

‘The Truth Looks Different From Here’

or

On seeking the unity of truth from a diversity of perspectives

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Gustavo Gutierrez, in a recent visit to Cambridge, told this story about the Medellin conference of 1968. (This is my recollection of his story and not an exact quotation.) Following that important gathering, the South American bishops received a letter from Rome. ‘We can see’, it read, ‘that your circumstances are very different from those we experience here in Europe. To enable us to help you, please send experts on South American economics, politics, sociology and anthropology to Rome. . . . But don’t send any theologians because we have our own theologians here.’

Despite the fashionable sound to the phrase, theology has always been done ‘in context’. Augustine was no less contextual a theologian than Bonhoeffer, with each page attesting to the writer’s particular education, formation as a Christian, pastoral concerns and so on. Does this alarm us? Should this alarm us? If we admit to, and even delight in, the diverse contexts for the doing of theology are we ‘going soft’ on any claim to a universally valid Christian message? How do we speak of the truth and yet speak from our particularity? These are the questions I wish to consider here, questions whose significance for contemporary theology, now a global and ecumenical enterprise, need not be underlined.

I would like to begin, however, at a place seemingly remote from our own—Europe in the sixteenth century. I should like to look at one of those Reformation debates which, while distant in time and sensibility from those of our century, have repercussions which all Christians to a greater or lesser degree must still feel. For reasons which I hope will become clear, I should like to begin this discussion of ‘truth’ with a look at an exchange of letters in 1539 between Cardinal Sadoletto and John

Calvin.

When the Genevans went over to the Reform, Cardinal Sadoletto, apparently on his own initiative, wrote to the city's Senate and people urging them to kick out the reformers and return to the Roman fold. The Genevans asked Calvin to reply on their behalf. The two, avowedly polemical, letters which have come down to us as a result tell us much of what was at issue between the reformers and the old guard of that day.

The substance of the letters is interesting, for although both writers touch on issues such as justification by faith, the place of works, the intercession of the saints and transubstantiation, they do no more than 'touch on' them. These issues are introduced almost in passing, as the 'cat calls' of the controversy. They serve as bench marks for the respective positions of the antagonists but are not developed in any depth by either Sadoletto or Calvin. The real energy of the discussion and the real subject of the letters in both cases is twofold: first, what is the true church, and second, where can one find the truth necessary to salvation? As to what divides the writers and their respective parties, I want to say that they are as much or more divided by the assumptions they share as by the doctrinal positions on which they differ. In particular, shared assumptions about truth force them inevitably and violently apart. Let me fill this out with reference to the letters. And I would ask you to pay particular attention to the picture of truth and the 'true Church' that emerges.

Cardinal Sadoletto, writing to the Genevans, warns them against subtle and crafty philosophers who boast of hidden interpretations of scripture. He promises himself to 'set forth things which are bright and clear', such as 'truth always is' (p. 6).¹ The Genevans must above all, if they fear the loss of their eternal souls, fear 'depraved worship' for God can forgive our many sins, but if we turn to 'preposterous and false religion' we have neither God nor anchor to save us (pp. 12–3). Is it more pleasing to God that we believe what has always and everywhere been believed by the Catholic Church for more than thirteen hundred years, or that we believe the innovations of men in the last twenty-five years, men who are not the Catholic Church? And then Sadoletto provides a definition; the church is that which 'has been always and everywhere directed by the one Spirit of Christ, in which Church no dissension can exist; for all its parts are connected with each other, and breathe together' (p. 14). There can only be one body, one Church and, as for the reformers, 'they attempted to tear the spouse of Christ in pieces' (p. 14). Their action has given rise to sects and falsehoods for, Sadoletto says, 'Truth is always one, while falsehood is varied and

multiform' (p.19). Sadoleto draws to a close by citing Christ's prayer for the disciples in John's gospel, 'that they may be one, as we also are one' (p. 20). 'All the glory of God', says Sadoleto, both his with us, and ours with him, consists solely in this unity. . .' (p. 20). The Church, according to Sadoleto, is one. There is one true worship. Truth is one, error is multiform. The alternative to Christ's one Church is man-made sects.

