

God is not a “Thing” in our Universe! Reflections on “Classical Theism” Inspired by Rowan Williams

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Abstract

In a recent article published as a blog post (<https://jrichardmiddleton.com/2022/12/08/gods-eternity-and-relationality-in-the-bible-why-i-am-not-a-classical-theist/>), J. Richard Middleton explains that he does not regard himself as a “classical theist” due to his inability to reconcile traditional philosophical categories describing God’s character with the portrayal of God in Scripture. Middleton explicitly contrasts the biblical portrayal of God’s relationality and adaptability with classic categories of divine simplicity and immutability. In this response article, I engage the work of Rowan Williams on Chalcedonian Christology in order to seek clarity on what “classical theism” entails—and does not entail—with respect to divine immutability, simplicity, impassibility, and other divine attributes. Properly understood, the “classical” view safeguards against inadequate theological portraits of both God’s transcendence (conceived via abstraction) and God’s immanence (conceived via the projection of human experience). “Classical theism” seeks to preserve the deep mystery of God’s being, thus applying its insights contextually requires wisdom and precision.

In December 2022, J. Richard Middleton posted a blog entry that expressed his uneasiness with what he calls “classical theism” (a term he acknowledges to be variously understood and represented).¹ His summary of “classical theism,” from

1 J. Richard Middleton, “God’s Relationality and Eternity in the Bible: Why I Am Not a Classical Theist,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (2023) 1–8. My thanks to Richard Middleton for prompting (provoking?) this exchange about “classical theism.” I regard this as a welcome opportunity to bring two disciplines together, biblical studies and systematic theology, in a reciprocal, interdisciplinary dialogue that creates the opportunity for deeper understanding and sharper clarity on these issues.

which his criticisms arise, is approximately as follows.² This theological view asserts that God is *atemporal* in the sense of being “outside of time” and *simple* in the sense that God is pure being, transcends finitude, and thus all of God’s attributes are essentially one. In this view, further, God is thought to be unaffected by the world or anything outside of himself, because such influence would seem to “demean God.” Thus, classical theism holds that God is *immutable*, a notion which Middleton believes is indebted to Aristotle’s depiction of “God” as the Unmoved Mover who cannot change in any way because change would imply movement either away from Perfection or toward unrealized Perfection.³

Finally, classical theism’s account of God’s infinite nature leads it to conceive of God in abstract and indirect ways, which in the process leads it to distort, displace, or replace the concrete, more direct and simpler (sometimes even “outlandish”) language of the Bible. Classical theism, Middleton claims, tends to relegate biblical language to “mere metaphor or anthropomorphism.”⁴ It thus champions an analogical view of biblical and theological language, as represented by Aquinas who, impacted by assumptions going back to Plotinus, worried about “how we are able to use language that derives from our experience of the finite world to say anything true about God who is beyond time and finitude.”⁵

Middleton raises important issues and concerns about ‘classical theism,’ especially his insistence that theological language must remain faithful to biblical language (in all its diversity of expression and depiction) about God. I am grateful for this reminder and challenge. In this response, I will seek to pursue clarity on some things, offer some critical pushback on others, and pose some difficult questions that complexify and problematize any simple or unnuanced description of ‘classical theism’ and its associated ideas (e.g., divine simplicity, aseity, immutability, infinity, atemporality).

Rowan Williams on Classical Theism and Divine Simplicity

One contemporary theologian who prompts us to think more carefully about classical theism is Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, noted historical theologian and one of the most prolific and creative theological thinkers writing in English today. Williams is an interesting dialogue partner, also, because while he shares some of Middleton’s concerns—including some expressed in the blog post

2 I have placed the term “classical theism” in scare quotes, to acknowledge its contested status as an accurate and useful term, since it was created by critics rather than the advocates of the tradition. As Sonderegger notes, “Process theologians seem to have coined the category *classical theism*, now so widely used as to seem self-evident,” in order to critique a particular conception of divine omnipotence. See Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 165.

3 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 1.

4 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 3.

5 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 2.

(e.g., the relational nature of God, God's love for creation, reciprocity in God's relationship to creation, the importance of the Bible) but also others expressed elsewhere (e.g., the goodness and integrity of creation, the "becoming" of the world eschatologically as intrinsic to God's redemptive work, the non-competitive and non-triumphalist character of God's action and mission in the world)—Williams believes that classical theism, far from rejecting or distorting a genuinely biblical account of things, instead properly frames and safeguards such an account.

Williams's book *Christ the Heart of Creation* is a profound and dense theological and historical work.⁶ I make no attempt here to represent its argument as a whole, account for its detail, or wrestle with its potential problems.⁷ Instead, I will draw out some key insights that are relevant to the present discussion of classical theism.

Williams centers his discussion of classical theism and divine simplicity in Christology.⁸ His account is grounded not in abstract speculation, but in the Person of Jesus Christ, the divine Word who became human. Williams follows the theological instinct of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (whom Williams engages often in the book), for whom all thinking about God begins with silence before the Word (the Logos) because divine speech always precedes, confronts, enables, and transforms human speech about God.⁹ In locating his thinking about God in Christology, he also follows the biblical-theological pattern of God's economic and temporal missions disclosing or revealing God's immanent and eternal being (being-in-relation). As a representative remark, Williams writes,

The God whose *quid* [i.e., "what-ness," identity] is revealed in Christ is the God who is strictly unspeakable by finite beings but who speaks himself in and as an entirely finite subject, wholly flesh and blood, mortal and vulnerable. This is why we can never speak of the nature of God as an object in anything like the ordinary way: we speak because God has given us (literally) a Word: God has invited us into the life that is his self-expression.¹⁰

6 Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

7 For insightful responses, offering penetrating critical and constructive feedback, see: Katherine Sonderegger, "Christ as Infinite and Finite: Rowan Williams' Christ the Heart of Creation," *Pro Ecclesia* 30, no. 1 (2021) 98–113; and Jordan Daniel Wood, "Against Asymmetrical Christology: A Critical Review of Rowan Williams's 'Christ the Heart of Creation,'" *Eclectic Orthodoxy*, Personal Blog (August 4, 2019); online: <https://afkimmel.wordpress.com/2019/08/04/against-asymmetrical-christology-a-critical-review-of-rowan-williams-christ-the-heart-of-creation/>

8 He comments throughout his book on related concepts, such as aseity, impassibility, immutability, and other classical attributes.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, vol. 12 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 300. For reflections on theological implications of this, see my article, "Bonhoeffer's Anti-Logos and its Challenge to Oppression," *Crux* 41, no. 2 (2005) 2–9.

