Encountering the Divine Names: 
A Theological Pilgrimage

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Abstract: In Scripture, the Church encounters many texts that “name” God. In Genesis, He is encountered as The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After the Exodus from Egypt, The Song of the Sea names Him as a Divine Warrior. In Exodus 32, God says “I kill and I give life.” The Psalms praise Him as Creator, Judge, and God of Mercy. Isaiah boldly calls on God using many different names, among them are Father, Potter, Redeemer. In the New Testament, the many titles ascribed to Jesus Christ re-shape Biblical faith in a profound way. Reflection on the divine names continued in the Patristic era and among the theologians of the Middle Ages. In spite of all our efforts to name God, He remains an elusive presence. Yet the church is taught to keep on looking for Him in the severe beauty of the Cross, and in the face of the other.

Genesis: “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”

According to Genesis 4, 26, it was some time after Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, and after Cain murdered his brother and became a builder of cities, that human beings began to pray and “call upon the name of the LORD.” Why this renewed desire for God? According to Ephrem the Syrian, it was because Cain’s sword had become “blunted” with killing. Seth called on The LORD because he very much wanted a different kind of life, a life not marred by the shedding of blood.

Father Abraham, too, is remembered as a man of peace. But he was not always able to follow that path. In Genesis 14, 18-19 we find him returning from a fierce battle, a campaign undertaken to rescue his nephew Lot. Even though Abraham’s adversaries received the worst of it, he himself was shaken by the violence of

the fighting. Interrupting Abraham’s long journey home, Melchizedek, the old priestly king, began the process of restoring peace in Abraham’s heart by blessing him in the name of Elyon, “The Most High God.” Abraham did not hesitate to receive Melchizedek’s blessing. Still, there seems to be a subtle polemic at work in the exchange between them. Melchizedek seems to know about other divinities, only one of whom he recognizes as “Most High.” By contrast, Abraham’s oath is more specific: “I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth…” (Genesis 14, 21-24).

Perhaps in times past, Abraham had ample reason to fear for his life, but there is no need for him to be afraid any longer. Now God promises to be a “Shield” or magen to him (Genesis 15, 1). This God may also be addressed as shaphat, or “The Judge of all the earth.” This name on Abraham’s lips when he prays that Sodom, that wicked city, might be spared from destruction. Later in life, Abraham calls upon Him as El Olam, or “The Everlasting God” (Genesis 21, 33), and he encourages others to do so, as well. Why “Everlasting”? Perhaps because so many of the blessings that help make for a stable life, a life of covenanted faithfulness from one generation to the next, come together for Abraham in Beersheba – family, sheep, water, peaceable neighbours.

Since Isaac is a key figure in the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, we might expect that he would emerge as one of the most vivid characters in Scripture. As the narrative unfolds, however, Isaac’s role in Israel’s story is overshadowed

by Abraham, his pioneering father, and by Jacob after him, a son whose life is filled with more dramatic events. Significant events seem to go on around Isaac, without his direct involvement. Led by Abraham to the top of Mt. Moriah, Isaac does not fully comprehend what is going on with the wood and the knife. At age forty, Isaac is still without a wife, and Abraham must send his trusted servant, Eliezer, to find a suitable woman for him. Even when he is “full of years,” Isaac does not appear to have grown much in wisdom. He is easily outwitted by Jacob and Rebecca, who use trickery to gain the blessing that should have been Esau’s.

Still, a man of only middling virtues, accompanied by his deeply flawed family, too, may yet find purpose and strength in calling upon the name of the Lord. Isaac is shown to be a man who keeps to the ways of prayer. He continues to grow in the faith that Abraham handed down to him, teaching it to the next generation. In a vision granted to Isaac, The God of Promise says that He will not forsake him, nor his children (Genesis 26, 24). And indeed, in Genesis 31:142, we see Jacob confessing his faith in “The God of Abraham and The Fear of Isaac.”

