Introduction

The Trials of Desire

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Confronted by religious and cultural diversity, some doubt whether Christian faith remains possible today. There are times and places when commitment to a particular religious tradition seems almost automatic, but the modern West offers many possible forms of life, religious and otherwise. Yet although faith has become a tenuous possibility—appealing to some, perplexing to many—this ambivalence is rarely acknowledged in public debates over religion. Critics claim that religion is necessarily irrational and violent, and its loudest defenders are equally strident. This insistence masks an underlying anxiety, which stems from the half-conscious awareness that its bluster remains an unjustified bluff. Whether it supports or opposes religious commitment, dogmatic certainty is psychologically fragile, and in fact it frequently shatters.

This volume suggests that Christians need not lay claim to certainty, for faith is a matter of passion (which plays best in the dark). Drawing on classic Christian thought alongside modern philosophy and literature, these essays argue that language cannot capture divine transcendence, for the creator described in Christian discourse
is not an object in the world. This suggests that modern arguments about God’s existence represent a dead end: in contrast to those who struggle to prove (or disprove) the existence of a divine being, Christian faith begins in a desire that outstrips itself, impassioned by the darkness of God.

THE ESSAYS gathered here are connected by four interrelated sets of questions. First, if God is the source of all things, God cannot be distinguished from the world in the way that two things are distinguished from each other, but this makes it difficult to avoid collapsing any difference between them. Augustine, Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa all affirm the ongoing importance of the created world, but their insistence upon divine transcendence risks dissolving God into creation—leaving one to worry that the value of either is lost. This theological tradition thus raises the question: If there is no common term on the basis of which God and creation could be opposed, how can God be differentiated from processes immanent to the natural order?

A second set of questions follows from the first: If the divine is no ordinary object, how can Christians speak of God? In order to explore possibilities for theological speech, these essays set Primo Levi’s poetry and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction alongside Christian traditions of self-critique. In this way, they suggest that poetic expression converges with a strand of Christian thought which argues that theological affirmations require a corresponding unsaying (in Greek, *apophasis*). If descriptive discourse cannot capture a transcendent God, it may be that expressive speech can surpass predicative reference. Or, on the other hand, perhaps poetry embodies the self-critical openness that characterizes apophatic negativity.

Expanding the range of Christian discourse in this way raises a third question: If God cannot be captured discursively, how does Christian thought differ from atheism? The flexibility of theological speech could encourage apophatic traditions to embrace their similarity to a sophisticated atheism, but even the most mystical theologians have been known to draw the boundaries of orthodox doctrine.
The question comes to a head with Marx, whose atheism resembles apophatic negativity in more than one way. These essays explore the ways in which Christian thought may acknowledge its affinity with atheism while continuing to sustain Christian practice.

It might be tempting to resolve the difficulties that surround Christian discourse by appealing to love, but desire is equally problematic when directed toward the divine. Thus, a fourth set of questions emerges: What does divine desire suggest concerning the status of creaturely realities? What does it mean to desire a God who transcends knowledge and experience? How does the love of God relate to the love of others? Rather than settle the questions at stake (concerning the relation between God and the world, the character of Christian discourse, and the distinction between atheism and faith), the theme of desire only amplifies their intensity. Crucially, however, where reason reaches its limit in uncertainty, these essays suggest that desire may take divine darkness as the occasion for a passionate faith.

Each of the volume’s four sections—Immanence and Transcendence, Discourse and Authority, Marxism and Negative Theology, and Revelations of Love—centers on one of the four sets of questions outlined above. However, these themes are so tightly connected that each runs through the collection as a whole.

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s essay, “End without End,” reflects on the relation between God and creation by drawing together the love of God and the love of everything else. In Rubenstein’s reading, where Augustine’s introspective search for God returns him to all things (now encountered in God), Nicholas of Cusa comes to himself by finding God in all things. For Nicholas, the universe resembles God in its endlessness even as it differs from God as a created, contracted infinity. On account of this similarity-in-dissimilarity, the desire for any thing draws us to God, who is the ultimate object of every desire.

In “The Darkness of God and the Light of Life,” Karl Hefty examines the function of the concept of life in negative theology against
the background of modern phenomenology. Hefty argues that according to Augustine, Pseudo-Denys, and Meister Eckhart, life is not an empirical phenomenon but rather the form taken by union between God and humanity. For this reason, Hefty says, the path into divine darkness is illuminated by life, which is in fact the very content of that illumination. In this theological tradition, as for the phenomenologist Michel Henry, life is the source of everything, and it is the milieu of affectivity. Thus, Hefty provocatively concludes, perhaps reflection on life leads inevitably to theology.