10 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218

Moreover, Williams seeks theological clarity and biblical faithfulness by grounding his reflections in the ecumenical tradition of Chalcedon. The Chalcedonian Definition is best understood not as an abstract, Hellenistic intrusion into a purportedly pure, biblical Christianity, but an attempt to clarify what the church *means* and *does not mean* when it confesses that Jesus Christ is “fully God” and “fully human.”¹¹ Its cataphatic (or positive) content includes four basic affirmations: Jesus is fully God (consubstantial with the Father in divinity, thus refuting Arian and Ebionite heresies); Jesus is fully human (consubstantial with us in humanity, thus refuting Docetic and Apollinarian heresies); Jesus is one person (thus refuting Nestorianism); and Jesus has two distinct natures (thus refuting Monophysite and Eutychian heresies).¹² As a contextual and historical document, arguably the definition’s unique contribution is apophatic (or negative) in nature, seeking to negate or rule out theological language that describes Christ’s Person in ways that are inadequate to the biblical witness and to divine revelation (Jesus Christ as God’s Speech-Act, as narrated in Scripture): Christ’s two natures, divine and human, are united in such a way that they are *unconfused*, *unchanged*, *indivisible*, and *inseparable*.¹³ As such, the definition seeks to guard the tradition *against* the uncritical and inappropriate intrusion of “unbaptized” Hellenistic philosophy into Christian doctrine, yet without simply refusing to engage missionally in questions and assertions urgently in need of response. As such, the Chalcedonian definition works best not in delineating Christological content exhaustively but in establishing the theological grammar (or framework or substructure) for thinking and talking about Christ in biblically-theologically faithful and philosophically adequate ways.¹⁴ As Williams puts it, “Chalcedon—notoriously—offered a neat outline of the agenda rather than a full resolution.”¹⁵

Since Chalcedonian Christology inherently considers the nature of divinity (uncreated being) in relation to and interacting with the nature of humanity (created being), Williams draws implications for how Christology both frees and constrains our theological thinking and speaking about the relationship of the

11 <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html>

12 See the discussion in Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 299–318.

13 Some might object that referring to ontological matters (“natures”) already takes us well beyond a “purely biblical” view of things. For a recent critique of this notion, along with a constructive proposal for a “biblical” conception of divine ontology, see Michael F. Bird, *Jesus Among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2022).

14 Concerning the relation of metaphysics to the Bible and theology, Williams helpfully writes, “Christology, while it is never the instrument of any metaphysical scheme, inevitably poses metaphysical questions, in the sense that it requires us to think about the grammar of our talk about finite being and what might tentatively be said about its relation to infinite being”; and, “metaphysics is never a matter of something to which an argument concludes: it is to do with what is presupposed as the ground of any discourse” (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 122, 218).

15 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 68.

Creator and the creation/creatures. I will touch briefly on three of these. First, Williams proposes that Christology helps us to reflect theologically on the relationship between the Infinite and the finite. The hypostatic union does not create a third type of being beyond Creator and creature, a demigod or demiurge sort of being (like Heracles or one of the Gnostic emanations). This is not a new insight, but what Williams seeks to show is that we must not envision the Infinite as simply the ultra-superlative of the finite.¹⁶ The latter view is essentially a form of idolatry; it amounts to a “theology” that tries to speak about God by speaking about humanity (and/or the cosmos) in a loud voice, to paraphrase Barth (or we picture the stern, powerful, and distant old man in the sky, to allude to Monty Python).¹⁷ The Infinite is both more radically transcendent—and more intimately immanent—than that! The Infinite is “truly the source, the ground and the context of every limited, finite state of affairs.”¹⁸ The Infinite is not the projected teleological perfection of anything at the ultimate end of a chain of being, or the final effect in a long progression of natural (or supernatural) causes, or the most ideal form of any object in its ultimate idealness (or the sum of all such objects); the Infinite is not a “thing,” an effect, or an object at all. “God does not belong in a genus . . . God is not a case or instance of anything.”¹⁹

Williams expresses this in several different ways. For example, “Divinity and humanity together cannot *add up* to anything. But an individualized humanity united to a divine principle of distinct agency, what we would call an ‘actualizing’ presence united with it, poses no such problem.”²⁰ Or, “theology has taken a very decisive step away from any residual idea that divine nature or agency is a vastly magnified version of finite agency.”²¹ Or, with respect to divine and human natures in Christ, we must recognize “the difficulties of treating divine and human nature as comparable, coexistent clusters of predicates attaching to the individual.”²² And finally, “The classical negatives about divine nature, the insistence on what cannot in any circumstances be predicated of God, are meant to clarify the impossibility of representing God and God’s action as any kind of circumscribed presence within the world, and thus the impossibility of

16 “As theology labors over its terminology, what comes into focus is that the life of the infinite is eternally relation and gift—not a bare limitlessness, but the endlessness of a mutual outpouring of life and bliss; so that the infinite Word taking flesh embodies itself as a source and agent of undefended and unconstrained welcome in our world, opening up access to its own relation to its infinite Source” (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218).

17 Similarly, “*God is not humanity freed from frustration*. The divine life is what it is; the eternal and necessarily existing ground of all, a life that is simply the conscious everlasting generativity we can only call love” (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218).

18 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, Preface (no page number).

19 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 113.

20 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 15.

21 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 63.

22 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 87.

representing the divine in Jesus as a complementary or additional item in the composition of his identity.”²³

Second, since the Infinite (and every expression of the Infinite) is not a “thing” in the finite universe of physical objects (or even in the spiritual world of finite yet immaterial objects), the Infinite does not “compete” for space, time, resources, causal influence/agency, or anything else. The Infinite thus relates to the finite in a non-competitive or non-rivalrous way.²⁴ More of God does not necessarily entail less of something else. The Infinite is not a god-of-the-gaps!²⁵ Drawing from Christology, Williams writes, “Creation’s relation to God . . . is grounded in the Son’s relation to the Father. And since the Son’s relation to the Father is not that of one thing to another thing but an unimaginably intimate existence in the other, a non-duality that is not a simple identity, we are steered towards a similar model of the relation between Creator and creation.”²⁶ This has important implications for how we understand God’s speech and action in the world. For example, God’s revelatory action is “not an interruption of the finite sequence, but a particular configuration of finite agency such that it communicates more than its own immanent content.”²⁷ Moreover, as applied to salvation and reconciliation, “just as the Trinitarian God lives eternally in a relation to the created order that is free from conflict and competition, so the finite self united with the infinite reality of the Word is able to live in reconciled communion with other human persons and to overcome the various life-denying divisions that characterize the fallen finite world.”²⁸

Third, properly distinguishing between Infinite and finite and thus recognizing the non-competitive relationship between Creator and creation allows us to

23 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 85.