In Genesis 49, after many years of grieving for a beloved son who was lost and presumed dead, Jacob is astonished to find himself reunited with Joseph in Egypt. With deep joy and gratitude, he calls down on Joseph a blessing in the name of Ra‘ah, the God who is a “Shepherd.” Jacob had been afraid that his sons, his “sheep,” were all going to be scattered, but God had been keeping watch over Jacob’s flock from the beginning (Genesis 48, 15). Even though Joseph’s

brothers had cruelly mistreated him, having meant it for evil, God was at work bringing good out of a broken situation, in order that many people might be kept alive in the years of the famine.\footnote{Carleen Mandolfo, "You Meant Evil Against Me": Dialogic Truth and the Character of Jacob in Joseph’s Story", \textit{Journal for the Study of the Old Testament} 28(4) (2004), 449-465. See also the interpretation offered by H. R. Niebuhr in \textit{The Responsible Self}, Westminster John Knox, Louisville 1999, 169.}

\textit{Moses and the Name of God}

In The Book of Exodus, it is Moses who is regarded as the pivotal figure with respect to learning and bearing witness to God’s name. Moses is given something not granted to the patriarchs: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name The Lord I did not make myself known to them” (Exodus 6, 3). However, this knowledge is not presented to Moses as pre-packaged “information.” When Moses asks whether he might hear and know the name of God, The Lord answers mysteriously: “I am who I am... This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to YOU.”\footnote{Roland de Vaux, “The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH” in \textit{Proclamation and Presence}: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies, Mercer University Press; Macon, 1983, 48-75. See also two essays by David Noel Freedman in \textit{Divine Commitment and Human Obligation}, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1997: “The Name of the God of Moses” pp. 82-87, and “Who Is Like Thee Among the Gods? The Religion of Early Israel”, 383-402.} With these words, God redirects Moses’ inquiry concerning the divine name. His name is not to be “handled” like other names, nor is it to be separated from the actions He is going to perform on behalf of His people: \footnote{Jonathan Magonet, “Names of God in Biblical Narrative” in Jon Davis, Graham Harvey and Wilfred Watson (eds), \textit{Words Remembered, Texts Renewed}: Festschrift for Prof. John F.A. Sawyer, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, 80-96. Clyde Lee Miller, “Maimonides and Aquinas on Naming God”, \textit{Journal of Jewish Studies} 28/1 (1977) 65-71.}

\begin{quote}
I have witnessed the affliction of my people in slavery...
Therefore I have come down to rescue them...
And I will lead them into a land flowing with milk and honey.
\end{quote}

(Exodus 3, 6-10)

Pharaoh, however, refuses to acknowledge the God of Moses. Like so many tyrants, Pharaoh prefers that the gods of his slaves remain anonymous. Nameless gods may be safely ignored, allowing the Egyptians to impose their own vision of social reality on those under their power.
After that, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let my people go, that they may celebrate a feast to me in the desert.” Pharaoh answered, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed his plea to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord; even if I did, I would not let Israel go (Exodus 5, 1-2).

According to Pharaoh, human life is defined by work, especially by the work that can be extracted by force from Egypt’s slaves. Moses, however, lives by a different vision, one grounded in his encounter with God. How different a story we would find in Scripture, had Pharaoh been wise enough to repent, had he too learned to call upon God’s name. But Pharaoh chose instead the way of oppression, believing his own arm to be stronger than the Arm of the Lord. Pharaoh’s hardened heart led to disaster for Egypt: “The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.” That is how Exodus 15 remembers and celebrates the mighty acts of The Divine Warrior.15

**Naming God in Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy 32 is especially rich in the metaphors and names it uses to speak of God.16

I will publish the name of the LORD... He is the Rock, a God of truth... is not he thy father that hath bought thee? ... As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young [so does the LORD care for his people]... the LORD shall judge his people... See now that I, even I, am he... I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal...

