greater than can be imagined, as the much-debated ontological argument has it? How do we conceive of God if all our images are ultimately inadequate, starting most obviously with that of a big Man (or Woman) in the sky in whom believers can put their trust or whose existence atheists need to disprove? God is greater than our imagination and cannot be found either in the gaps still unplugged in our knowledge or in depictions of reality.

7. God of the gaps

Bonhoeffer recognised the futility of trying to find God in the ever-shrinking gaps in human knowledge.²⁹ Invariably, as science progresses, the gaps in our knowledge shrink and God is banished from yet another sphere where he had previously been the sole answer to our questions. The problem for many people who believe in God is that the more science pushes back these frontiers, the more it seems to be transgressing the province of religion and theology. This explains in part the tension that has sometimes existed between theology, faith and religious institutions on the one hand, and science, reason and the secular academy on the other.³⁰ That tension remains, despite productive attempts to reduce it, as scientists and theologians seek some common ground on the boundaries that science explores, and the mystery that theologians seek to understand.³¹

Few contemporary Christians are likely to feel threatened by the notion that the earth is not the centre of the universe. But Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution radically challenged the notion of human

29 See the extended footnotes 5 and 6 in Bonhoeffer *Letters and Papers*, 405–406.

30 See Alister McGrath’s timely reminder in *Why God Won’t Go Away* 2011:81–84.

31 An excellent overview is John Russell & Kirk Wegter-McNelly, ‘Science’ 2004.

exceptionalism and therefore the belief that human beings are created 'in the image of God'. Despite the abundance of 'creationists' among Christians, most theologians today have integrated the proven insights of evolution into their anthropology.³² Teilhard de Chardin's groundbreaking *The Phenomenon of Man* set this process in motion and his work continues to inspire many, despite its flaws.³³ More recently, Wentzel van Huyssteen has helped us rethink embodied human uniqueness, traditionally understood as 'being in the image of God', within an evolutionary framework.³⁴ Attributing everything to genetic development is no longer beyond dispute. There is a hierarchy of complexity that embraces the whole of cosmic reality of which human beings are part, and this demands more complex answers than any one discipline can offer.

Theologians should approach this ever-changing world of physics, microbiology and neuroscience with due wonder, humility and care, acknowledging the amazing revolutions that are taking place in our understanding of time and space, of the world in which we live and the universe(s) beyond, and of our own bodies. We can also discern fresh possibilities for retrieving Christian faith, but only if we recognise that the terrain keeps on changing. Building theology on the rapidly shifting sands of scientific discovery is not a good idea, but neither is burying one's head. The jettisoning of inadequate theories along with questionable theologies is part of being led deeper into mystery, for each discovery teaches us 'that reality far outstrips human imagination and guesswork'.³⁵ There are infinite mysteries in the universe awaiting exploration.

We are at a different historical point in the long debate between theology and science, made inevitable by the increasing awareness of the complexity of an expanding universe and possible parallel universes, and of our own brains. The future of the planet on which we live and of which we are an integral part is by no means certain, nor is the future of our own humanity and its evolving consciousness. Boundaries will be transgressed as science pursues its historic path, but mystery will undoubtedly deepen at the same time. How, then, are we to begin to understand this God who is beyond our definitions, yet relates to us and the world in which we now live in a meaningful and therefore liberating and redemptive way?

32 Ibid.

33 De Chardin 1959. See also De Chardin 1964.

34 Van Huyssteen 2006.

35 Eagleman 2011:195.

8. God beyond modernity

In *Being Human*, I said little about the *mystery* into which we are led as human beings on the journey of faith. I think it was probably because Christian humanism, as it emerged during the Renaissance, was imbued with the same emerging spirit of modernity. Erasmus typified the mood when he poured scorn on the religious superstitions of his day kept alive by the wiles of unscrupulous priests, and applauded, as he himself promoted, scholarship as a means of getting at the truth.³⁶ This led to suspicion about any recourse to mystery, for religious superstition could too easily be smuggled into the life of church and society under its umbrella. The reality of mystery was not denied, but the notion was prone to religious obfuscation and, as such, problematic for those who promoted a reasoned faith and responsible life in the world.