Calvin does not disagree. 'Nothing', he says, 'is more pestilential to souls than perverse worship of God.' (p.224) There is no salvation for those who violate the unity of the Church, he says, but the question is 'where is true worship and true Church to be found?' 'When the Genevans, instructed by our preaching, escaped from the gulf of error in which they were immersed and betook themselves to purer teaching of the gospel *you* (Sadoleto) call it defection from the truth of God; when they threw off the tyranny of the Roman pontiff, in order that they might establish among themselves a better form of Church, *you* call it desertion from the Church' (pp. 227—8, my emphasis). Calvin insists that he is not deserting the Church and it is noteworthy that never in his letter does he criticise the Church, or the Catholic Church, but always describes those he variously styles as 'the Roman pontiff and his faction' or some such title. From Calvin's point of view he is not rejecting but rescuing. The Christian faith must not, he thinks, be founded on human testimony or human authority, but engraved on one's heart by the finger of the living God (p. 244). And as for unity, Calvin insists he has 'burned for the unity of the Church, provided truth were made the bond of concord' (p. 250).

Now there were certainly significant theological differences between the reformers and the old church, but let us continue to reflect on some agreements. I have said that Sadoleto and Calvin are pushed into bitter division as much by the assumptions they share as by the doctrinal matters on which they differ. They agree that there can only be one Church and thus that rivals must not only be in error but almost satanic. They agree that truth is one, clear and distinct, and that error is multiform. Neither would thank you for saying 'the truth looks different from here'. From Calvin's point of view God alone is worthy of worship and therefore any veneration paid to the saints must be idolatry. From Sadoleto's point of view the Pope is the head of the one true Church which is without dissension and therefore divisive criticism must have the scent of heresy. Black and white, saved and damned, in no sense are the two men in this exchange agreeing to differ.

Recent studies in early modern history have enhanced our understanding of the tumults of the sixteenth century. We can see more clearly than before some of the sixteenth century's continuities with the

concerns of late medieval Europe and some of its discontinuities, for it was a time of change, and of social as well as personal trauma for many.² An old order was in decline, the new ideas of the Renaissance were blowing fresh through northern universities. Calvin was not alone in fearing as well as welcoming the changes. His language, like that of Erasmus and Luther, was replete with metaphors of pollution, contamination, defilement and confusion of order. For in no sense did Calvin or many of his contemporaries treasure disorder, uncertainty or lack of authority. Outside of the antinomian fringe of the radical reformation, the mainstream of the reform longed for order, authority and stability. If we're honest, probably many of the ordinary people of Geneva just wanted to get on with making an honest living without the costly interference of bishops, kings, wars, famines and plagues. For the reformers of the mainstream and for Calvin especially, lawyer as he was, 'authority' was a positive term. The authority of scripture facilitated escape from the authority of the Pope and in some cases kings. We should note that both Sadoletto and Calvin draw a distinction between 'man-made customs', which they reject, and 'God-given truths' which they happily appropriate to their own side of the argument. The rhetoric of the debate determines that, by contrast with 'God-given truths', 'man-made customs' are made to seem untruths or lies, or at least extremely unreliable.

Now this longing for absolute certitude and disdain for the man-made and merely probable sounds familiar, does it not? Are we not reminded of the philosophical obsession with certitude which dominated early modern western philosophy and lingered on into our own century? Descartes, indeed is very near at hand. For the early modern European longing for certainty, already evident in the exchange between Sadoletto and Calvin, was not restricted to religious matters, and nor is this coincidence. The Renaissance humanism that informed both Calvin and Sadoletto brought with it another potent discovery—or rediscovery—the rediscovery by northern Europeans of classical scepticism, with the terrifying prospect that nothing is certain. In Montaigne's formulation, 'Que scay-je?' (What do I know?). As Michael Buckley documents in his suggestive study, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, this scepticism and its implicit atheism had a corrosive affect on seventeenth century intellectuals in Northern Europe, Catholic and Protestant. It was this scepticism which fuelled Descartes search for certainty, just as it was a desire for certainty in religion that informed the rigid orthodoxies of seventeenth century religion and perhaps, in its own way, the reaction to them that was the Enlightenment. For, as Buckley points out, the Enlightenment was not indifferent to religion, 'It would be more