Throughout all Israel’s journeys and the many years it has spent wandering in the wilderness, God remains for them a Rock of stability and refuge. The other gods fail and are swept away in the flow of history; Israel itself is inconstant and


forsakes the covenant. Yet, the true God remains faithful. As father to Israel, God provides protection and sustenance. But images of motherhood are equally significant. God is like an eagle, who, after giving birth to her little ones, watches over her young in the nest, protecting them with her wings.

In the very same chapter, however, are images of destruction: “I kill and I make alive.” God gives sustaining food, but He is the One who sends famine, too. Thus are we instructed: these are not isomorphic images of a static divinity.17 No, their aim is to show that God is intimately involved in all of Israel’s historical experience. God was there in the beginning. In Israel’s days of vulnerability and rescue, God was there with them. And in the days that are to come, in triumph and disaster, God will continue to care for those who enter into covenant with Him. Yet this God will always be completely and utterly free. God cannot be manipulated by human beings, and He always escapes when we try to domesticate Him.

The Name of the Lord in the Psalms

Psalm 104 is a profound meditation on God as Creator. The first stanza declares that it was He who created the heavens and formed the boundaries of the universe (104, 1-3). In the second stanza (104, 5-9), He is Creator of the earth, the One who formed the land. Stanzas three and four portray Him as the One who gives rain and causes the earth to bear fruit. Out of this abundance, He feeds all the wild animals of the earth. Domestic animals, helpers in the labours of humankind, also depend on Him (104, 11-23). This same God is Lord of the sea and the creatures that live there, for He created them, too (104, 25-26). All these works of His are connected, integrated together in a meaningful unity, giving praise and glory to His name (104, 31-35).18

A somewhat different emphasis is found in Psalm 119, where God is encountered as “The Giver of the Law.” Perhaps a Kantian approach to law and faith tends to drive a wedge between divine commands and the inclinations of the human heart, so that obligation to God never runs any deeper than duty. But that is not the

17. Paul Ricoeur describes these many images as a “polyphony” in “Naming God”, Union Seminary Quarterly Review 34, no. 4 (Sum 1979) 215-227. Any attempts to reduce these many conflicting descriptions to univocity would be misguided, even dangerous.
attitude of Psalm 119. In this psalm, God’s Law is not burdensome, but gives life. In trusting obedience, the Psalmist makes an appeal to God: “Quicken me through Your Law.”¹⁹ The Law of God is sweeter than the taste of honey in one’s mouth (v. 103). If the path ahead is dark, God’s Law provides light for one’s feet (v. 105). The Torah gives delight, and rightly inspires joyful singing (v. 172).

Many Psalms also describe God as Judge. “For He is come to judge the earth; He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples in His faithfulness”, (Psalm 96, 13). The Lord will execute justice against the wicked, says Psalm 58. “My sin is ever before me,” says David, after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Consequently, “You are blameless when You judge” (Psalm 51, 3-4). The God who judges, however, is also willing to forgive, to show steadfast love, and to redeem the one who turns to Him in faith. What prayer explores the dimensions of God’s mercy more fully than Psalm 51?²⁰ Here David acknowledges his fault before God: “I have done that which is evil in Your sight” (v. 4). It is a very humbled king who then calls upon the Lord to “purify” or “cleanse” him (v. 7). He desires true wisdom, such as only God can give, for amendment of life (v. 6). David asks the Lord not merely for pardon, but for a renewed spirit with which to serve Him (v. 10). Still calling upon this merciful Lord, David seeks restoration (v. 12), not just for himself, but also for the common good: “Rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem” (v. 18).

Psalm 113 proclaims that there is none like The Lord. He is an incomparable God. He does not remain in lofty isolation upon His throne, but comes down in order to lift up the poor. Those who were sitting in ashes, He rescues, making them the equal of princes. Do the nations surrounding Israel worship other gods?

Those gods, unlike Yahweh, cannot redeem; they cannot rescue nor render assistance to those involved in an unequal struggle; they are unable to do justice; they are no rock; they do not hear when there is a call for help... they are unable to work miracles; they cannot effectively carry a nation, but have to be carried;

they are not creators, but have themselves been created; they neither command, nor decide, nor know the future...21

Those other so-called gods are nothing. Yahweh is Sovereign over all, says Psalm 113.