Modernity is characterised by a growing confidence in the power of reason to solve human problems and to shape the world through scientific endeavour. It challenges mystery but champions clarity, certainty and scientific progress. Theologically, it has found expression in liberal Protestant thought which prided itself on its reasoned, scientific approach to explaining the Christian faith to ‘modern man’. But modernity’s defining myth of inevitable progress was destroyed on the battle fields of France during the First World War, as was the confidence and credibility of liberal Protestant theology which, in Germany at least, had justified the war in the name of God. Barth, who led the charge, anticipated later postmodern developments in his critique of the power of reason to know God, and largely changed the face of twentieth-century theology in the process. An awareness of the awesome mystery of God, known only to faith, was recovered. This was the theology that attracted Bonhoeffer as a student in Berlin, despite the objections of his teachers who insisted that Barth’s ‘unscientific theology’ would destroy all the gains made in bringing Christianity into the modern era.³⁷

Postmodernism is the attempt to understand and critically evaluate modernity within this postmodern framework. It emphasises respect for difference, rejects meta-narratives and hierarchies, challenges patriarchy, anthropocentrism and destructive power relations along with global cultural and economic hegemonies, and is sceptical of dogmatic truth claims. Postmodernist thought helps us question and rethink modernity; it also prompts us to think afresh about how to speak of God beyond the straitjacket of modernity and its scepticism about mystery.³⁸ In doing so,

36 See e.g. Erasmus 1971:129–130.

37 Rumscheidt 1972.

38 Ward 1997:xxv.

it helps us to step beyond a pre-modern reading of Christian tradition that is incapable of transformation as it engages new knowledge. But however much postmodernism may break open theological enquiry and offer new possibilities, it is not without its own problems.

Huston Smith sums this up when he writes that whereas

*... the Modern Mind assumed that it knew more than its predecessors because the natural and historical sciences were flooding it with new knowledge about nature and history, the Post-Modern mind argues (paradoxically) that it knows more than others did because it has discovered how little the human mind can know*³⁹

Reason has again become aware of its limitations and the fact that there are different rationalities. This brings epistemology, or the theory of knowing, onto centre stage, for how then *can* we know God? It is not simply a theoretical question but one of enormous practical significance. How shall we live in a world that seems to be falling apart, given that the centre (faith in God), which seemed so secure in the past, no longer holds as it once apparently did?

In his prison correspondence, Bonhoeffer noted that the 'fundamental concepts of humanism ... in their finest form' predated the Renaissance.⁴⁰ This led him to consider again the importance of the high Middle Ages in providing insight for rethinking Christianity in the 'modern' world. He was not trying to find an escape route by returning to a pre-modern era.⁴¹ His was, rather, an attempt to recover a vision of the world and ourselves that was holistic rather than subject to the Cartesian dualism that underpinned modernity and led to the separation of faith and reason, theology and science, transcendence and immanence. For Bonhoeffer, the clue was found in the mystery of the Incarnation, for in Christ the reality of God and the reality of the world are disclosed at the same time.⁴² This was in continuity with his much earlier critique of the idealist epistemologies, which were so formative in his own thinking, but incapable of 'rendering the 'encounter with an other ... whether God, neighbour or enemy'.⁴³ They were unable to break through the ceiling of rationality, history or experience to the transcendent that held them to account and gave them significance.⁴⁴

39 Smith 2003: x-xi.

40 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 320.

41 Ibid. 478.

42 Bonhoeffer *Ethics* 1949:47-75.

43 Floyd 2008:119.

44 See Bonhoeffer *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible* 1996.

The need to relate to transcendence is at the heart of the resurgence of spirituality in our postmodern but largely secular age which feels trapped in the iron cage of both instrumental reason and historical fate. The notion that we humans are somehow called to control nature and ‘make history’, either in the name of God or modernity, to justify imperial and similar claims, is rightly seen as idolatrous. But secular neo-humanism continues to understand transcendence in a purely lateral way in terms of our fellow human ‘other’ rather than the ‘Other’ who encounters us as the ‘other’. What fundamentally separates contemporary Christian humanism from such neo-humanism is not its shared commitment to the ‘human project’ and the claims of the environment in which we live, but the basis on which that commitment is made, namely, the transcendent claims that keep it human and challenge the absolutising of the human under whatever banner.