In “Mysterious Reasons,” Anna Williams observes that, although the Bible says that God is beautiful, it is not clear how this beauty relates to that of material creatures. Augustine claims in both cases that beauty is attractive insofar as it is rational, but he admits that aesthetic experience nevertheless precedes analysis. Williams argues that, although Edmund Burke’s earthbound aesthetics differs from Augustine’s, Burke helps us to imagine how the mind can be both drawn to and defeated by a mysterious object. In this, she suggests, the delight of the mind consists both in satisfaction and in the endless pursuit of deferred consummation.

In “Using Reason to Derive Mutual Illumination from Diverse Traditions,” David Burrell argues that the insistence of some believers that “there is such a person as God” testifies to their idolatry, for such an assertion makes God into a thing (albeit a big one). Burrell claims that the postmodern and medieval are close insofar as they recognize that faith is a mode of knowing; from this perspective, theology provides a corrective to the modern assertion of superiority over supposedly regressive societies. According to Burrell, while reason is easily co-opted by power, theology models a form of reflection in which the positive and the negative intertwine in service of love.

DISCOURSE AND AUTHORITY

In “Assent to Thinking,” Karmen MacKendrick describes a faith that is characterized by decentered unknowing. Against the widespread assumption that faith consists in propositional belief, MacKendrick
argues that Augustine and Aquinas both describe faith as a thinking with assent that renounces security. There remains a place for propositions, but MacKendrick suggests that statements of faith deepen rather than dispel its mystery. This desirous inquiry is the converse of an apophatic negativity; in MacKendrick’s account, the assent of faith aims to search rather than to declare, committed to a questioning that continues.

Katie Bugyis’s essay, “Apian Transformations and the Paradoxes of Women’s Authorial Personae in Late Medieval England,” shows the way in which authors from Mechthild of Heckeborn to Julian of Norwich describe the fruitful chastity of women religious, often through the figure of the bee. According to Bugyis, the metaphor of the bee authorized women’s voices, enabling them to defy the limits both of language as such and of the place of women in medieval society.

In “Academics and Mystics,” Bernard McGinn examines Jean Gerson’s evolving account of the relation between the academic and the mystical. Whereas his early mystical writings center on an affective reading of Dionysius the Areopagite, Gerson’s later work qualifies this emphasis by articulating his suspicion of untutored lay mysticism. According to McGinn, although Gerson attends to the danger of academic pride, he suggests that mystical experience benefits from the scrupulous constraints of academic theology.

In “How Wrong Could Dante Be?,” Robin Kirkpatrick argues that Dante devalues doctrinal purity, preferring instead to see error itself as part of the process of creation. Kirkpatrick traces the scathing wit with which Dante cuts self-important popes and academics down to size, and he suggests in this light that Dante’s exhilarating comedy indicates that theological language functions as a sacramental sign which exceeds our command and understanding.

MARXISM AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

In “The Turning of Discourse,” Cyril O’Regan argues that by cultivating a generous grammar Christian discourse avoids both the
desire for overdetermined systematicity and the anxiety implicit in overwrought claims to orthodoxy. Such a grammar escapes the dialectic between system and fragment by emphasizing questions more than answers, and it recognizes that traditions are constituted by doctrinal contestation. In O'Regan’s view, this grammar ultimately exists in order to give way to a silence that is more eloquent than even the most capable speech.

In “‘Love was his meaning,’” Oliver Davies argues that medieval Christian thought and modern science share an analogous understanding of language and the self. In Davies’s account, the performative use of language in Eckhart, Aquinas, and Dante approximates the modern emphasis on the materiality of the sign (which he associates with Karl Marx and Julia Kristeva). For this reason, Davies claims, reading premodern texts in light of modern science challenges the dualism naively presumed by some contemporary thinkers.

In “Ideology and Religion, Yet Again,” Ludger Viefhues-Bailey argues that debates concerning the secular or religious origin of political power betray a desire for a single source of legitimation. In this, they mirror the polemic between theists and atheists, who seek a stable point on which meaning and value may be securely grounded. In response, Viefhues-Bailey argues that scholars of religion ought to reflect on how imperfect—even ideological—concepts allow particular contestations to be described even if language remains entangled in systems of power.

“Is Marxism a Theodicy?,” Terry Eagleton asks. It could seem that Marx’s historical materialism provides a justification of evil; as Eagleton observes, Marx sometimes suggests that some evils are necessary insofar as they are what enables good to follow. After all, it sometimes appears that the price of socialism is years of suffering under the evils of capitalism. Nonetheless, Eagleton argues, Marxism (like Christianity) is a tragic creed, for it acknowledges its own fragility and does not assume that a happy ending is worth the hell required.