24 This does not entail that the finite does not set itself up in opposition to the Infinite, but that there is nothing inherently rivalrous or competitive between God and God’s good creation as finite and created (and contingent).

25 Contemplating such things in his prison cell (May 29, 1944), Bonhoeffer writes, “we shouldn’t think of God as the stopgap . . . for the incompleteness of our knowledge, because then—as is objectively inevitable—when the boundaries of knowledge are pushed ever further, God too is pushed further away and thus is ever on the retreat. We should find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know; God wants to be grasped by us not in unsolved questions but in those that have been solved. . . . We must recognize God not only where we reach the limits of our possibilities. God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God is the center of life and doesn’t just ‘turn up’ when we have unsolved problems to be solved.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Kraus, and Nancy Lukens, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 405–6.

26 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.

27 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 5.

28 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 108. Williams notes even political implications: “Christology posits limits to human *logos*, in politics as elsewhere—not to de-realize or dissolve the solidarity of the finite but precisely to ground its finite nature, its density and temporality and locatedness” (p. 192).

give adequate theological expression to the integrity of creation *as finite creation*. God's non-enmeshment with creation points not to God's aloofness or abstractness, but to God's loving nature and God's correlative decision to allow creation the *space* and the *otherness* to be creation.²⁹ But this requires that we also give adequate theological expression to the integrity of God *to be God*. As Williams expresses it, "If we are to hold to the doctrine that creation is a free or gratuitous bestowal of life, not a necessity for God, we must hold to the integrity of the system of finite causes and interactions. And thus, in such a world, God can act only from the centre of finite life, not as an intruder; otherwise the divine act dissolves the integrity of what is made."³⁰ Williams argues not on the basis of what must be true 'abstractly,' but in light of how the two natures of Christ are inseparably united yet remain *other*, distinct (unconfused, unchanged, indivisible). Since Christ's infinite otherness is not in competition with the world, but is rather its ground and eschatological telos, he who is Infinite and Other is also present as the one who is "*perfectly creaturely*" and who activates and encourages the world's own being and agency.³¹ Drawing on Bonhoeffer's Christological ethics, Williams exclaims, '*In Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of the world*': the event of Jesus Christ is the place where the unconditional eternal reality of God's life coincides with the life of the finite world, not displacing it or 'conquering' it but penetrating and suffusing it in such a way that it is now the case that I may participate *in the world*, since God has committed Godself to that world in all its aspects."³²

In light of this brief engagement with the thought of Williams, one is prompted

29 I avoid the word "autonomy" here, in light of its connotations in modern society, politics, and law, which tend place the atomistic individual in the centre over-against others and having "rights" expressed as freedom-from others. The word "autonomy" could work if understood within the framework of a participatory and sacramental cosmos and with the understanding that freedom is also freedom-for-God-and-others.

30 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.

31 Thus, "Christology is a key to the 'logic of creation' because Christ appears as the *perfectly creaturely*: the unlimited, unconditioned reality of the divine Word animates within creation the active, energetic interweaving of intelligible life that makes finite reality a *universe*, not a chaos; and that interweaving is focused upon the life in which the Word is uninterruptedly active as the determining form of a human identity, realizing what humanity itself is called to be." (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 218.)

32 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 200. Bringing these themes together, Williams writes (p. 11): "Christology, so far from requiring a rethinking of the classical account of divine perfections (impassibility, immutability and so on), actually provides the fullest possible rationale for them. And conversely, the classical modes of characterizing divine life, so far from being abstract and alien importations into a properly scriptural and/or experientially grounded theology, allow created existence its own integrity and dignity, and deliver us from a theology in which God is in danger of being seen simply as a very important or uniquely powerful agent in the universe competing with other agents in the universe for space or control. That God is in no imaginable sense the rival of humanity, that the relation between finite and infinite agency can never be one in which more of one means less of the other, and (crucially) that God can therefore have no 'interests' to defend over against the interest of the creatures God has made out of unconstrained and selfless love."

to provide pushback on some of the claims Middleton makes. For example, he asks, “Is God really ‘immutable’ (= unchangeable) or did the Word actually become flesh? Is God really ‘impassible’ (= unaffected) or has God truly known suffering in the ‘passion’ of Christ?”³³ I wonder: does Middleton mean to imply that the Word was transmuted from its divine nature into a human nature, or that the divine and human natures of Jesus combined into a mixture amounting to a new, third kind of nature, or something else? Or does the rhetorical force of his question only succeed by evading the interrogation of ontological assumptions upon which any specific understanding of “the Word becoming flesh” must necessarily rest? (I will return to the question of divine suffering below). As a second example, Middleton writes, “Luke’s Gospel says: ‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in maturity [the word can mean in age or in stature] and in divine and human favor’ (Luke 2:52). Jesus clearly changed.”³⁴ Of course, all agree that “Jesus” changed; but does this passage prove that the pre-existent Word—the eternal, second person of the Trinity—changed in these respects? Did the eternal Word—the One for, through, and in whom all things were created and the One in whom all things continue to hold together and cohere—really undergo a process of learning everything that Jesus learned from childhood onward? This seems doubtful, to say the least.

Before moving on to my own reflections on the “classical view,” in light of my reading of Williams, it is important to note the pushback Williams has received from other theologians on his more insistent and idiosyncratic proposals. Specifically, Williams is at pains to emphasize the “asymmetrical” (almost unidirectional) relation between the divine Word/Son (the eternal, second person of the Trinity) and the historical, human Jesus. For example, Williams asserts, “We have to find a way of saying that the animated, ‘Word-embodying’ human substance that is Jesus is a composite reality in which created agency is real and distinct, while *not* claiming that this human substance contributes anything to what the Word eternally is by definition.” This is because, such a claim “would undermine the entire structure of the fundamental distinction, the non-dual separation, of infinite and finite on which Christological doctrine rests.”³⁵ Elsewhere, he says that while it is true to say that “one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh,” nevertheless, “it would be wrong to say that the Word suffers ‘in his divine nature’; not—as I have been trying to argue—simply because of squeamishness about the appropriateness of speaking of God as suffering but because something would then be admitted into the definition of what it means to be God that would

33 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 4.