Christian humanism insists that moral responsibility and action in the world is dependent on transcendent critique and empowerment from beyond, but not separate from human agency. In Schweiker’s words, human responsibility and flourishing ‘arise out of and are empowered by gratitude for the infusing of finite life with the *power to do good*, the moral capacity for goodness’.⁴⁵ Such gratitude and responsibility are indicators of the divine presence among us. This leads directly to the domain of mystery. For our understanding of God, disclosed in the mystery of the Incarnation as ‘truly human’, does not remove God from the world; on the contrary, it is in the world that God encounters us as ultimate mystery in ‘the other’, in the claims of creation, at the centre and on the boundaries of our existence. That is why our knowledge of God is inseparable from our knowledge both of ourselves and ‘the other’ through whom God encounters us as ‘infinite demand’, or in Tillich’s phrase, ‘ultimate concern’.⁴⁶

9. Ultimate mystery and concern

God remains unfathomable mystery even when revealed, for what is revealed is what we need to know about God, not everything there is to know. What we glimpse of God is never enough but always more than sufficient for us. Jesus as the revelation of God is truly God but not the whole of God. Rahner speaks of God as incomprehensible unless God in some way communicates with us.⁴⁷ To speak of God as ultimate mystery and therefore our ultimate concern, is making a faith claim.

45 Schweiker 2010:99.

46 Tillich 1953:14–16.

47 Rahner (note 81) 1002.

Bonhoeffer was adamant that it was foolish to try and ‘decode God’s mystery, pulling it down to the commonplace, miracle-less words of wisdom based on human experience and reason!’ The task of theology, he insisted, is ‘to comprehend, defend, and exalt the mystery of God, precisely as mystery’.⁴⁸ When we appeal to God as mystery, we always do so too late to convince those who do not believe.⁴⁹ This does not alter the fact that faith ‘knows God as the ultimate and authentic mystery of the world’, or that it ‘understands God as that which is most self-evident’.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most serious difficulty in speaking of God as ‘ultimate mystery’ is that it sounds remote and impersonal. But the ‘ultimate mystery’ we call God is not an object we study but a Subject, hence the many personal and relational metaphors used to speak about God. What makes it possible for us to respond to God is that as humans we are orientated towards mystery *as persons*. This implies God too is personal, otherwise a relationship whether in contemplation or action would not be meaningful.⁵¹ Faith in God as ultimate mystery, far from being an abstraction, implies a commitment to God as the ultimate concern in living our lives. This leads us deeper into reality, not away from it, into a relationship of trust that expresses itself in love of God and the ‘other’.⁵² Faith thus understood is therefore a commitment that has to be made every day within the realities of the world. It is not a certainty that we possess, but a certainty that comes to possess us, the mystery of grace that makes believing possible in the first place.

10. The reality of God and the world

As we have seen earlier, in prison, Bonhoeffer began to wrestle with the question of how to speak about religion to its enlightened and disenchanted sceptics. But he did not assume some kind of religious sensibility to which the gospel could appeal; he spoke of Christian faith in terms of living fully and responsibly in the world.⁵³ His was not the language of piety but of engagement, where the reality of God and the world are united in the crucified and risen Christ. It was there that God encounters us rather than in religious intuition and feeling, however significant they may be. In speaking of God, we should neither assume some religious *a priori* nor try to find God in the gaps of our knowledge not yet plugged by scientific

48 Bonhoeffer *Meditation on Christmas*, December 1939, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 15, 529.

49 Jüngel 1983:251.

50 *Ibid*, 246.

