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The Christian Faith

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Part One

KNOWING
GOD

The Presuppositions
of Theology

DISSONANT DRAMAS: PARADIGMS FOR KNOWING GOD AND THE WORLD

Any genuine field of knowledge (the older meaning of *scientia* or “science”) must have an object—in other words, a subject matter. Furthermore, that object must be knowable. Astronomy is a legitimate science because planets, stars, and other bodies in space actually exist and can be studied. *Theology* is “the study of God.” For reasons explored later in the chapter, the object shifted in the modern era (with notable exceptions) from God and his works to humanity and its morality, spirituality, and experience. *Science* came to refer narrowly to the empirical sciences, and religion could only be a legitimate discipline only to the extent that it was studied as a natural phenomenon of culture. As a consequence, theology has become largely a subdiscipline of psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, or history of religions, even in universities with a Christian past. As we will see, theologians themselves pioneered this turn to the self in the hope of making Christianity more relevant and acceptable in our world.

The opening claim of this systematic theology is that the triune God is the object of theology and that this God is knowable because he has revealed himself to us. To explore this claim, we will begin with the widest horizon. Although this is the most philosophical chapter in this volume, our discussion will draw on the content of the Christian faith itself in order to develop the basic presuppositions of our worldview. From this widest horizon, we will narrow our focus to the character of theology, revelation, and Scripture.

I. DISSONANT DRAMAS: THE NATURE OF REALITY

The widest horizon for theology—indeed for all of our knowledge—is the question of *ontology*: what is reality? Nothing is more central to our governing narratives than the God-world relation. In an important essay, existentialist philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) suggested that all of the varied schools and theories in philosophy of religion can be grouped under two contrasting paradigms: *overcoming estrangement* and *meeting a stranger*.¹ Adding a third, which I will call *the stranger we never meet*, I will define these paradigms and then defend a version of meeting a stranger that fits with the biblical drama.

A. PANTHEISM AND PANENTHEISM: OVERCOMING ESTRANGEMENT

The first grand narrative erases (or tends to erase) the infinite-qualitative distinction between God and creatures. Narrated in myriad myths across many cultures, this is the story of the ascent of the soul—that divine part of us, which has somehow become trapped in matter and history. Although it originates in dualism—a stark (even violent) opposition between finite and infinite, matter and spirit, time and eternity, humanity and God, the goal is to reestablish the unity of all reality. In some versions, only that which is infinite, spiritual, eternal, and divine is real, so all else perishes or is somehow elevated into the upper world. Nevertheless, the goal is to lose all particularity and diversity in the One, which is Being itself.

If one begins with a story of the cosmos in which the divine is somehow buried within us, a sacred spark or soul trapped in a body, space, and time, then the ultimate source of reality is not outside of us but inside. God does not *enter into* the times and spaces that he has created; rather, all of reality *emanates* from this divine principle of unity like rays from the sun.

In Platonism, for example, spiritual/intellectual entities possess more “being,” while aspects of reality that belong more to history and matter fall down the ladder in diminishing grades of being. To the “upper world” belong the eternal forms: unchanging, one, and real; the “lower world” consists of the realm of mere appearances: ever-changing, diverse, and shadowy in their existence. In the case of human beings, the mind or spirit is the immortal spark of divinity, while the emotions are slaves of the body and its bondage to the realm of mere appearances. We just need

1. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), 10. Tillich most frequently states this contrast in terms of the “ontological” versus the “cosmological” paradigms,

but since every worldview includes an ontology and cosmology, I prefer his synonyms—“overcoming estrangement” versus “meeting a stranger.”

to go deeper within to find the truth, overcoming our sense of estrangement from “being” by returning to the source of a single Light.²

In this perspective, if God is considered in personal terms at all, not just as a unifying principle (namely, The One, Ground of Being, Absolute Spirit, the Unity of All, etc.), he is certainly not viewed as someone other, standing over against the self, especially in judgment. In other words, divinity is domesticated, brought inside of the self, so that it can no longer threaten, judge, rule, or condemn. This type of deity does not offend, disrupt, command, or save; rather than a stranger, God, the gods, or the divine principle is the most immanent and personal aspect of one’s own existence.