34 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 3.

35 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 89–90.

be dependent on how things stood in the world, and this would be a fundamental confusion of categories.”³⁶

Critics charge Williams with an uncharitable reading of certain theological figures and discussions within the great Tradition, including, for example, Luther and the historical discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum* (the communication or interaction of attributes between the divine and human natures of Christ) and nuanced accounts of the hypostatic union which differ from that of Williams (including from Aquinas).³⁷ This is not the place for me to enter into the technical details of this debate. My suggestion is that this ongoing conversation *within the “classical theist” tradition* points to an awareness of mystery concerning how precisely the divine and human natures interact and affect each other in the one Person of Jesus Christ. This being the case, it seems wise and fitting to acknowledge that the tradition has room for mystery—because there is much we do not know—with respect to the precise details concerning the reciprocally “impacting” relationship between God and God’s creation.

Reflections on the Contributions of the “Classical View”

The Central Insight of the “Classical View”

The strengths of the “classical view” largely arise from what is arguably its central insight, which is that the Being we name *God* is utterly transcendent in his essence. Williams is very effective in emphasizing this truth: God is not a “thing” of *any kind* in our finite, material universe; God is not the ultimate superlative of anything (or everything) finite. God is God. This means that all human language about God is inadequate, contingent, partial, and thus tentative and in constant need of qualification and revision. Human beings can never give the last word about God. Genuine human language is always human speech about God’s own Speech; human speaking is always a *speaking-after*, followed by constant correction, clarification, and transformation. Anything we say about God must immediately be qualified; for example, we pray to God as Father, and “Father” he is, but not like any father we know from our own limited experience. Human thought and language about God simply fails.³⁸ It’s rather like trying to talk about spiritual or immaterial realities (e.g., consciousness, goodness, dignity,

36 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 98–99. It should be noted that Williams’s concern is not to protect some Platonic notion of divinity, but rather to protect the finite, “natural,” and embodied integrity of humanity and of God’s good creation: “If Jesus suffers, it is a human self that suffers. This means that *it is the affirmation of unequivocal divinity for the Logos that mandates the affirmation of unequivocal humanity for Jesus*. The solution to the conundrum of their unity cannot be found by blurring the definition of either element.” (p. 63)

37 Sonderegger, “Christ as Infinite and Finite,” 109–13.

38 Particularly within the confines of the fallen world marred and distorted by sin. Whether pre-fallen creation is inherently sacramental such that human language is capable of participating in the divine thought and speech is an important, and different, question.

the “soul,” divine action in the world, etc.) within the confines of scientific language. We might point or gesture toward such realities, but we cannot adequately describe them in scientific terms: we can refine our comparisons and metaphors, but there will always be an unbridgeable gap between scientific description and theological language. While in the case of finite existence the gap is not actually ontological but merely epistemological and thus methodological, in the case of God our descriptive challenges go beyond the epistemological and methodological: simply stated, *God is ontologically Other*. As Kierkegaard put it, there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings. God is not simply another dimension of finite reality that one particular method, or set of methods, cannot penetrate to describe (as with one scientific discipline in relation to another, or the sciences in relation to other human disciplines of knowledge and inquiry). God is in God’s own category; God is, in fact, *beyond categories altogether*.

This would seem to spell the end for theology, rendering all God-talk impossible and perhaps even ridiculous, especially within the dualistic and desacralized worldview of modernity (or the post-Enlightenment period), which has the tendency of turning *methodological* naturalism into *ontological* naturalism and materialism (and hence “scientifically” positing atheism or at least agnosticism). But assuming the impossibility of theology is not a necessary consequence of recognizing the Infinite; in fact, such an assumption makes the same kind of mistake as the view it seeks to deny, but in the opposite direction—it is a negative (and negating) form of idolatry rather than a positive (asserting) one. Such an assumption rightly discerns that we cannot adequately talk about “God,” but it quickly moves on from this, progressing on the presumption that we can therefore adequately talk about “not-God.” But both “God” and “not-God” are human constructions that inherently summarize assertions or negations of what exists or does not exist within our finite universe. True apophatic theology does not begin with speculative philosophical assumptions about “what must be true” abstractly, but with a revelatory awareness of the infinite, overwhelming, and unnameable Reality and Presence that is God (and even here, “Reality” and “Presence” are redefined—because (re)constituted—by the disclosure and unveiling of God’s active and inexhaustible Being and Act).

Theology can be true and genuine not because human beings grow in their mastery of philosophical language and in their creativity in using religious metaphor and symbolism, but because God efficaciously speaks to us and enables our *speaking-after* God’s own Speech. We are incapable of ascending to God through language. Every human attempt to describe the Infinite—however brilliant and profound—amounts to a linguistic tower of Babel. Yet God is more than capable of descending to us in the form of God’s own Word and

thereby indwelling, because first creating then *assuming* and *animating*, our conceptual and linguistic forms, patterns, and references and, crucially, *transforming them in the process*. Our language on its own is inadequate, yet God is present to us in and through language. Since God is universally present and active, the cosmos is not abandoned to be inert and meaningless; it is “sacramental,” full of God’s presence and God’s speech (e.g., Ps 19:1–6; 24; 139:7–12) which we encounter and apprehend by faith. The Father speaks with his Word and his Breath—and the cosmos comes into being and has meaning, coherence, life, and dynamism. And by the Spirit creation is drawn up into the Son where it is cleansed, purified, redeemed, realigned, healed, enlightened—in short, transformed—in order to offer fitting (and in the case of humans, intelligible) praise and holistic worship (heart, soul, mind, strength) to the Father.

In light of this confession of faith, true and genuine theology is possible (*made possible*) but must necessarily also be responsive, dynamic, contextual, and ongoing; the truth it seeks to express is not inherently inaccessible, but it is *inexhaustible*. Thus, genuine theology is an active and intentional spiritual *practice* of paying attention to God and aligning one’s heart, mind, body, and speech to God’s own speaking, doing, and willing. Thus also, genuine theological language is analogical, not merely in a philosophical or conceptual or linguistic sense, but in a sacramental and participatory sense. This is why we seek to discern God’s Word *in the words of Scripture*—even when interpreting figuratively or typologically—not *in spite of or apart from* the words/narrative in either a kernel-husk abstract kind of way or in a “gnosticizing” allegorical interpretation that completely detaches content from form.