_The Prophets and the Names of God: Amos and Isaiah_

"Prepare to meet your God, O Israel: Him who formed the mountains, and created the wind, and declares to man his thoughts; Who made the dawn and the darkness, and strides upon the heights of the earth: The Lord, the God of hosts by name (Amos 4, 13).

As Amos sees it, Israel has forgotten that it has a covenant with “The Lord, the God of hosts.” The heads of the poor are being trampled in the dust. The land they need for subsistence fanning is being systematically confiscated by the wicked. There are powerful men who believe that God does not see what they are doing. Yet the God who judges continues to speak to human beings in their innermost consciences, and He surely does care about what is done in the marketplace, says Amos.22 This jealous God, who sends through Amos a message of judgment and justice, tolerates no rivals, no worship of idols. Moreover, any nation that claims it has gained a military victory or political advantage thanks to its own efforts is gravely mistaken. The God of Hosts – He is the One who brings about triumph or disaster in human history.

Amos had warned Israel of approaching disaster, and in 587 B.C.E. Jerusalem was invaded by the armies of Babylon. The city was destroyed and many of its people were dragged away into exile. Having believed steadfastly in Jerusalem’s inviolability, the exiles were utterly bewildered by these events. The scroll of Isaiah

the prophet works with the images of Father, Potter, and Redeemer, however, to announce a message of hope in the midst of despair. Isaiah found in Psalm 68 an image that fit their situation: God is the Father and protector of “widows and orphans,” (Psalm 68, 6). Father Abraham and the nation of Israel may have forgotten the exiles, says Isaiah 63, 16, but God will never forget them. He continues to be a Father to them. Yet, He is also a Potter and His “clay” is going to be shaped according to His own judgment, not that of the “pots” themselves (Isaiah 64, 7). Using a third image, Isaiah says that God is a “Redeemer,” a kinsman with whom Israel is in covenant, and He will “redeem” or “buy back” those who have been humiliated and forced into slavery.23

**Naming God in the Four Gospels**

Many Christological titles are applied to Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 1, 22-23, Jesus is known as “Immanuel, God with us.” At Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3, and again at The Transfiguration in chapter 17, a voice from heaven calls him “My beloved Son.” The Sermon on the Mount (chapter 5-7) shows Jesus as a revered Teacher. When the disciples in their boat, with their “little faith,” believe they are about to perish from the storm and winds, they call on him as “Lord” to save them.24 Hailed as “Son of David” by crowds in Jerusalem, Jesus is thought to be the expected one who will help the Jewish nation throw off the yoke of Roman oppression.25 Yet after Jesus is arrested, tried, and sentenced to die on a cross, “King of the Jews” is the title Pilate uses to mock him (Matthew 27).26 His followers forsake him, having forgotten that Jesus had often spoken of himself as a Suffering Servant, the one described in the scrolls of Isaiah (Matthew 12, 18-21).

Why this proliferation of names and titles for Jesus? If few of Jesus’ contemporaries understood him in a comprehensive way, Matthew’s own multivalent Christology is nevertheless the beneficiary of all those earlier attempts

to grasp the meaning of Jesus’ life and ministry. Any one of those efforts taken by itself provides only an incomplete picture of who Jesus is, yet none of them is to be dismissed. Taken together, the titles ascribed to Jesus in Matthew provide a marvelous witness to the truth of salvation. And Matthew has one other special advantage over that first generation of followers that helps him unify these various appellations: he is able to present all those Christological titles in the light of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

“Blasphemy” is the misuse of God’s name, a sign of disrespect for the Most High, and it plays a special role in Mark’s gospel. Mark’s account of the conflict between Jesus and the chief priests in Jerusalem turns on the question of whether Jesus’ claims about his relationship with God the Father are true. The teaching of Sanhedrin 7.5, that the “blasphemer” is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name itself, is found also in Josephus and the Community Rule of Qumran. Philo, however, seems to hold to a broader definition of blasphemy, one in which anyone claiming to be divine or to possess divine power would also be held guilty.