Although the confusion of the Creator with creation characterizes paganism generally, it formed the horizon for Greek philosophy. In the second century, a movement arose within esoteric Jewish and Christian groups that tried to reinterpret the biblical narrative in a basically Greek philosophical framework. Known as *Gnosticism*, this heresy was decisively challenged by Irenaeus (AD 115–202), bishop of Lyons.³ In contrast to the biblical story of a good creation, the fall into sin through transgressing the covenant, and redemption through Christ’s incarnate life, death, and resurrection, the Gnostics sought redemption from an evil creation through inner enlightenment (*gnosis*). Plundering the Bible for its material, Gnostic sects offered a radical reinterpretation. The God of creation (Yahweh), represented in the Old Testament, becomes the evil deity who imprisons divine souls in bodies, while the serpent in the garden sought to liberate Adam and Eve through inner enlightenment. The God of redemption (Christ), revealed in the Gnostic “gospels,” is an avatar of sorts, leading initiates away from their bodily incarceration in history, toward their divine destiny.

While distancing himself from the Gnostics, Origen of Alexandria (AD 185–254) nevertheless tried to assimilate Christian doctrine to a fundamentally Platonist scheme. In this he was following Philo of Alexandria, who had developed a system of Jewish Platonism with great success a century earlier. Origen rejected the biblical doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation and downplayed the reality of Christ’s physical

2. It is not an overstatement to suggest that pantheism/panentheism has, since antiquity, represented the most dominant rival to biblical faith in both the East and the West, and continues to do so today. According to the Hindu Vedas and Upanishads, the Atman (soul/self) of individuals is one with divinity (Brahman). For all of their differences, it was the ontological horizon of Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Stoicism. This paradigm was taken over by Plato and continued in Middle Platonism (through the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria) and (with some revision) in Neoplatonism. The key difference is that “the One” of Plato, from which all reality emanates, is for Plotinus and other Neoplatonists not only pure

being but “beyond being” and therefore also beyond rational knowledge.

3. The study of Gnosticism has become a cottage industry today, especially with many scholars advocating a recovery of Gnostic emphases. The vast secondary literature has highlighted the diverse schools of this movement, although Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*) has stood the test of time as an account (and Christian refutation) of the various types. See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (3rd ed.; Boston: Beacon, 2001); Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and Structure of Gnosticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

embodiment in his incarnation, ascension, and return in the flesh. He also taught reincarnation and the final restoration of all spiritual entities, including Satan and the fallen angels. For these speculations, Origen was later judged heretical by the Christian East, but his Platonized version of Christianity remained powerful and long-lasting especially in monastic movements.

Within the history of Western Christianity there have been tendencies among some mystics to move in a pantheistic direction. An extreme example is the fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart, who wrote in a characteristic sermon, “To the inward-turned man all things have an inward divinity. . . . Nothing is so proper to the intellect, nor so present and near as God.”⁴ The connection between rationalism and mysticism is as old as Platonism itself. This outer-inner dualism has characterized much of radical mysticism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as in Sufi Islam and Jewish Kabbalism. This trajectory continued in radical Protestantism from the Anabaptists to the early Enlightenment. It is especially evident in the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza (1632-77), which was revived in German Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Its influence is evident in the dominant forms of theological liberalism and especially today in New Age and neopagan spiritualities.⁵

Even in its dualism (for example, between spirit and matter), the pantheistic worldview is ultimately monistic. In other words, all of reality is ultimately one. There is no distinction, finally, between God and the world. While bodies may be lower than souls on the ladder of being, all of reality emanates from a single source to which it returns. In spite of the hierarchy of being, all distinctions—even between God and creation—become gradually lost. For example, theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther seeks to go back behind Christianity to ancient Near Eastern pagan myths and Gnosticism for a holistic (i.e., monistic) worldview.⁶ “The visible universe is the emanational manifestation of God, God’s sacramental body.”⁷

4. Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises* (trans. Maurice O’Connell Walshe; Longmead, England: Element, 1987), 3:46. “And since likeness flows from the One,” neither the seeking intellect nor the One itself (God) is satisfied “till they are united in the One” (78). The contemplative soul strives upward, “transformed in God and estranged from all multiplicity . . . or shadow of difference,” and together with “one God-Father-Son-and-Holy-Ghost loses and is stripped of all distinctions and properties, and is One alone” (85). J. Deotis Roberts (*A Philosophical Introduction to Theology* [London: SCM, 1991], 118) comments, “God appears to imply what Plotinus meant by ‘Mind,’” while Godhead corresponds to the ‘One’ in Plotinus’ Godhead; it is Being itself and not an individual being.” Roberts further notes the similarities of this view to the Hindu idea of *Brahman*, although he tries to make these views consistent with Christianity. Everything “outer,” even about Jesus Christ (his bodily

incarnation, life, suffering, pain, passions, etc.), is dispensable; the truth is “inner” unity with the divine. Like Mary, Jesus “inwardly was in a state of unmoved detachment” (Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, 124).