I suggest that it is against this kind of backdrop that the genuine theological meaning of words like omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, and infinity—as describing the divine perfections—should be understood and expressed. The same is true of the divine attributes, including “classical” notions of aseity, simplicity, impassibility, immutability, and so on. The primary point is not to say that God is *incapable* of experiencing certain things finite beings

experience (it's not that God is to be conceived as simply “not-creature”),³⁹ “suffering” for instance, but that human experience is inadequate and distorting when attempting to describe God's own experiences.⁴⁰ We simply have no idea what it's like for God *to be God*. I suggest that this point holds not only because of the nature and limitations of theological language, but also because of the inherently contextual nature of theological language. Words such as “impassibility” and “immutability” did not simply fall from the sky abstractly, nor were they imported from Hellenistic thought in some simplistic and unidirectional kind of way; rather, they were commandeered and employed with specific theological intentions in mind, within particular historical settings, in order to accomplish contextual theological work (both polemic and constructive, both negating and asserting).⁴¹ The following two quotations from Williams are helpful in illustrating this point.

The classical theological and Christological scheme does not mean *either* that God stands aloof from the suffering of the human instrument he has assumed or any other human individual, *or* that his divine

39 Surely fundamental human experiences must be grounded ultimately in something that is “real” in God (what else would they be grounded in?); in fact, in God, they are *more*—not less—real (in an ultimate sense). Human experience participates in the Real, but in ways that are necessarily finite, partial, divided, myopic, limited, temporal, and—due to our fallenness—distorted and misaligned. For example, T. F. Torrance argues that while God does not experience “time” in a human way (subject to decomposition, having a beginning and an end, etc.), God must experience something like the succession of moments within the divine life, if relationality within the divine life is to make any meaningful sense. See, for example, Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 241.

Or (drawing from Stan Grenz), while God should not be conceived as a sexual being, human sexuality (which embodies our physical “incompleteness” and yearning for union) might be something that is partial, incomplete, and distorted now as a human experience yet also a sign that points beyond itself eschatologically to something it cannot actually fulfill (even in marriage): union with Christ and the Father by the indwelling Spirit (the Spirit who is “in” us—individually and together—places us “in” Christ who is “in” the Father; see John 14–17). Thus, sexuality is a finite and physical reality that acts as a sign of something that is real in God (perichoretic union) but in ways that human language fails to describe adequately (there is both continuity and radical discontinuity between the sign and *both* its human fulfilment in the new creation community and its transcendent reality in the triune God). See Stanley J. Grenz, “The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Theology of the *Imago Dei* in the Postmodern Context,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2002) 50–57.

40 Similarly, to say that all biblical language is, in some sense, metaphorical is not to suggest that its content is less than factual, but rather to suggest that it is more than merely factual.

41 One could cite many examples of this. One that Williams mentions is the importance of the doctrine of divine simplicity as a critical response to the Gnostic cosmogonies/theogonies, asserting “God's absolute independence of any narrative of change, necessary emanation, division and so on” which is “inseparable from the idea of a creation that is unified and good in itself” (Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 69). I borrow the image of “commandeering” from Alan Torrance (in a class lecture at Regent College, Vancouver): as a police officer commandeers a vehicle and thereby “enables” it to do things it usually cannot do (go through red lights, travel well beyond the speed limit, etc.), so God “commandeers” human language in order to render it efficacious for his purposes.

“subjectivity” is somehow immersed in and identified with a human psyche, in an extreme instance of intersubjective empathy. The presence of God in or to the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth is literally immeasurably more intimate than any intersubjective exchange of feeling; but this is not necessarily to qualify in any way what the doctrine of divine impassibility affirms, which is that God is not passive in relation to other agents on the same level, not part of an *interactive* system.⁴²

“Ubiquity,” the belief that God’s presence is not spatially limited, is here [improperly] treated as if it were some sort of positive predicate, the ability to be in every place rather than in only one. But insofar as it can be called a distinctive doctrine in early theology, it is much more an aspect of the *denial* that spatiality is an appropriate category for speaking of God. There is a difference between unlimited spatial “reach” and the denial of spatiality as a mode divine presence.⁴³

It seems that “classical theism,” at least as Williams represents it, succeeds primarily not by giving us exhaustive and abstract definitions of theological terms, but in providing frameworks that both enrich and constrain the use and ongoing refinement of such terms as they apply to the triune God of Scripture and the Christian Tradition and as they relate to the church’s missionary context.

Analogical Language and the Bible

In his blog post on “classical theism,” Richard Middleton worries that the classical emphasis on the analogical nature of theological language (for example, in Aquinas) leads to ways of understanding God that do not match the ways in which God is depicted in the Bible. This is a valid and important concern.⁴⁴ For example, Middleton writes,

This psalmist [Ps. 18] had no qualms about describing God in the most outlandish way (so outlandish that Rastafarians could come to use verse 8 as proof that JAH smokes weed); the text piles up images and

42 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 9.

43 Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 139.

44 The next line of the blog post is much more puzzling: “Most crucially, classical theism is in fundamental contradiction with the central Christian understanding of the incarnation and the atoning death of Jesus.” This seems odd, given that “the central Christian understanding of the incarnation” arose within the framework of classical theism, an understanding which unites all major sub-traditions of the historic Christian Tradition: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

metaphors to portray just how much God was affected by the suffering of his faithful servant.⁴⁵

Despite the clear depiction in the Bible of God being affected by creatures—from God being grieved in his heart at the violence before the flood (Genesis 6:6) to God’s “repentance” or change of mind about destroying Israel after the idolatry of the golden calf (Exodus 32:14)—classical theists usually relegate such biblical language to mere metaphor or anthropomorphism.⁴⁶