discerning to say it was obsessed with it' and 'irrevocably hostile to supernatural revelation and confessional beliefs.' As he points out, after the 'fratricidal wars' and 'endless dogmatic controversies' that followed the ruptures of the sixteenth century, a reaction of disgust was perfectly understandable. So, too, was the Enlightenment ambition to establish universal truths, not bound to claims to a special revelation, on which all 'men of right reason' would amicably agree. Kant states his faith thus: 'inasmuch as there can be only one human reason, so likewise there cannot be many philosophies; that is, only one true system of philosophy based on principles is possible. . .'⁴ No one, so far, in this historical sketch would thank you much for saying 'the truth looks different from here'.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries secular and scientific verities are contesting and even recasting the religious ones. The new paragons are Newton, Lyell and Darwin, and the quest is for the real and demonstrable behind the apparent. With the nineteenth century critiques of religions the churches, having failed to agree between themselves on *the* truth, have now to meet the accusation that their truths were never more than fictions to start with. Equally destructive to the Christian faith as the criticisms from without were the inconsistencies within. For if, as part of your argumentative strategy, you style your opponents' position as one of 'man-made constructs' by contrast with your own position as 'God-given truths' then you will have difficulties when confronted with the human component of your own settlement. This, I believe, happened to Protestantism in the nineteenth century when historical criticism forced conclusions about the human and historical composition of the biblical texts and similarly, in the Catholic church, when the modernist crisis compelled admission of human features of the God-given Church. Crudely, if your theory of religious knowing is that things are either 'man-made' or 'God-given', and thereby either bad or good, and if one then not the other, then you will be hard put to explain how the bible is in any way a human document, or how its interpretation by the churches is in any sense a human activity. Similarly it will be hard to acknowledge that the church is in any real sense a human institution and subject, as all such institutions are, to error.

I am aware of having moved at great speed over complicated terrain in trying to show the pervasive influence of certain views on 'truth' and human knowing. It is one which presents us with stark alternatives: either we know things clearly or we know them not at all. Either claims are objectively true or they are completely false; either they are from God or from men and women. In its extreme form it poses the alternative to absolute certainty as total relativism. The slogan of this

position might be 'truth as direct correspondence', and the ideal for human knowing, whether that be religious or secular, is that the knower be solitary and free, unaffected by constraints of language, culture, custom and all such other human limitations.

This vision of human knowing and this version of truth as certainty, if long untenable, is now impossible to defend. Nowhere has this become more instructively apparent than in twentieth century philosophy of science. As physical science has grown more complex, it has grown more modest about its truth claims; not because scientists no longer care about 'the truth' or 'the world that is the case' but because scientists, working at both micro and macro levels, are aware of dealing with states and relations whose complexity not only transcends our present formulation but which will never be comprehended within any human formulation. (What might an adequate or 'true' theory of what happened 'before' the Big Bang look like?) It is, in part, for this reason that models are seen as so important in scientific theory construction, providing flexible means for describing 'that which is the case', while nonetheless not claiming exhaustive knowledge. While not necessarily directly descriptive, the models employed in scientific theories are nonetheless regarded as reality representing.

The inescapable inference is that science, too—even the hardest of hard science—is a human and interpretative venture. There is a good deal of debate amongst contemporary scientists and philosophers of science as to how to characterise the scientific project in light of this epistemic modesty, but a general agreement that scientific theories do not give us 'the world' or 'the truth' neat can be reached. It is important to emphasise that this modesty does not mean scientists would no longer regard themselves as concerned with the world that is the case, but only with an ever shifting tissue of representations. The world informs our theories, even though our theories never adequately describe the world.⁵ Or, as Hilary Putnam puts it in a recent article, 'the world is both 'objective' and not 'objective'; we cannot ask what is the case without choosing some system of concepts (and no one system is uniquely fitted to describe 'the world'; but once we have a system of concepts in place, what is true or false is not simply a matter of what we think'. He continues, cryptically, 'The reality is objective, but the 'objects' aren't!'⁶

