TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC FOR CONTEXTS OF CHANGE:
LOVE IN LIMINALITY

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Bibliography
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Abstract

Saint Augustine, the founder of Western theological hermeneutics, declared the double-love command of God and neighbour-as-self to be the key to Christian theology *(On Christian Doctrine).* Love is the heart of Christian theology, but love has a fluid range of meanings and its expressions are enmeshed within contextually specific forms. In an era of mass cultural change, as is currently the case in Western late-Capitalist cultures, the normative sociality of love is highly contested, complicating its function as a guide to Christian theology.

This thesis develops a theological hermeneutic for contexts of change utilising *liminality theory* from the discipline of anthropology, in order that love might continue to be a concept that acts as a guide to Christian theology, even whilst it is in the midst of cultural transformation. Central to liminality theory is a movement of *‘open-space’*—a chaotic but creative opportunity where stable sociality falls away in order to be transformed into a new sociality, fit to express the complex relationship between the individual and the universal. By negotiating the cultural open-space via a spiritual open-space of *contemplative prayer*—an embrace of apophatic strategies for knowing without form and for the refinement of human wisdom—the theologian is equipped with the resources required to love in liminality. This can be translated into a theological method where dialectical propositions and practices are held as *‘thresholds’* to be traversed into a ‘liminal’ anti-structure of discourse. The *‘contemplative-communitas’* present in liminal states of sociality, that is, a type of relating that emphasises direct and immediate engagement with a multiplicity of pre-systematised ‘other/s,’ affects both an objective and a subjective transformation of theological knowledge.

Re-examining Augustine’s theological hermeneutic of love with these resources in place, it is argued that if love is to be a guide for theology in contexts of cultural change, the conception of love itself must fall into liminality and be re-formed in the crucible of personal spiritual encounter with God-who-is-love.
So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.

Saint Augustine
Preface

Love is not a problem, not an answer to a question. Love knows no question. It is the ground of all, and questions arise only insofar as we are divided, absent, estranged, alienated from that ground.¹

Since the early 1990s, when I undertook Bachelor of Arts Honours research in Sociology of Religion, I have been an observant wayfarer in the epochal changes to religion in society. Sociologists predicted that religion and spirituality would become increasingly marginalized in late-Capitalist, secularizing cultures. Instead, religion has become a critical factor in twenty-first century global politics and spirituality has flourished in diverse, non-institutional forms. Ordained as a priest in 2003, I became enmeshed in the complexities of an institutional church in transition. The ‘Church of England’ is burdened with the task of reforming church structures in a post-colonial era and expanding its exclusively English identity. Furthermore, the socio-cultural changes in religion and spirituality are accompanied by substantial shifts in philosophical assumptions about how we know truth, psychological viewpoints as to how we form relationships, and scientific data about the universe, all of which are influencing the way theology is being conceived across the globe.

These heady contemplations of an educated sociologist and priest took a startling turn in 2008, when I suffered my own private crisis. At the most intimate and personal levels I was led into an investigation of these massive issues of change in the particularity of my own individual life. To think about these challenges as an objective exercise is one thing, to be confronted by them in the loss of one’s own family, one’s own home, one’s own place in the social order is quite another. But it was here in the intimate and internal world of spirituality, that I found the beginning of a new way of thinking which could lead me through the complexity of

global movements in public religion.

The opening quote by twentieth century contemplative Thomas Merton beautifully expresses the theological question that this thesis seeks to explore. Jesus’ affirmation of the shema and his declaration of a ‘new covenant’ offer a directive for love as a guide for Christian theology. However, in the present era of seismic cultural change, we encounter the complexity of love as a culturally contested linguistic concept. Its meanings are inextricably entwined with both individual experience and the social norms of love expressed in a seemingly endless variety of feelings, actions, relationships and institutions. That is, love itself is a problematic concept, not because love is a problem, but because the pathways between love as the ground of being and love as a guide for living are divided, absent, estranged, and alienated.

I am not the first, of course, to have traversed a trial of life and faith that St John of the Cross famously called ‘The Dark Night of the Soul.’ Nor is my discovery unique, that in the prayer of this night I encountered a new way of being which transformed my theological thinking. Thomas Merton himself entered into a Trappist monastery in 1942 in the throes of The Dark Night of World War II, and wrote much on peace and non-violence in the years following his contemplative transformation. This thesis draws upon several contemporary theologians who insist that a re-grounding of theological thinking in the life of prayer—as it was in the earliest centuries of Christian theology—is now an essential and urgent task. I am emboldened to attempt what lies herein, by the example of Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams and others exploring the re-integration of spirituality and theology. However I walk my own pathway of integration, exploring a theological hermeneutics informed by my academic background in social science, from the perspective of one who has been transformed by contemplative prayer.