In response, I would like to make two points. First, I do not think that classical theism must necessarily deny that words like “grief” or “anger” name an experience that is real for God.⁴⁷ The point it would make instead is that we really have no idea what it is like for God to “grieve” or “be angry” (in an emotional or existential sense). Certainly, God does not simply *react* in an instinctual kind of way, whereas, for us, many of our emotional responses are grounded in instinct and in social conditioning. Moreover, human experiences of emotion are intrinsically *embodied* in deep and pervasive ways. What would fear, for example, *feel like* to a being who does not sweat, or experience an increased heart rate, or wrestle with flight-fight-freeze reflexes, which are not cognitive but embodied responses embedded in the “primitive” parts of our brain stemming from our evolutionary history? We don’t really know. *There is both continuity and radical discontinuity when we think about such words in relation to God.* Much damage has been done (and continues to be done) when Christians read Scripture in ways that do not consider the discontinuity between God’s anger and ours (but also God’s love and ours). Perhaps what Scripture leads us to do, all things considered, is not to reflect

45 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 3. E.g., “Smoke went up from his nostrils / and devouring fire from his mouth; / glowing coals flamed forth from him’ (Psalm 18:8). God rode upon a cherub, bowed the heavens, and came down to deliver the suppliant in cloud and thunder and lightning, parting the waters by the blast of his nostrils.”

46 Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 3.

47 This suggestion is substantiated by the detailed work of Thomas Weinandy, in his book *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), who identifies similar suggestions in Patristic writers of the east and west (Justin Martyr; Aristides, Athenagoras, Theophilus; Ireneaus; Tertullian; Novatian; Lactantius). As one representative example, citing Tertullian: “This does not mean that God is without emotion. Rather it means that God possesses emotions in a divine manner. It is not that God possesses human emotions, but rather that man possesses divine emotions. It is ‘palpably absurd of you to be placing human characteristics in God rather than divine ones in man, and clothing God in the likeness of man, instead of man in the image of God. And this, therefore, is to be deemed the likeness of God in man, that the human soul has the same emotions and sensations as God, although they are not of the same kind; differing as they do both in their conditions and their issues according to their nature.’ ... Moreover, unlike us, God’s anger is subsumed into his happiness. ‘God alone is truly happy, by reason of his property of incorruptibility. Angry he will possibly be, but not irritated, nor dangerously tempted; he will be moved but not subverted.’” (Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 102, citing Tertullian.)

speculatively about “how God feels” but rather to notice and contemplate *how God acts* in response to human suffering, evil, injustice, and so on?

We can reflect similarly on the question of whether or not God suffers. I am not sure that a “classical view” (especially as a *living tradition*) requires us to say that God cannot empathize with God’s creatures and especially with human beings.⁴⁸ Even the word “suffering” could be permissible, so long as we do not imply (as the word often seems to) that God is *passive* in suffering or simply *at the mercy* of forces outside of God’s own being. Within human experience, most suffering is not directly sought out; most suffering *comes upon* humans, *subjects them*, completely beyond their control and outside of their will. Some suffering comes about because of sinful human choices. Some suffering afflicts us apparently randomly within a seemingly chaotic and unpredictable world (e.g., natural disasters). Some suffering comes by way of spiritual affliction or oppression. And sometimes, human beings enter into suffering willingly and actively, perhaps in pursuit of a greater good or in solidarity with others (perhaps here human suffering is most like God’s response to suffering or even God’s “way of suffering”?). In any case, to be human is to suffer. Can we say “to be God is to suffer” in the same way or without significant qualifications?

The human experience of suffering is also deeply intertwined with our experience of time. Getting a vaccine, for example, involves experiencing minor pain and discomfort for a second or two; most would not call this “suffering.” But if the temporal experience of feeling a needle’s injection were to be drawn out and extended for days, we would likely call this “suffering.” The experience of a present crisis, for instance a break in a relationship or the loss of a loved one, can involve intense suffering; but the passing of time changes our future experience of that event. Applied to God, we do not even need to posit an abstract notion of “atemporality” or “existing outside of time” to realize that we simply do not know how infinite eternality (whatever it is) impacts God’s experience of our finite present (remembering that “infinite eternality” does not merely mean *a really, really, really—to the ultimate superlative—long time*, but something beyond linearity as we know it altogether). If one were to experience 1 second of pain and 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds of bliss, we probably would not find this “suffering” to be too severe. Whereas a year of pain would be much more difficult

48 “Repentance” or “changing one’s mind” seems different to me; it seems more likely to me that instances of God changing his mind or “repenting” reflect the human perspective of the biblical authors, not a sustained and analytical reflection on how it is that God makes decisions. Without even getting into abstract debates about God’s foreknowledge, if we simply assume that God has access to all possible information (including the depths of peoples’ hearts and thoughts), what would be left to persuade God that God has not already known and considered? Are we really to believe that God is swayed simply by our rhetoric or the passion with which we offer our pleas? This would seem to put us on a very slippery slope toward prosperity or word-of-faith thinking.

to bear. However, if we were beings that lived for millions of years, our sense of time and thus of suffering might be quite different and one year of pain might not seem like “suffering” to us.⁴⁹

There are, of course, limits to this analogy. My point is simply that we do not really understand what we mean when we ask whether or not God “suffers.” I do not think that it is problematic, within a “classical” view, to believe that God can empathize with human suffering. But can God experience trauma, that is, something that is inherently incapacitating? If not, can God empathize with those who experience trauma (i.e., if we accept the premise that if God does not experience something we experience, then God cannot sufficiently empathize with us)? It seems to me that too little empathy would inhibit God’s capacity to love, while too much empathy would inhibit God’s capacity to do everything else.⁵⁰ This is because empathy tends to make the present and immediate context all-absorbing and our perspective myopic.⁵¹

Second, in the passages Middleton quoted, while we should not dismiss what is depicted as *mere* metaphor, surely we do still have to distinguish metaphorical language (and anthropomorphisms) from more “literal” statements. Most of these are rather obvious: God does not literally have a heart, nostrils, have smoke coming from his nostrils and mouth, and so forth. Sometimes, though, scriptural language that should not be taken literally is not obviously metaphorical (specifically within the narrative world of Scripture itself). For example, Scripture generally depicts God as male: the imagery for God is predominantly masculine, the personal pronouns for God are male, many of the Bible’s major symbols and titles for God are culturally masculine (e.g., King), and Jesus characteristically refers to

49 The equivalent ratio applied to one million years amounts to 11.57 years. To us, 11.57 years of intense suffering might seem unbearable, but it is the same ratio as one second in one twenty-four-hour day.