While culled from modern philosophy of science, the basic point I wish to make is not so very different from one made many centuries earlier by Thomas Aquinas. In the first question of his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas considers the difficulty of claiming that theology is the highest of the sciences when it seems to lack certainty. Some of its premises seem open to doubt. In reply he says that 'There is nothing to

stop a thing that is objectively more certain by its nature from being subjectively less certain to us because of the disability of our minds. . .'. Then citing a simile of Aristotle's, we are like bats who, in the sunshine, blink at the most obvious things. Now this is analogous at least to Putnam's claim that the world informs our theories even though our theories can never adequately describe the world. We continue to be like Aristotle's bats who, in the sunshine, blink at the most obvious things. What may be objectively certain in itself may be subjectively uncertain to us, or if you prefer, 'the reality is 'objective', but the 'objects' (humanly delineated) aren't.'

The epistemological modesty of modern science is thus not only a useful complement to the propositions of theology, which has always at its best moments admitted the human limitation in any of our efforts to talk about God, but also provides a foundation for theological perspectivalism—the thesis that 'the truth may look different from here.' The world is construed very differently under a Newtonian or an Einsteinian description, but nonetheless both theories are usefully taken as representing the world that is the case.

To my mind, if we are to continue within what is recognisably Christian orthodoxy when we embrace a diversity of perspectives, we must cleave to the idea that it is 'the truth' that we are approximating, however inadequately, and 'the truth' that looks different from here. That is, a concern for 'that which is certain in itself but subjectively uncertain to us' will continue to be at the heart of the Christian message. What I have tried to show thus far is that not only is it perfectly acceptable, epistemologically speaking, to seek a unity of truth from a diversity of perspectives, it is often desirable to do so. A complex description is more likely to provide an adequate account of complex subject matter than a simple, single view. We can see this in scientific theory construction and nearer to home we can see it in St. Paul. Paul uses a number of metaphors (or models) to give an account of what God has done in Christ (that which we designate in English by the wonderfully non-committal term, 'atonement'). He speaks of redemption from slavery, a military victory, a new birth, a price being paid. But we do not believe Paul uses a plurality of descriptions because he's not sure which is right! Rather the complexity of that which he undertakes to describe is such that it *demand*s a number of descriptions, no one of which alone is adequate. No one description could be adequate to this saving mystery, and taking one description or model and privileging it so as to occlude or silence the others would falsify Paul's account. In this case, a reversal of Sadoletto's dictum would be called for: truth is multi-form, error is one.

Perspectivalism is, in one sense, at the centre of contemporary theological concern, and not only because of the ecumenical movement but because of the newly-heard voices of liberation, black and feminist theology, amongst others. All these theologies emphasise historical and social particularity, and stress their own contexts as the scenes of witness to God's redemptive love—we drink from our own wells, says Gutierrez, or, we might say 'the truth looks different from here'. This is undoubtedly an extremely attractive and invigorating feature of the new theologies from which the world-wide Christian community has much to learn. But it is this 'drinking from our own wells' that invites the question of 'how it is we can be certain that the truth we are approximating, the water we are drinking, in South America or South Africa or a woman-church in Detroit, is the same as that drunk in Rome or Geneva or Canterbury.' How do we preserve the unity of faith from a diversity of perspectives? Now at one level we might say that the fearful and death laden circumstances in which some liberation theologians write makes the resolution of philosophical questions like this a low priority, and rightly so. Some, like Albert Nolan writing in the midst of the struggles of the mass democratic movement, deliberately bracketed speculations about universal meaning in favour of preaching the gospel in the place to which they have been called.⁸ But is the same strategy open to me in Cambridge or you in Dunedin or Christchurch or Sydney? How do we continue in our concern for the unity of truth and faith that has characterised the Christian witness? Need we continue in it?