According to the broader definition favoured by Philo, the claims Jesus makes – “that he will be enthroned at the right hand of God and that he will come with the power on the clouds of heaven” – are a form of trespassing on the divine name. They imply divine status, equality with the Most High. Mark makes no attempt to deny that Jesus spoke in this fashion. In fact, it is one of Mark’s express purposes to confirm that Jesus did indeed utter the words the chief priests interpreted as blasphemy. Mark exploits the irony of this situation to make a theological point. That which is blasphemy from the point of view of the council is, from Mark’s perspective, normatively true: Mark knows that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.

According to Luke, what does the Holy Spirit do? John the Baptist is “filled” with The Holy Spirit, says Luke 1, 15. The Holy Spirit “revealed” to Simeon that he will not die before the Messiah comes (2, 26). At Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, The Holy Spirit “came down” and settled upon him in the form of a dove (3, 22). Then Jesus was “led” by the Spirit into the wilderness (4, 1). At the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry, The Holy Spirit is said to be “upon”

him. The Holy Spirit will also be “given” to the disciples by the Father in order to enable mission (11, 13). They should carefully count the cost, however, for the followers of Jesus can expect to be persecuted in court, and when that happens, the Holy Spirit will “teach” them the words they need to bear witness (12, 12).  

In Acts, The Holy Spirit is “poured out” on all flesh, just as the prophet Joel promised it would be (Acts 2, 17). Experienced as wind and fire, the Spirit enables those who have been separated by barriers of language and race to understand and embrace each other as brothers (2, 1-13). Stephen, who feeds the hungry, is recognized as a person “full of the Holy Spirit” (6, 5). Peter would not have reached out to Cornelius and the Gentiles with the message of the gospel, had his outlook not been transformed by The Holy Spirit (10, 47). The Holy Spirit creates fellowship (koinonia) among the disciples, and knits their hearts together in joy (13, 52).  

Much of John’s gospel is organized around the “I Am” statements made by Jesus.

I am the Bread of Life (John 6, 35)
I am the Light of the world (John 9, 5)
I am the Good Shepherd (John 10, 14)
I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11, 25)
I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14, 6)
I am Vine, you are the branches (John 15, 5)

Each of these statements can be read as an answer to the question posed in John 8, 25 by the people who heard Jesus teaching in the Temple: “Who are you?”


It is only natural that such “answers” would puzzle us, framed as they are in language so figurative. We may even suspect that the symbolic language of John’s gospel is meant to perplex us; designed to provoke us to prayerful meditation and to action. Pope John Paul II seems to have thought so when he preached a homily based on John 14, 6:

Dear brothers and sisters: let us ask Christ, “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, to teach us the path of peace and justice. Let us ask him to convince us that our common humanity requires solidarity among us, and love and respect for human life everywhere.31

Rather than simply lamenting that peace and justice are too often absent between individuals, groups, and nations, then, John Paul II’s reflection brings to our attention a deep connection between the mysterious resources of John’s gospel and the pressing needs of the world.

**From Gregory of Nyssa to Thomas Aquinas**

As Gregory of Nyssa sees it, God is in Himself the deepest of all mysteries, far beyond our words. However, out of love for humankind, He accommodates Himself to our limited understanding. Therefore, the names of God as we find them in scripture are given for the purpose of our instruction. God allows us to begin with names and images that are simple.

... the Holy Spirit, in delivering to us the Divine mysteries, conveys its instruction on those matters which transcend language by means of what is within our capacity, as it does also constantly elsewhere, when it portrays the Divinity in bodily terms, making mention, in speaking concerning God, of His eye, His eyelids, His ear, His fingers, His hand, His right hand, His arm, His feet, His shoes, and the like, – none of which things is apprehended to belong in its primary sense to the Divine Nature, – but turning its teaching to what we can easily perceive, it describes by terms well worn in human use, facts that are beyond every name, while by each of the terms employed concerning God we are led analogically to some more exalted conception. In this way, then, it employs the numerous forms of

generation to present to us, from the inspired teaching, the unspeakable existence of the Only-begotten, taking just so much from each as may be reverently admitted into our conceptions concerning God.\textsuperscript{32}

Growing in virtue is the key to the Christian life, according to Gregory, and the divine names play an indispensable role in this ascent.