50 To provide a personal example, in the midst of writing this paper, we faced a family crisis that was potentially devastating (my seventeen-year-old son had to be taken to the hospital by ambulance with symptoms very similar to those caused by a stroke). Thankfully (praise God!), the problem turned out to be relatively minor (an atypical migraine causing neurological disruptions). But, in my love and concern and worry for my son—in short, my empathy—I was completely incapacitated from doing anything productive in a creative, scholarly, or compositional sense. Whatever it means for God to experience “empathy,” it cannot mean this. Otherwise, the universe would fall into chaos and destruction! Similarly, for those who care for others professionally (counsellors and therapists), empathy is important but also very limited and potentially counter-productive for good practice (e.g., dual relationships, transference, etc.). A client needs another human person who is present, but also one who transcends the present context (offering some distance and perspective) and is not absorbed by empathy.

51 For a fascinating and evidence-based treatment of this topic, see Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2016). The capacity to empathize is important and helpful, especially on an individual basis, but empathy alone—or apart from other capacities such as reasoning—can be disastrous, especially at larger scales (e.g., at the level of professional, societal, or legal policy-making). It bears both the strengths and weaknesses of anecdotal experience and evidence.

God as “Father.” To be sure, Scripture also uses feminine imagery to talk about God (this is very important!), but it does not refer to God directly as “Mother” or as “she.” On this basis, some argue that the Bible’s masculine language points to something direct or “real” about God, while its feminine language is a metaphorical way of talking about something else about God (God’s character, or the manner of God’s actions, or God’s care for his creature, and so forth).⁵² For the record, I do *not* think that God *is* male.⁵³ I am just pointing out that the Bible has “no qualms about describing God in the most outlandish[ly male] way” (to quote Middleton out of context) *over and over again*. So much so that many feminist theologians regard the Bible to be a thoroughly and inescapably patriarchal text. The correct response, in my view, is not simply to point out that the Bible also envisions God as female (so that God is, what, some kind of androgenous or intersexual being?) but that sex and gender are created categories describing procreative creatures and God is not a created (and procreating) being; *God transcends sex and gender altogether* (though perhaps the unique experiences of women and men point to something that is real but transcendent and indescribable in God?). In order to make this kind of qualification, however, we cannot but appeal to the analogical nature of theological language for God and to categories such as divine infinity and simplicity.

Theological Reflection and the Bible

I have often noticed that biblical scholars and theologians ask different kinds of questions. As a result, sometimes their proposals can seem to point to different, mutually exclusive conclusions, when in fact this is not necessarily the case. A good recent example of this is the debate concerning whether or not human beings possess a “soul” that is distinguishable from their body (as an immaterial “thing” or “substance”). Recently, some biblical scholars have argued against the “classical” view of the soul, namely some version of dualism, and instead promoted a purportedly “biblical” view which is more closely aligned with physicalism (e.g., non-reductive physicalism or “holism,” perhaps bolstered by emergence theory). This newer view often combines insights from “neuroscience” with biblical scholarship that attempts to show that the “classical” view of the soul is not a biblical

52 Simon Turpin, “Is God Male or Female? An Overview of God Revealed as Male in Scripture and a Critique of Feminist Biblical Revisionism,” *Answers in Genesis*, online: <https://answersingenesis.org/who-is-god/god-male-female/>

53 See my blog post, “Is God Male?” on the *Junia Project* website (incidentally, the post was inspired by my reading of Aquinas, specifically his discussion of substantive and adjectival predication of the divine names): <https://junia-project.com/is-god-male/>

idea but a philosophical one.⁵⁴ The essence of the argument is that the Bible does not support the notion of the “soul”; one does not arrive at the classical notion of the “soul” as a legitimate deductive application of biblical exegesis. When the Bible uses words traditionally translated as “soul,” it typically refers to the whole person (Gen 2:7 is a good example) and perhaps sometimes to the interior dimension of the human person holistically conceived, not to a distinct and potentially separable spiritual substance or essence. We might say, exegetically, that the Bible’s view of the “soul” is, at the most, underdetermined (perhaps like its view of the afterlife more generally).

The problem with this kind of argument, however, is that it does not account for how Christian philosophers and theologians arrive at the notion of the “soul” (if not minimizing or evading philosophical and theological concerns altogether). Granted, if one begins with the Bible and simply seeks to deduce what it explicitly teaches, one does not on that basis conclude that substance dualism is a “biblical” idea. (Of course, this is true of lots of things that are not strictly “biblical” but real nonetheless, such as DNA, protons, bacteria, etc.).⁵⁵ However, if one poses the question differently, things become more complicated. For example, is it possible for a human being to exist consciously without their body, even temporarily? If so, how do we explain that? What precisely *is* this non-physical or non-material aspect of the person that retains some level of agency and consciousness in a disembodied state? And might the Bible shed any light on these questions at all,

54 I place scare quotes around “neuroscience” because, properly speaking, no scientific method can tell us whether or not an immaterial object or substance exists: its conclusions on this matter are predetermined not by Reality but by method. For a profound and insightful critique of currently fashionable strains of scientific reductionism (what the author calls “parascientific” views and literature), see Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). I say that some biblical scholarship “attempts to show” that the ‘soul’ is not biblical because some passages remain at least suggestive concerning the existence of an immaterial “part” of the human constitution. See, for example, the treatment offered in Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturally and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 19–50. A good example of a biblical scholar arguing against the classical view of the soul is Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 81–85; see also Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

55 Similarly, in response to the “classical” view of God’s atemporality, Middleton writes, “the Bible has no conception of an atemporal ‘eternity’—in either the Old or New Testament. No biblical texts that have the term ‘eternal’ (in English translation) ever mean atemporality (being outside of time). This isn’t just my opinion; it is the view of every reputable biblical scholar I have encountered.” (Middleton, “God’s Relationality,” 4.) But this settles nothing, because the Bible has no understanding whatsoever of “space-time” as we know it (or how relativity impacts our experience and understanding of time). The Bible’s view is inadequate (or under-developed) in this respect, both scientifically and philosophically. This is not a weakness of the Bible, as the Bible is not primarily trying to do science or philosophy; at the same time, scientific and philosophical matters not addressed in the Bible are still important! I am not arguing here that the “atemporal view” is correct, just that the so-called “biblical view” is neither necessarily exhaustive nor fully determinative in understanding finite “time,” much less eternal “time” (whatever that might be).

however underdeveloped? Here is where the philosophical notion of the “soul” becomes useful. It names something that, while not a conclusion from biblical exegesis, is potentially true about human beings on the basis of other things we know (or suspect) to be true from Scripture and from human experience.