51 Rahner (note 81) 1003.

52 Critchley 2012:247–250.

53 See Wüstenberg 1998:112–145.

investigation, but rather seek God in what we do know.⁵⁴ This applies not only to ‘the relation between God and scientific knowledge’, but also to ‘the universal human questions about death, suffering and guilt’. ‘God’, Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘wants to be recognised in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action, and not only in sin.’⁵⁵

In this way, Bonhoeffer went to the heart of the scientific challenge to faith in God, namely God’s agency in the world – whether or not God could intervene in nature in ways that were traditionally understood as miraculous. Apart from traditional biblical theism which teaches that God is distinct from creation but actively engaged in history, several alternative positions have been adopted over the centuries. Chief among them are pantheism, the view that God can be identified with *all* things; deism, the belief that God, having set all things in motion, is no longer directly involved but lets the laws of nature and history run their course;⁵⁶ and panentheism, literally meaning that everything exists *in* God, even though God transcends everything. Panentheism is not unrelated to the Hellenistic view, noted positively by Paul in his sermon in Athens, that ‘we live, move and have our being in God’. But how does this relate to God’s agency in relation to human tragedy and suffering?

There are reasonable responses to the problem that carry explanatory weight. One is that God has given us freedom to make choices but that we do not always make good ones, and that these often result in suffering and even death, not just of ourselves but also of others. Natural disasters are likewise explainable by reference to the nature of the earth and the solar system of which it is part. But even so, the problem of faith in God in the midst of human suffering remains, tempting us along with Job, to ‘curse God and die’.⁵⁷ If God is God then surely somehow, somewhere, amidst such tragic events, God must be present, even if hidden. Perhaps, as John Hick said, there is no ‘solution’ this side of eternity,⁵⁸ for the problem ‘remains unjust and inexplicable, haphazard and cruelly excessive’, or at the very least, a mystery ‘impenetrable to the rationalizing human mind’.⁵⁹ Even so, it may well be, as Hick suggests, that its irrationality and lack of ethical meaning ‘contribute to the character of the world as a place in which true human goodness can occur’.⁶⁰ However much genuine

54 Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 29, 1944, *Letters and Papers*: 405–406.

55 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 406.

56 *Ibid.* 475–478.

57 Job 2:9.

58 Hick (note 84) 398.

59 *Ibid.* 371.

60 *Ibid.* 371–372.

pleasure enriches life, it is in suffering that we are led into the depths of God's mystery, and through pain that new life is born. Any attempt to justify God's permitting of human suffering must surely begin with the suffering of Jesus on the cross as the revelation of the mystery of who God is. Our deepest knowledge comes, as the Psalmist discerned, 'out of the depths' of human experience.⁶¹

Keith Ward helps us go further when he writes about God having 'a universe-long intention to bring conscious beings into a community of freely chosen loving relationships' which shapes the laws of nature and the complex possibilities that emerge within it. So, in general 'God will exert the maximum influence for good compatible with the preservation of the relative autonomy of nature and its probabilistic laws, and with the freedom of finite agents'.⁶² In short, God 'is continuously, pre-eminently, but not all-powerfully, active in evolution, influencing events through persuasive love but not controlling them unilaterally'.⁶³ This may not be of much comfort to those who are suffering right now and are crying out for some answers to their plight from an apparently silent and hidden God, but it does relate well to what Bonhoeffer wrote for his secular co-conspirators shortly before he was arrested and imprisoned:

I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil. For that to happen, God needs human beings who let everything work out for the best. I believe that in every moment of distress God will give us as much strength to resist as we need. But it is not given to us in advance, lest we rely on ourselves and not on God alone. In such faith all fear of the future should be overcome.⁶⁴

It is not a question of whether God is omnipotent, but about the nature of God's power and how it is exercised. In the Creed, God's 'almightiness' is always placed in relation to God's parenting, which provides an analogical clue to the conundrum, for good parents know that their authority is contingent upon their love, not the reverse. Even so, with reference to God, as Tutu says: 'It is one of the abiding mysteries that there can be the oxymoron of a weak omnipotence.'⁶⁵ It is a strange power that we discern as we are led into the ultimate mystery we name 'God'.