We might imagine that as we are drawn closer to God, passing “from glory to glory,” we could jettison the names with which we began, or exchange them for higher ones. Gregory warns us, however, that even if we are entering into a journey of sorts among the divine names, not one of them may be discarded. Rather, each name grows deeper in meaning as we participate more and more in the divine life.

For truly He is at the same time a “door of encompassing” and a “house of defence” as David calls Him, and through Himself He receives them that enter, and in Himself He saves those who have come within, and again by Himself He leads them forth to the pasture of virtues, and becomes all things to them that are in the way of salvation, that so He may make Himself that which the needs of each demand, – both way, and guide, and “door of encompassing,” and “house of defence,” and “water of comfort” and “green pasture” which in the Gospel He calls “pasture”… He Who is above every name has for us many names, receiving them in accordance with the variety of His gracious dealings with us, being called the Light when He disperses the gloom of ignorance, and the Life when He grants the boon of immortality, and the Way when He guides us from error to the truth; so also He is termed a “tower of strength,” and a “city of encompassing,” and a fountain, and a rock, and a vine, and a physician, and resurrection, and all the like, with reference to us, imparting Himself under various aspects by virtue of His benefits to us-ward.\textsuperscript{33}

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As God’s goodness is inexhaustible, our journey toward Him is likewise without end, and Gregory does not see how this journey could begin or continue without the benefit of the divine names.

Indeed, that God has innumerable names is the claim of Dionysius the Areopagite. Among these names are Goodness, Wisdom, Justice, and Power. Only those names that signify evil, some kind of lack, loss, or imperfection should be ruled out as unfitting. Yet, says Dionysius, it would be more true to say that God’s name is beyond all naming. “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” (Judges 13, 18).34

When Augustine takes up the question of speaking properly about God, he too emphasizes the poverty of language. Words and signs (verba and signa) are never identical with the things (res) they point to, and in our human attempts to speak of God, this incommensurability becomes all the more vehement. “It is not easy, after all, to find any name that will really fit such transcendent majesty.)35

In spite of this difficulty, in De Trinitate (IV.2.4), Augustine finds a fruitful place to begin. Here he enthusiastically embraces the Johannine imagery of “Light.” The Word shines in our hearts, dispelling the darkness of sin and evil desires. In his Soliloquies, too, Augustine affirms that God is the Father of all intelligible light, and how could any creator not leave something of himself in that which he has created? Then, since we do have some experience of light, it follows that we also have some knowledge of God, through his effects in the created order.36

In Augustine’s estimation, however, “acknowledgement” of God counts for much more than knowledge about Him. God is pleased to accept the homage, the praise (laudare) offered to Him by human voices.37

37. De Doctrina Christiana 1.4.6.
God, above whom, outside whom, without whom, is nothing: God, beneath whom, in whom, with whom, is everything: who hast made man after Thine own image and likeness, which he who knows himself discovers: Hear, hear, hear mel My God, my master, my king, my father, my cause, my hope, my wealth, my honour, my home, my country, my salvation, my light, my life.\(^{38}\)

Thus when Augustine approaches God humbly in prayer, his praise often begin in an apophatic mode, but then he hastens to speak in more concrete images drawn from scripture.