Other questions bolster the philosophical appeal of the “soul”; for example, how do we account for the continuity of the person (*who am I?*) on the basis of the physical body alone when we know that our future bodies (e.g., twenty years from now) will be totally different from the bodies we presently possess (I mean this literally: our current cells will have expired and those we will have in the future will be copies via genetic replication—with minor changes and mutations along the way—and then copies of copies, and so on). How can I say that the “me” who exists twenty years from now (or twenty years ago) is the same ‘me’ who exists presently? What precisely is the entity I refer to as me/I? What about the continuity of my personhood over the course of my existence: is the embryonic ‘me,’ the toddler ‘me,’ the teenaged ‘me,’ the adult ‘me,’ and the senior ‘me’ the same person? I imagine we would respond, ‘yes and no,’ but to the degree that our answer is ‘yes,’ what allows us to say that, ontologically? Perhaps we would appeal to memory (embodied in the brain) to explain the continuity of the person, but what then becomes of the person who suffers memory loss or dementia? Are they the same person, ontologically, or not? If so, how so?⁵⁶ Can the person really be reduced to the physical or the material (however physically complex)? Arguments for non-reductive physicalism tend to appeal to notions such as emergence to explain the qualitatively different states that arise as the result of increasingly biological complexity, but even emergence cannot fill the gap that remains between scientific description and spiritual (and nonmaterial) realities and entities (no scientific term can). The answers to these kinds of questions are complex; they are not reducible to a narrow or naïve biblicalism or scientism.⁵⁷

My intention here is not to offer a robust argument for the existence of the soul but to point out that on this matter the disciplines of theology and biblical studies ask different kinds of questions and thus come to use language and concepts in different kinds of ways. Conclusions that appear, on the surface of things, to be incommensurable and/or mutually exclusive are *not necessarily so*. Theological language does not seek to erase, displace, or replace the Bible’s narrative or its

56 To appreciate the philosophical complexity of such questions, see Richard Swinburne, *Are We Bodies or Souls?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

57 Not to mention mystical experiences, near-death (or death and resuscitation) experiences, or the sense that a dying person lingers and then dissipates gradually upon death, or the rare cases of sudden lucidity in patients with severe dementia or memory loss right before death, and so on. For a fascinating account of such things, which is both open yet also quite cautious theologically, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

use of language; rather, in dialogical engagement with all language games, thought forms, speech patterns, and disciplines of knowledge and inquiry, it draws us *back to the biblical narrative in different, enriched ways*. It helps us to exhaust human thought (not cheaply, but in good faith) and opens us to engage divine revelation and its written codification in fresh and contextual ways. Moreover, the Bible itself does this kind of theological work as its narrative progresses, taking up, recapitulating, and transforming formerly received revelation and tradition within the context of its present readership and audience.

Conclusion

In closing, I suggest that classical theism does not offer the last word on definitive and exhaustive definitions concerning God's being and attributes, or on concepts such as infinity, immutability, impassability, aseity, and the various "omni" attributes. Rather, what the classical view does best, especially when reading Scripture well and in close dialogue with biblical scholars, is to *interrogate critically what we mean when we use human language for God*. It rests on the insistence that God is Transcendent and Self-Sufficient in God's eternal triune life and we, as finite, temporal, contingent, limited, and perspectival creatures, have absolutely no idea what it is like for God *to be God*. What we confess about God's being, character, inner life, and will, we confess by faith on the basis of divine revelation and we try to make educated guesses and "faithful improvisations" on the implications of divine revelation in response to new questions posed by philosophy, science, and all the various disciplines of human learning and experience.⁵⁸ Here we must progress both by way of tentative constructive proposals and (perhaps with a higher degree of certainty) with negations, constraints, and deconstructions in response to human conceptual overreach concerning God (i.e., idolatry). Does "God" "suffer"? Perhaps yes *and* no. It depends very much on what we mean by "God" and what we mean by "suffer." Does God "change" and is God "affected" by human beings? Again, it depends on what we mean by these terms, what specific misconceptions we might need to correct, and how such terms apply to God and to human beings in both continuous and radically discontinuous ways.

Furthermore, acknowledging the critical function that classical theological language for God plays can help us think contextually and missionally as we do constructive theology in the present. For example, reflecting critically on God's immutability might find practical application in one of two directions. At times when God is perceived to be distant and transcendent while human suffering is

⁵⁸ In referring to "faithful improvisation," I am alluding to Kevin J. Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). The term "faithful improvisation" was used earlier by J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1995), 182–84.

severe and its need for God's presence in suffering great, then divine immutability might actually serve to critique false notions of transcendence.⁵⁹ However, in cultural settings where God is perceived to be too similar to human beings, or where divine immanence is overemphasized—such that God's love, compassion, personal presence, and even casual familiarity to us are emphasized to the neglect or even exclusion or denial of God's holiness, justice, invisibility, and otherness/transcendence—then the relevance and utility of theological witness to God's immutability intensifies.⁶⁰ Without such theological reflection equipped with adequate conceptual categories, many seem vulnerable to simply assimilate the Bible's simple and straight-forward language about God into their preconceptions and culturally-formed worldview and/or social imaginary.

And so, may the dialogue continue, may the church's witness be ever clarified and unified, and may we not succumb to the temptation—on any side of any issue—to resolve the mystery and the tension of Scripture, divine revelation, and human experience prematurely, uncritically, or unreflectively!

59 I think, for example, of the context in which Julian of Norwich did her theological reflection and work. See Patrick S. Franklin, "Julian of Norwich: Her Life, Contribution, and Contemporary Significance," in *Between the Lectern and the Pulpit: Essays in Honour of Victor A. Shepherd*, ed. Rob Clements and Dennis Ngien (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2014), 18–21.

60 It seems to me that contemporary North American culture struggles with both forms of the distortion. In many ways, we see the effects of "moral therapeutic deism" impacting peoples' lives, hence the need for God's immutability in the service of critiquing overly abstract and depersonalized views of the divine. But in other ways, we see the effects of sentimental, self-focused, pop-spiritualities, whether in the "Jesus is my boyfriend" worship in some evangelical circles or the more self-actualizing (and God/the universe is always on my side) focus of much of our culturally popular forms of spirituality.