Siren voices are heard here, emanating from a mysterious and elusive new territory called 'Postmodernism'. These tempting voices say,

Parochialism is all there is. We must free ourselves from the Enlightenment ideals of universalism. For too long the myth of universal reason and its 'grand narratives' have silenced the small voices. Western logocentrism and phallogocentrism together collude to oppress and silence women and other marginalised groups.⁹ There is no metaphysical certainty, and for those of you in the Reform tradition there is no textual certainty either. Texts and even readers of texts are no longer stable for as Roland Barthes says,

'we know that a text is not a line of words releasing a simple 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of an Author—God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'.¹⁰

According to these voices we must free ourselves from the 'myths of

presence' and step out proudly into a world of fragments, for that is the only world there is.

Maybe, but maybe not. Certainly anyone who either is or regards themselves on the side of the poor and the voiceless has cause to agree with the post-modernist suggestion that master-narratives and 'canons of judgement' are not neutral but weighted to the interests of those groups which, historically, they have served. The claim 'Columbus was the man who discovered America' is not obviously true if you are a descendant of the Aztecs. By the time small (European and colonial) children are able to give the 'correct' answer to the question (viz. Columbus) they are already embedded in a language which privileges certain perspectives and powers and which, without thinking, hears only the dominant voice as 'true' voice. 'Voicelessness' in this sense is so substantially documented by anthropologists and social theorists as to be no longer regarded as a contested hypothesis.¹¹

Any statement of a 'fact' is already the product of an explanation or a narrative which, even despite best intent, is not neutral. (As Paul Ricoeur says, 'to narrate is already to explain'.¹²) But to be aware of the reality of ideology in language and the social embeddedness of knowing and speaking is only, in our linguistically informed day, to exercise a proper critical faculty. The further challenge of post-modern parochialism is to say that the abandonment of meta-narratives *means* the abandonment not only of iron-clad claims to 'truth' but of the search for truth itself. Must we then really, to be able to listen to the quiet, local and previously silenced voices, follow that pioneer of post-modernism, Friedrich Nietzsche, and distance ourselves from those symptoms of the sickness of the Enlightenment that are truth, reason and morality?

Recent feminist philosophy makes an interesting case study here. While for a time post-modern parochialism, combined with its critique of phallogocentric master-narratives, exercised a fascination (particularly in feminist literary critical circles), the mood is shifting now. Many feminists do not want to, and some would say cannot, adopt a philosophy which makes moral judgements impossible. Feminists do not want to say, at the last evaluation, 'do as you please because we are free from master-narratives and "Author-Gods"'. They want more characteristically to say that some things, like gratuitous inequalities and oppressive structures, 'are wrong'. The Oxford philosopher Sabina Lovibond has pointed out that, in this moral sense, feminism as a movement stands within Enlightenment and modernist (not post-modernist) hopes that 'sooner or later, arbitrary authority will cease to exist.' It is difficult, she says, 'to see how one could count oneself a feminist and remain indifferent to the modernist premise of social

reconstruction.'

'What', she continues, 'are we to make of the (post-modernist) suggestions that the project has run out of steam and that the moment has passed for remaking society on rational, egalitarian lines? It would be only natural for any one placed at the sharp end of one or more of the existing power structures (gender, race, capitalist class. . .) to feel a pang of disappointment at this news. But wouldn't it also be in order to feel suspicion? How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to 'emancipatory metanarratives when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?''¹³

Lovibond's argument is readily applicable to liberation theologies. For despite promising murmurs about the importance of local narratives and parochial truth, neither feminist nor liberation theology is, to my mind, likely to find an ally in some of the 'postmodernisms' currently on offer. Both will continue to want to make universal claims in the area of morals and for this reason both will need to find a way in which an emphasis on particularity and context is compatible with universal value, or the unity of faith. While theologically, socially and sometimes ecclesiologically innovative, these new movements are fundamentally aligned to an old-fashioned moral realism. 'Some things are wrong', they want to say, and one cannot say, globally, 'some things are wrong' having ruled out universal claims.