Anselm’s Monologion has a special bearing on the question of the divine names. One of his primary concerns in sections 15-17 of the Monologion is that whatever we say about God should aim to show respect for His absolute simplicity and oneness. Anselm wants us to see that it is would be a mistake to say that God “possesses” justice or “has” goodness. If we were to think of Him in that way, we would be imagining God as a composite sort of being, made up of various parts. Good parts, yes, but parts” nonetheless. Instead, Anselm is eager to say that God is Supreme Life (summa vita), Supreme Justice (summa justitia), Supreme Wisdom (summa sapientia), Supreme Truth (summa veritas), Supreme Goodness (summa bonitas), Supreme Beauty (summa pulchritudo),\(^{39}\) following Anselm’s reasoning, it seems likely that we would find him puzzling over the implications of Psalm 48, 10: “Thy right hand is full of justice.” Meanwhile, would he not find Deuteronomy 32, 4 positively luminous? “For all His ways are justice.”

Albert the Great taught that the philosophers know of God by the fact that there is motion in the universe. St. Thomas re-worked the insight of his great teacher in his Summa Contra Gentiles, where the argument for an Unmoved Mover unfolds roughly as follows. Motion is evident to us through our senses. Everything that we see in motion has been moved by something else. Given any series of motions, if we take away the first motion, no other motion would be possible. From observing motion, we can surmise that an infinite regress of movers is probably impossible. So it is reasonable to imagine that there must have been, before any motion whatsoever could begin, an original and unmoved mover.\(^{40}\)

St. Thomas knows well, however, that in the scriptures of the Christian church, Adam and Eve are not befriended by a nameless, abstract “mover,” but by a God who walks with them in The Garden, where He also confronts them with certain inescapable questions: Where are you? Who told you ...? This God is a familiar, intimate Presence, who knows the secret sums and measures of each human heart. He is “named” in special way by the Eucharist, which itself has three names: (1) sacrifice, which recalls the death of Jesus on the cross; (2) communion, which underscores the unity of those gathered at the Lord’s Table; and (3) viaticum, because it keeps the faithful on the path that leads to Him.

The bread and wine of the Eucharist – fruit of the land, work of our hands – come to us as things that God has created. The language of perfection as discussed by Anselm, however – Supreme Wisdom, Supreme Goodness, Supreme Life – describes God in a more unmediated way. Taken together, these two modes of revelation point vector-like toward an apex that is beyond our sight. Yet we see enough to discern a direction for inquiry, for hopeful anticipation, even if God Himself remains beyond representation.

**Beauty and The Crucified One**

In “Letter 8,” Basil the Great sums up a venerable tradition in Christian thought: “From the beauty of created things, the nature of the creator is correspondingly inferred.” Psalm 104 draws on our feeling for natural beauty as a clue to God’s greatness. Augustine and Anselm, too, readily responded to many forms of God’s beauty. However, in the New Testament, the central event in which God is “named” is in the Cross of Christ. Given that the cross is a sign of rejection, betrayal, humiliation, and injustice, how can it be possible for the agony of the

41. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, question 91, article 1, “Whether God should be praised with the lips?” Also, *Summa Theologica* III, question 73, article 4, “Whether this sacrament is suitably called by various names?”


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Crucified One to be reconciled with the Christian tradition’s emphasis on the beauty of God?44

Hans Urs von Balthasar argues that it is our concept of beauty that needs to be interrogated, overturned, reframed. Kant’s account of the sublime, like so many others modern accounts, locates judgments about what is beautiful in subjective assessments made by each individual, in a person’s “sense of satisfaction.”45 Yet if we continue in this direction, we eventually reach either (1) a Freudian dead-end in which beauty is limited to an individual’s sexual desires, or (2) a barbaric struggle for advantage in which only “winners” are left standing, winners of the sort that are ubiquitous in today’s mass media. Instead, says Balthasar, a sense of God’s glory grounded in His self-revealing is the proper measure of beauty.46 If we begin to see the world in the way scripture teaches, then the beauty of the Cross of Christ outshines the world’s glittering images. Such a beauty can never be circumscribed by a calculus of pleasure versus pain. Philippians 2 and Matthew 25 would then hold the keys to the deepest truth about a Beautiful God. Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a Servant, and He is most likely to be found among the sick, the hungry, and the imprisoned. For the moment he dwells there without a name, beckoning to us: “Come and join me.”

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