“If you do love, you’ll certainly be killed” records a conversation between Terry Eagleton and Denys Turner concerning the relation between Marxist theory and mystical theology. Expanding on his con-
tribution to this volume, Eagleton suggests that the two traditions are close in their affirmation of the sacramental meaning of material things and in their relentlessly critical character. Turner agrees, connecting Marx with the emphasis on materiality in Thomas Aquinas. Turner goes so far as to suggest that Meister Eckhart’s insistence on the dispossession of desire is the prerequisite of the transformative community that Marx describes. Turner and Eagleton thus come to agree that Christian sacramentality, like socialism, has a self-canceling character that anticipates its obsolescence.

In “As We Were Saying,” Eric Bugyis places several Marxist theorists indebted to Christian thought into conversation with a number of Christian thinkers who draw on Marx. Bugyis argues that the latter group (which includes Eagleton, Turner, and Herbert McCabe) provides a better foundation for the hope that liberation can be achieved. In his account, the former group (which includes Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek) lacks recourse to a theology of creation from nothing. For Bugyis, this theological trope is required for any revolution to avoid repeating the violence of the present order in a new context.

REVELATIONS OF LOVE

In “How to Say ‘Thank You,’” Vittorio Montemaggi argues that the rejection of idolatry entails a willingness to learn through attention to the suffering of others. On the face of it, Primo Levi and Julian of Norwich would seem to be at odds, for Julian claims that evil is fitting insofar as it serves the divine plan while Levi insists that the existence of Auschwitz militates against belief in God. Montemaggi argues that the God Levi rejects is one who plays favorites, allowing some to live while condemning others to suffer, but on Julian’s terms such a God would in fact be an idol. Montemaggi thus suggests that, despite his apparent atheism, Levi’s open-minded gratitude for the world exemplifies a basic rule of theological grammar.

In “Sitit Sitiri,” Philip McCosker distinguishes between varieties of apophaticism in terms of Christology, arguing that each corresponds to a logic of desire that either undermines or upholds the
Chalcedonian affirmation that Christ has two natures in one person. McCosker claims that Meister Eckhart sidelines Chalcedonian Christology by suggesting that God and creation displace each other, while Bonaventure strenuously attempts to maintain the balance between human and divine. According to McCosker, whereas the apophatic ascent described by Bonaventure is finally undone by the abandonment of creaturely desire, Maximus the Confessor effectively synthesizes negative theology and Christology by insisting that we can only journey to God as fully human.

In “Our Love and Our Knowledge of God,” John Hare argues that our knowledge of God may be limited because God’s relation to us is particular, unique in every case. Duns Scotus argues that we are each called to love God in a different way; according to Scotus (interpreted in light of Gerald Manley Hopkins), it is only through this particularity that we may contemplate the divine. Because we are in time while God is not, we cannot know God as God is in Godself, and yet for Scotus (as for Søren Kierkegaard), we may love that which we do not understand.

My own essay, “Eckhart, Derrida, and the Gift of Love,” argues that Jacques Derrida and Meister Eckhart both construe love as a gift that is entirely free of economic exchange, and both conclude on this basis that love cannot be grasped or identified. In my reading, Eckhart and Derrida do not rule out consideration of one’s own well-being, but their accounts do entail that calculated self-protection is external to love. For this reason, they suggest, lovers should not expect to balance love against prudential restraint: although both demands are indelible, they function at different levels. A gift of this sort is ineluctably dangerous, but Derrida and Eckhart suggest that unsettling darkness must be endured in order to preserve the possibility of love.

Denys Turner’s concluding meditation, “How to Fail,” ties together these themes by reflecting on anxiety and delight. In Turner’s telling, obsessive critique characterizes life in the academy; in his view, a sophistic irony that he calls “deconstructive” drowns contemplative wonder. Turner contrasts self-satisfied cynicism with the delight in creation exemplified by Aquinas, Scotus, and Hopkins, each
of whom acknowledge (in different ways) that amazement is the proper response to the gift of creation: that there is anything at all.

BECAUSE THESE essays are closely connected, they benefit from being read together. When the authors convened in 2012 for the conference in honor of Denys Turner’s retirement, his work served as a guiding thread in our reflection on the issues at stake. Because the contributors were drawn from Turner’s friends and former students, the gathering was characterized by a generous collegiality, and the participants devoted themselves with extraordinary sensitivity to creating a common conversation.

Each paper was circulated in advance of the conference, which meant that each benefited from a full hour of wide-ranging discussion. The essays in this volume have been revised in light of the other contributors’ comments on the conference papers, and many of them explicitly describe their connection with the other essays. Although they disagree about many things, the essays trace a common trajectory insofar as they display their authors’ commitment to reflection in community.

Together they suggest that the interplay between speech and unsaying opens the space in which an unknowing love may expand. Because faith is tenuous, some are tempted to retreat into dogmatic certainty, whether for or against religious commitment. However, the history of Christian thought opens the possibility of another response to uncertainty. Although dispassionate reason soon reaches its limit, Christian life may be understood as an ethical and political practice impasioned by a God who transcends understanding.