The difficulty we face is that of seeking metaphysics without mastery and here, curiously, the theologian has the advantage over the morally embarrassed post-modernist. For if the latter has followed a familiar trajectory initiated by Nietzsche, then 'the death of God' has resulted in the death of man, the death of the subject as humanistically conceived, and in turn the death of value, including moral value. If the post-modernist recoils at the vision and wishes to reinstate morals they face the difficulty of doing so without reinstating a moral master-narrative. The Christian, on the other hand, holds fast to God who is the guarantor of value, but need not fall once again into repressive 'master-narratives' if they follow the strategy outlined in the first part of the paper and commonplace in historical Christianity. That is, the Christian cleaves to the conviction that 'the truth' inheres in God, while realising that all our approximations to it are just that—approximations, and thus open to bias and human error. The Christian can retain the idea of the unity of truth, grounded as that is in the divine, while embracing a plurality of perspectives. We are like bats who blink in the sunshine at the most obvious things.¹⁴

In fact I do not believe that either feminist or liberation thought is

much endangered, except in the most transient ways, by the extremes of post-modernism.¹⁵ Curiously the danger might rather be on the other side; that these new movements may reinstate the older and unproductive stasis on truth and objectivity that I spoke of earlier. I give you one example—possibly apocryphal since it comes from California. An academic theologian I met from that State said that enthusiasm for inclusive language had now reached such a pitch amongst his students that, not only would they not read contemporary works that failed to use sex-inclusive language, they were now rebelling against readings works of historical theology that spoke in sexist terms. When their teacher replied that one could scarcely expect Schleiermacher writing (in German) at the beginning of the nineteenth century to be aware of sexist language, the students replied, ‘Well, how could he be so great a theologian then if he failed to notice this great affront to human dignity?’ What is amusing about this tale of undergraduate woe is that it is not really a position of moral high-mindedness which is displayed here, but a failure of moral vision—a failure to see how differently things could look. Many people, male and female, over the age of thirty have had the experience of becoming aware of sexist language and practice, and wondering why it had never troubled them before. Many Europeans and Americans may remember becoming conscious of racism or anti-semitism, and wondering why it never previously hit them in the face. It is not my intention to condone sexism or racism or anti-semitism, and I do not think perspectivalism commits us to condoning them. But the real moral and, I would say, theological failure embodied in the thoughtless condemnation of Schleiermacher as a sexist is not so very far from that for which I have faulted Sadoletto and Calvin. It is the assumption that the truth is always and everywhere transparent and self-evident. It is the assumption that the right thing for a Christian to do is always obvious. It is, in short, the sin of pride. It is the presumption that says: ‘we see things absolutely clearly and those who do not see things as we do are either wilfully stupid or evil.’ It is the naiveté which assumes without question that, had I lived in Nazi Germany, I would of course have defended the Jews, which ignores the more painful and difficult possibility that had I lived in Nazi Germany I might well not have defended them.

In theological terms it is the denial of original sin, and of the extent to which we are born into and caught up in languages and cultures which, whatever their excellences, have their dark sides—structures and truisms so built around injustices, so built into the fabric of language itself, that we may not be able to see the injustices as such. We can learn this lesson in a hundred places. One is the theological and Biblical

justification of apartheid developed by some South African theologians, interpretations which fashioned from Biblical accounts like that of the confusion of tongues following Babel a justification for a social policy of separate development. Yet apartheid theology was Biblically oriented and had its base in a respectable theological tradition. Its interpretation of the Bible was eccentric, but not totally incoherent.¹⁶ Indeed it had many features of a liberation theology, for the Afrikaners at least. Surely the insight we must take away from a study of that particular variant of South African Calvinism which read a racist message into the Bible is not 'weren't those people foolish and immoral' but, at least at one level, 'there but for the grace of God go I'? One of the painful lessons we have always to learn is that Christians, even in their Christianity, are not free from the sin which distorts vision (this, by the way, is what I take Calvin to have meant by total depravity).