This thesis is a work of love that seeks to create an intellectual space where love may speak on its own terms in theological discourse, guiding with ambiguous certainty through even the biggest of Dark Nights—a church and a world in

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3 Thomas Merton, The Seven Story Mountain (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1948)
epochal transition. It argues for careful and attentive theological conversations which express love by their determination to allow vulnerability and brokenness, not just in the relationships complicit in theological discourse, but in the sociality of the concepts themselves. In a world in cultural transition, the gift of love is freedom for theological discourse, and for theologians themselves to be works in progress evolving in dialectical relationship with a tradition updating itself—faithful but not stifled by what has been, open and not fearful of an unfolding future.
Chapter 1

Love is the Key

So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.\(^4\)

Love is the heart of Christian theology. As a guiding principle it would seem to set a clear, uncomplicated course for theological hermeneutics. However, the present era of seismic cultural change alerts us to the cultural complexities of love as a socially embedded concept. Christian theology emerges from an ongoing, interactive dialogue between the normative foundations of the tradition on the one hand, and the particular contexts or worlds-of-life to which the wisdom of the gospel is applied on the other. In times of cultural change, the foundations of that relationship between context and tradition is disturbed from the side of culture, and the possibility for rupture between meaningful interpretations of the Christian tradition and the life of love to which Christians are called ensues. This in turn presents a theologian with an opportunity to re-examine the tradition, since systematic discourses about God do well to submit to the rigors of intelligent critique, lest theology might speak only of itself, rather than the God who stands beyond it. Specifically, how does love continue to be an effective guide to Christian theology when both social norms and the community's understanding of love are highly contested?

This thesis carefully examines the mechanisms of theological hermeneutics by

which a theologian might conceive of her or his task during periods of epochal cultural change. It does this through two investigations: first, it develops a framework for understanding the social process of cultural change and second, it examines how love might be the key to Christian theology even in the midst of this unfolding process. When theological discourse works in synchronicity with this process, rather than in resistance, it discovers resources that will enable it to continue to love God and neighbour-as-self, through a movement of unknowing, in dialectical relationship with what has previously been known and what is yet to become known.

What emerges from this investigation into theological hermeneutics in contexts of change is that love must be allowed its failure and fragility in the scholarly practice of theological discourse, if it is to continue to act as the key to Christian theology within the chaotic circumstances of transitional environments. In fact, it is only through this failure and fragility that divine love might hope to be described, and the many and varied challenges of human love in contemporary theology find meaningful address. The theological hermeneutic developed herein proposes attention be given to the holding of an open-space in theological conversation, by which a theologian might pass over a threshold of unknowing, into a contemplative-communitas with God which refines and reforms the sociality of theological knowledge.

1.1 Theology in a World of Transition

It is widely agreed that Western culture (and church culture as a consequence) is in a period of mass transition. Sociologist Peter Berger describes a global society that is ‘a picture of a cultural earthquake affecting virtually every part of the world.’ In 1969 Victor Turner, the social anthropologist who first developed the

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6 Sociology and anthropology initially developed as separate academic disciplines in the nineteenth century. Victor Turner and ‘social-anthropology’ stands at a point in his discipline which started to integrate different methodologies such that—as is the case in this present research—critical tools are chosen from a plurality of social science methods, determined in relation to their subject matter. A useful history of social science research can be found in Marja Alastalo, “The History of Social Research Methods,” in The SAGE Handbook of Social Research Methods, ed. Pertti Alasuutari, Leonard Bickman & Julia Brannen (London: SAGE Publications, 2008).
social theory of liminality that is utilised in this thesis, discerned the rumblings of this cultural earthquake in Western Society.

What appears to have happened is that with the increasing specialization of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labour, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities ‘betwixt and between’ defined states of culture and society has become itself an institutionalized state.7

In other words, late-Capitalist culture thrives on a constant state of flux, the market continuously creating demand for the new and novel. Whether this represents continuity or a break from the previous epoch of modernism is debatable, but the global extent of technological change, politico-economic restructuring of the world, cultural shifts, population movements and the philosophy underlying these socio-cultural events is undeniable.8

Technological innovations in a ‘scientific age’ of Enlightenment have led the people of the world to a different engagement with their environments, leading tragically in this century to an environmental crisis of catastrophic proportions.9 The culture, its people and their belief systems—both religious and a-theistic—form the basis of engagement with their environment and with each other in an inextricably complex flow of relationships. When this complex system of people, their culture and their environment is disturbed, the meaning systems cease to provide appropriate guidance for everyday activity in this world.10

8 Often labeled with what has become a catch-all term—‘postmodernism’—this philosophical and cultural era is variously dated from around the middle of last century. For an example of a description of these cultural changes from the perspective of theology see Scott Cowdell, *God’s Next Big Thing: Discovering the Future Church* (Melbourne: John Garrett Publishing, 2004), 14.
9 There is some evidence that environmental degradation always accompanies the end of large-scale social epochs. See Sing C. Chew, *Ecological Futures: What History Can Teach Us* (Plymouth, UK: Alta Mira Press, 2008).
10 Husserl’s world-of-life comes to mind here: ‘In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each ‘I-the-man’ and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together.’ We, as living in wakeful world-consciousness, are constantly active on the basis of our passive having of the world. . . . Obviously this is true not only for me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together, belong, the world as world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning. . . . The we-subjectivity . . . [is] constantly functioning.’ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the
In stable cultural contexts key doctrines of God and humanity function as beliefs and values with a comprehensively shared social interpretation and have an easy quality about them. They are ‘fit for purpose’ to explain the world in which we carry out the business of everyday life. However, the initiation of cultural change introduces, at the very least the possibility, of a disjuncture between a belief system and the real-world experience. Questions arise in place of statements: What do we do with beliefs and values that don’t explain our experience? Why do the old answers no longer work? Is the world different from what I thought I knew? Am I different? In what way is God beyond my limited understanding? New understandings of old categories (old doctrines) will emerge from the disturbances of culture, but not without cost and struggle. It requires an uncomfortable decoding of new questions and previously held answers, an unfettered creativity and innovation, and hope for a future moment where everything might make sense again. The loss of dogmatic certainty in the context of cultural change opens a liminal space in theological discourse for which there is no obvious, externally mediated close.