5. Eckhart was also a personal favorite of Hegel. Ernst Benz (*The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy* [Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1983], 2) observes that the continuity between German medieval mysticism and German idealistic philosophy has been thoroughly recognized at least since Wilhelm Dilthey. For this connection especially between Hegel and Eckhart (as well as ancient Gnosticism), see also Cyril O’Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1994).

6. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1972), 118; *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 52, 60, 87.

7. Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 87.

Some have tried to blend pantheism (“all is divine”) with belief in a personal God (theism).⁸ Often identified as *panentheism* (“all-within-God”), this view holds that “God” or the divine principle transcends the world, although God and the world exist in mutual dependence.⁹ In varying degrees of explicit dependence, panentheism is the working ontology of process theology and the theologies of Teilhard de Chardin, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Jürgen Moltmann among many others, especially those working at the intersection of theology and the philosophy of science.¹⁰ Some panentheists envision the world as the body of God.¹¹

B. ATHEISM AND DEISM: THE STRANGER WE NEVER MEET

At the other end of the spectrum from pantheism and panentheism are atheism and deism. Although Buddhism denies the existence of a personal God, Western atheism rejects any transcendent reality beyond the world of sense experience. Deism affirms the existence of a Creator God, but generally denies that this Architect of the Universe intervenes miraculously in nature or history.¹² Especially as formulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, modern atheism sees religion as arising from a psychological need to project something or someone to whom one can pray in the face of the threats and tragedies in a random and chaotic universe.¹³

Nietzsche advocated an “inverted Platonism,” where the upper world is illusion and the lower world is real.¹⁴ In fact, the dualism of two worlds is rejected as an illusion perpetuated by Christianity. Drawing on classical Greek myth, Nietzsche identifies Apollo (the god of order) with Plato’s upper world and Dionysus (the god of pagan revelry and chaotic self-indulgence) with the lower world. Where the death of ultimate meaning led Schopenhauer to a state of depression—a passive resignation to fate—his disciple Nietzsche embraced it as a call to create meaning for ourselves. “That my life has no aim is evident from the accidental nature of its origin. That I can posit an aim for myself is another matter.”¹⁵ As Mark C. Taylor expresses it, “The lawless land of erring, which is forever beyond good and evil, is

8. The term *pantheist* seems to have originated with John Toland’s *Socinianism, truly stated, by a pantheist* (1705). *Panentheism* was coined by Karl Christian Friedrich Karuse in 1828.

9. Charles Hartshorne, *Man’s Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, U.K.: Archon, 1964).

10. See, for example, Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

11. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

12. The term *deism* was apparently coined in 1564 by John

Calvin’s colleague Pierre Viret and is typically regarded as the religion of the Age of Enlightenment.

13. See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (trans. George Eliot; New York: Harper and Bros., 1957); Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989). More recently, the New Atheists have rehabilitated this theory. See, for example, Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (trans. Duncan Large; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 20.

15. Quoted in Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.

the liminal world of Dionysus, the Anti-Christ, who calls every wandering mark to carnival, comedy, and carnality.”¹⁶

Amid important differences, there are some surprising similarities between pantheism and atheism. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. Both embrace the view that being is *univocal*: in other words, that there is only one kind of reality or existence. In this perspective, there is reality (that which exists) and then there are particular beings who exist, such as divine and non-divine entities. In the “overcoming estrangement” paradigm of pantheism, the physical world is a weak projection of an eternal (real) world. In the atheistic paradigm (“the stranger we never meet”), the projection is reversed; in fact, the longing for transcendent meaning and truth reflects a form of psychological neurosis, nostalgia for a nonexistent “beyond” that paralyzes our responsibility in the present. In other words, pantheism assumes that the upper world is real and this world is mere appearance, while atheism assumes that this world is real and the upper world is nonexistent. In their drive toward immanence, both paradigms locate the divine within the self (reducing theology to anthropology or psychology). When, under the influence of the pantheistic scheme, modern theologians emphasized religion as a purely inner affair of mystical experience or personal piety, the atheist was then quite warranted to regard God’s existence as an entirely subjective claim with no bearing on actual reality.

In neither the pantheistic nor atheistic paradigm is God a personal being who transcends creaturely reality yet enters freely into relationship with it. Neither scheme allows for the personal intervention of God in nature and history. For pantheism, everything is “miraculous”; the divine is indistinguishable from nature or historical progress or at least the human soul. Yet “miracles” always happen within the self; they never happen in the external world, as disruptions of the ordinary process of nature. Religion or spirituality pertains exclusively to the inner or transcendent realm, beyond history and life in this world. Of course, naturalistic atheism has no place for the supernatural and deism excludes the possibility of miraculous divine intervention—either in judgment or grace. In both paradigms, nothing strange or unfamiliar is allowed to disrupt the sovereignty of the self, which is often identified as *autonomy*. As different as these paradigms are in many ways, they are co-conspirators in the suppression of the knowledge of God and his relationship with creatures.