The answer to our fears of distorted perspectives cannot be, as I have said, an attempt to clamber onto the moral high ground, or an attempt to find a theological language with an authority which, as Rowan Williams puts it, is 'determined from an elusive elsewhere', mysteriously ahistorical, unaffected by language or culture and thus 'objectively true'. This is not to resolve our problem but to deny it.¹⁷ Christian theology throughout its history is always tempted by the prospect of a 'theology done by angels', free from human limitation, but what we have in fact is theology done by men, and recently by women as well.¹⁸ The solution must lie in the theological modesty we considered earlier. Truth may be one, but our apprehension of it is limited and perspectival.¹⁹

It may even be that if in our differing moral and theological journeys, we are moving to the light, we are doing so not despite our differences but because of them. Christianity and Judaism are not, after all, religions to whose faithful the Deity at one moment in time lowered a compendium of truths from the sky. Instead God is disclosed in human history. God covenants to be with the people, Israel, and it is through their historical experience that they come to know what God is and how God acts. God discloses himself in human history and supremely through taking on a human history in becoming human in Christ.

We have not one gospel but four. The Bible discloses God to us through human history and from different perspectives, and these perspectives, we must believe, are not in default of one plain and uncontroversial text or set of propositions, but indeed required by the complexity of that which is revealed, God Godself. Like so many facets of a gemstone these particularities are the means by which we apprehend, even if we cannot comprehend, the glory of God and God's

creative and redemptive act.

What then of certainty? How can we be certain we are right? The answer may be that we cannot. There may be clear signs, however, that we have got things wrong. The signs are evil and its attendant suffering; the suffering of our fellow men and women and the suffering of creation.²⁰ As long as there are these signs we, collectively as well as individually, cannot be certain all our answers are right. But is this kind of certainty what Christianity offers? Is this kind of 'complete certainty' not something that early modern European philosophy first constructed as a fiction and then demanded as a fact? What we are promised as Christians is that we shall know the truth, not that we shall have the facts. Indeed there are two good reasons why epistemic certitude must be seen as not part of the Christian promise. The first, as Aquinas knew well, is the fact of the Godness of God—the unutterable holiness of God before which all human speaking and all human theologising is as straw. The second is the pledge of the Spirit and the hope of the kingdom—for the Christian story, like the Jewish one, is a story that awaits completion. The future, for us, is God's future and it is not for us to delimit the boundaries of God's grace.

We are limited creatures, even our speaking of God is limited. Yet for a religion whose central doctrine is the incarnation this should not be a problem. If God did not despise and despair of the limitations of the human condition, why should we? Why should we aspire to be philosophical angels when God became a man? Maybe this will mean, as Professor Metz has recently said, that we must acknowledge religious diversity to be not the work of Satan but the will of God.²¹ Truth may be one for God, but Calvin and Sadoletto were misguided in thinking it one for us. We may know the unknowable God truly in the knowledge of love but, as far as our cognitive knowing goes, we know in part and we know in progress.

Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Life of Moses*, tells us that Moses came to learn that 'to follow God where ever he might lead is to behold God'.²² We, too, must remember that ours is an eschatological faith, a religion of hope and future, of now and not yet. We must remember that the truth is what we seek as much as what we savour and indeed we must remember that the truth may look different from here.