Much contemporary theological discussion around these issues takes its cue from Bonhoeffer's growing conviction that we have to live

61 The opening words of Psalm 130.

62 Ward 2001:80.

63 Russell & Wegter-McNelly (note 104) 524.

64 Bonhoeffer (note 89).

65 Tutu 2012: xiii.

in the world *as if* God were not present. But this does not mean that God is not present. The issue is really about the mode of God's presence as the God whose mystery is revealed in the crucified Jesus as self-giving love, not unbridled power that overrides human freedom and responsibility. We continually stand before God, Bonhoeffer says, but before a God who 'would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God'.

*Christ does not help us by virtue of his omnipotence, but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! ... Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as Deus ex machina. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.*⁶⁶

To speak of God's impotence and pathos in this way is shocking to our normal sensibilities of divinity. But no more so than when Paul claims that Christ crucified is the power of God at work in human life and the world.⁶⁷ Such language rudely breaks open the door into the ultimate mystery we name 'God'; it also radically challenges the human will-to-power which inevitably leads to violence, including the violence of the cross through which the mystery of God's power and wisdom is revealed as unfathomable love.

11. The mystery that embraces us

The unending quest of science and the theological sense of being led into mystery are analogous and converge, but they are not the same. When Einstein says that the 'most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious', and that this is 'the source of all true art and all science', he is referring to that ultimate mystery which transcends art, science and theological enquiry itself. People of faith name that ultimate mystery 'God', and we use our theological and aesthetic imagination and the resources of tradition to construct images that give substance to what we mean. Being led into mystery is, however, more than a never-ending intellectual search – it is being drawn into the embrace of a love and beauty that is both disclosed yet always exceeding what we can fathom. Only this ultimate reality is worthy of the name 'God', and therefore of our worship, that which makes us 'pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe'.⁶⁸

66 Bonhoeffer (note 89) 479.

67 I Corinthians 1:23–25.

68 Einstein (note 88).

In Christian tradition, the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the mystery of faith in God; the most complex of all images constructed of God as ultimate mystery. But it is a doctrine burdened by language that is incomprehensible to most people, if not metaphysical gobbledygook easily derided. But the main point of the doctrine is not to try to decipher God, but to describe, in so far as words allow, the 'pattern of God's self-expression' in Jesus Christ and the Spirit, derived from the gospel narrative.⁶⁹ As such, it asserts both God's transcendent freedom *from the* world and God's immanent freedom *for its* well-being. Or, as Bonhoeffer declared, the 'doctrine of the Holy Trinity is nothing but humankind's feeble way of praising the mighty, impetuous love of God in which God glorifies himself and embraces the world in love'.⁷⁰

God's beauty is nothing less, then, than God's creative and redemptive, self-giving or kenotic love, which is described in the New Testament as *agapé*, which is another way of speaking of God as triune. All other terms used to describe God, such as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, transcendent and imminent, freedom and power, are qualified and determined by God as *agapé*. Such love is not sentimental but 'holy' because it is qualitatively different from, even if related to, other forms of love, whether erotic, filial or genuine self-love. It is not a love we can manipulate for our own ends, but the love which seeks the good of the other without denying the other freedom to spurn or accept it. It is also a love that seeks justice, especially for the oppressed, and at the same time judges those who perpetrate evil. This is the 'righteousness of God' revealed in Christ, but it is the righteousness of restorative, not retributive, justice.⁷¹

In the end, the only analogy that comes close to the sense of being led into the mystery of God's unfathomable love and beauty is that of falling in love. Genuinely falling in love is a long-term commitment, an ongoing and ever-deepening exploration of the mystery that binds lovers together in communion with each other and in embracing others. It is a relationship in which initial hesitation, even reluctance, and later apathy, even unfaithfulness, are transformed by the grace of forgiveness and the joy of companionship.

69 Lacugna 1991:225.

70 Bonhoeffer *London* 363.

71 See De Gruchy *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* 2002:44–78.