To be sure, there has been a revival of deism and atheism in our culture, but these are largely modern (Enlightenment) heresies. In our postmodern environment, radical mysticism seems more pervasive. Turning inward for divine inspiration, many today say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” Some writers today

16. *Ibid.*, 157.

are announcing a shift in western culture from the Age of Belief to the Age of the Spirit. A revival of pantheistic and panentheistic worldviews (much like the ancient heresy of Gnosticism) is evident in academic as well as more popular circles.¹⁷

This spectrum, from pantheism and panentheism to deism all the way to atheism, plots the course of pagan ontologies (theories of reality) from primitive to postmodern cultures.

WORLDVIEW PARADIGMS	
Pantheism	All is divine.
Panentheism	All is within divinity; the divine and worldly principles are mutually dependent.
Deism	God created the world but does not intervene miraculously within it.
Atheism	God does not exist.

In sharp contrast, the biblical narrative tells the story of the triune God who created all of reality (visible and invisible) out of nothing for his own glory, the creation of humankind in his image and covenant, the transgression of that covenant, and the surprising announcement of his gracious promise to send a Savior. The “scarlet thread” of the promised Redeemer runs through every book of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation: Jesus Christ is the unifying center of God’s saving revelation.

II. A COVENANTAL ACCOUNT OF “MEETING A STRANGER”

The biblical ontology is not a species of a larger genus. In other words, it does not fit into a generic paradigm but generates its own ontology.

A. DEFINING THE MODEL

This model assumes that God and the world are distinct—Creator and creation. The world is dependent on God, but God is independent of the world. Precisely because the world is dependent at every moment on the word of the triune

17. Examples are too numerous to cite, as mysticism and technology, magic and science, spirituality and materialism merge. The second-century heresy of Gnosticism has enjoyed a renaissance ever since the Nag Hammadi discovery in 1945 and is especially popular today in academic circles. In some ways, contemporary advocacy of Gnosticism is the next stage

of the New Age movement. Theologians like Harvey Cox, in *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), and popular writers like Brian McLaren, in *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) defend this shift from Scripture and creeds to inner experience and deeds.

God, nothing in history or nature is ultimately self-caused. God is sovereign over and within every time and place. God is never “trespassing” on his own property and never “transgresses” natural laws, as if these stood above him. God is indeed a stranger, but one who has condescended to meet us in our own creaturely space, which we have in the first place because it is his gift.

From the biblical perspective, God is a stranger in two senses. First, *God is a stranger in a positive sense*. Intrinsically holy, God is *qualitatively* distinct from creation—not just more than, but different from, his creatures. There is no divine soul, preexisting throughout eternity, thrown mercilessly into the realm of time and matter. God breathed life into Adam in creation, and he “became a living being” (Ge 2:7 NIV)—an embodied soul and an animated body. And yet, God pronounced this creation good (Ge 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It is no crime to be different from God. Finitude is not a “falling away” from some primordial infinitude. There is no part of human nature that is higher, brighter, more infinite, or more real than another. This means that the only legitimate ontological distinction is between the uncreated God and the created world, not between spiritual and material realms. Ontological difference—the strangeness that makes us stand in awe of God’s majesty—is good.

Second, *God is a stranger in a negative sense*. Whereas the *ontological* difference is a good gift of our creation, *ethical* difference came about as a result of the fall, when Adam transgressed the original covenant. In this sense, God is not only qualitatively *different* from us but morally *opposed* to us. We are estranged from God by sin. In his righteousness, goodness, justice, holiness, and love, God is outraged by our collective and personal rebellion. As human creatures, we are made in God’s image; as sinners, we are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3). Salvation is achieved not by human ascent from the realm of shadows into the unity of divine being but by God’s descent in our flesh. We are saved not from nature and history but from the bondage to both sin and death. The dilemma that this redemption solves is the reconciliation of sinners to God in Christ, not the reconciliation of infinitude and finitude, spirit and matter, universals and particulars. Thus, the history of the covenantal relationship of God and humanity rather than the metaphysics of being and becoming is the interest of this model.

B. DEFENDING THE MODEL

The biblical and pagan stories and consequent doctrines could not be more fundamentally opposed at the points I have mentioned. First, *the biblical God is personal, not an abstract principle*. There is no such thing as “the divine,” “divinity,” or a “divine realm.” There is only the God who speaks and acts.

Second, *this personal God is the Trinity rather than “the One.”* Especially in dominant Greek philosophy, the highest reality (i.e., that which possesses supreme