- 1 All references to Sadoletto are from James Sadoletto, 'Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva, (18 March, 1539)', in *Tracts and Treatises of the Reformation Church*, Oliver and Boyd, 1958. All Calvin citations are from John Calvin, 'Reply to Sadoletto (September 1, 1539)' in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, XXII, SCM, 1954.
- 2 See, for example, William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 3 Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p 37.
 - 4 Kant, Preface to *The Metaphysical Principles of Right* (in *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, trs. James Ellington, 1964, p.5), cit. Lovibond below. That it was still very much 'men' of right reason whose agreement was solicited by the philosophers seems clear. See, for instance, 'Kant' by Susan Mendus, in ed. Ellen Kennedy and Susan Mendus, *Women in Western Political Philosophy* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987).
 - 5 I have explored this far more thoroughly in *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), especially chapters 6—8.
 - 6 'An interview with Professor Hilary Putnam', in *Cogito*, Summer, 1989, p. 89, p.90.
 - 7 *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,1,5 . Blackfriars edn, Vol. 1, trans. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), p. 19.
 - 8 Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa* (London: CIIR, 1988). Nolan is critical of what he calls the 'universalising tendency' of Western theology, 'the assumption that nothing is true or valuable unless it applies to all people, at all times and in all circumstances' (p. 15), but nonetheless his own distinction between 'content' and 'shape' of the gospel, the first changing and the second remaining the same across time and place, is an attempt to say how Christian continuity is maintained while hearing the new voice.
 - 9 See Toril Moi on the French feminist, Helene Cixous in eds. Ann Jefferson and David Roby, *Modern Literary Theory* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1986), p. 211. An account of the post-modernist critique of Enlightenment ideals is given by Lovibond below.
 - 10 Cit. Jonathan Culler in *Barthes* (London: Fontana, 1983).
 - 11 For an anthropological account of the 'muting' of women see the Introduction to ed. Shirley Ardener, *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 20ff. For a more philosophical account, Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1985) and Diane Macdonell, *Theories of Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
 - 12 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 178.
 - 13 Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, #178, 1989, p.12
 - 14 A more difficult question, but fortunately not ours to answer, is how the the secularist and secular feminist will escape from the amoral vision of the future post-modernism holds out before them? It is interesting to find Lovibond speaking of 'the epistemic equivalent of an article of faith, a commitment to persist in the search for common ground with others: in fact, something which could not be relinquished on pain of sinking into 'hatred of reason and of humanity' (Plato, *Phaedo*)' (p. 14).
- The French writer, Julia Kristeva, speaks directly of the crisis of meaning in language in a world without God. After speaking of the quest for 'an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking beings' (ix), she speaks of psychoanalytic discourse as perhaps the only one 'capable of addressing this untenable place where our speaking species resides, threatened by the madness beneath the emptiness of heaven' (xi). In her *Preface to Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1980).
- 15 In order to underline this moral quandary of post-modernist thought I have run the danger of appearing dismissive of some of the astute criticisms of power and language to emerge from this quarter. Theology has much to learn from these, as

- Rebecca Chopp demonstrates in *The Power to Speak: Feminism. Language. God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
- 16 For a critical discussion of the exegesis of apartheid see J.A. Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1987).
 - 17 Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology* 2:3, 1986, p. 197.
 - 18 For the limitations of theology 'done by angels' see Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
 - 19 The approach to theology here developed is thus entirely different from that which T.F. Torrance credits to Karl Barth. According to Torrance, Barth 'set himself to think through the whole of theological knowledge in such a way that it might be consistently faithful to the concrete act of God in Jesus Christ from which it actually takes its rise in the Church, and, further, in the course of that inquiry to ask about the presuppositions and conditions on the basis of which it comes about that God is known, in order to develop from within the actual context of theology its own interior logic and its own inner criticism which will help to set theology free from every form of ideological corruption.' (my emphasis) cited by Richard Roberts in Stephen Sykes, ed., *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 147. For a very different view of what Barth's intentions were see Ingolf Dalferth, 'Karl Barth's eschatological realism' in the same volume.
 - 20 I take evil to be a prime correlate of suffering. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, '... to do evil in this sense is always, either directly or indirectly, to make another person suffer. In its relational or dialogical structure, in other words, evil committed by someone finds its other half in the evil suffered by someone else.' In eds H. Deuser, G.M. Martin, K. Stock and M. Welker, *Gottes Zukunft Der Welt: Festschrift für Jürgen Moltmann* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), p. 346.
 - 21 At the *Concilium* conference, Louvain, Summer, 1990.
 - 22 I am grateful to Ann Conway for drawing my attention to this text.

Adrienne von Speyr and the Mystery of the Atonement

Aidan Nichols OP

Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967) is this century's most remarkable mystical theologian: a mystic, that is, become theologically articulate. Although her place in the history of Catholic theology is, thanks to her influence on Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), entirely assured, her life and teaching—above all, her doctrine of the Atonement—are of considerable interest in their own right.