In his book *Reconstructing Practical Theology: The Impact of Globalization*, John Reader describes how the shifts in global culture have resulted in theological categories entering into a state of flux, swept along by the tidal wave of socio-cultural deconstructions. This, in turn, has produced a mass of what Ulrich Beck calls ‘zombie categories’: ideas and ideals that have passed away, and yet are not at peace, so they are the ‘living dead.’ Zombie categories are ‘the tried and familiar frameworks of interpretation that have served us well for many years and continue to haunt our thoughts and analyses, even though they are embedded in a world that is passing away before our eyes.’

In other words, the potential problem of theology in eras of cultural transition is that the reasoned discourses that have previously served to explain a received

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12 For Ulrich Bech’s original discussion on zombie categories see Don Slater & George Ritzer, “Interview with Ulrich Bech,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, no. 2 (2001).

tradition of knowledge about God falls out of step with the experience of how that knowledge relates to everyday life. In theological discourse, the notion of zombie categories refers to a rupture between systematic theology and spiritual experience. The location of the rupture is in the negotiation of ‘sociality’—human interaction—which is ‘the phenomenological starting point for anthropological description.’

Issues of hermeneutics comes to the fore in this cultural context. In a narrow sense, hermeneutics is a scholarly task applied to the interpretation of texts, but in a wider sense might be applied to any complex phenomena treated ‘like’ a text. Culture, theology, philosophy, ethics and religion are subject to a process of interpretation for the production of meaning as a function of human sociality. If love is to continue to be a reliable guide for Christian theology, what is meant by love must first be articulated, in the plurality of assumed meanings that might be in the mind of any reader.

Preeminent British theologian Rowan Williams, whose work shall provide some instrumental guidance at key points in this thesis, has illustrated the way that certain cultural concepts have broken away from their theological intentions, including the concept of ‘charity.’ In a volume he wrote as the Archbishop of Canterbury at the close of the second millennium, Williams reflects theologically on four key cultural evolutions in British society that are changes that represent not only a loss of Christian values but a loss of support to civic society. One of these relates to the evolution of love in its civil or public expression by cultural icons, institutions and performances: the concept of charity. He notes that the word ‘charity’ has evolved during the Enlightenment period from being a state of Christian love or affection in the early 1400s, to meaning a benefaction in the late 1700s. The former implied a personal, even intimate, connection and the latter an

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15 This definition of hermeneutics, as it relates to theology, is supported by Alexander S. Jensen, Theological Hermeneutics (London: SCM Press, 2007), 2.
16 Rowan Williams, Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000)
institutional one.\textsuperscript{17}

What Williams laments is the further erosion of cultural expressions of institutional forms of love that offer ‘opportunity for suspending relationships characterized by competition.’\textsuperscript{18} By this he means conversations, rituals, organisations (fraternities) and cultural performances in the mode of carnival: occasions for people to come together for reasons other than their own gain, or ‘prior to negotiation.’\textsuperscript{19} Games enjoyed for their own sake are being replaced by occasions of competition and rivalry, professional sport being a prime example, where the advancement of one’s chosen team becomes paramount. When a culture’s structured expressions or public performances of love are eroded, something like a fundamental building block of civil society is at stake: opportunities for relationships based on the fundamental acceptance of every human person is threatened.

\subsection*{1.2 Love as the Key to Christian Theology}

Love has been a consistent theme in Christian theology. It was commanded by Jesus, first in an affirmation of the Jewish \textit{shema} (Deuteronomy 6:4–5, Matthew 22:37–40), then as a ‘new commandment’ to his disciples that they should love each other as Christ himself had loved them (John 13:34) and even more radically to love their enemies (Luke 6:27). Biblical commentator Leon Morris describes this as a personalising step from Jesus, internalising the law as an inner code for moral behaviour. He writes, ‘the meaning appears to be to make the commandments one’s own, to take them into one’s inner being.’\textsuperscript{20}

In the Johannine thread of New Testament scriptures, love is essential to the nature of God (1 John 4:8, 16), the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:16), and the human response to the love of God in Christ—we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). In the Pauline thread of New Testament teaching, love has a close

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[17] Rowan Williams, \textit{Lost Icons}, 53-54. Williams relies on the historical work of John Bossy for this analysis, whose account of the church in European society from 1400 to 1700 maps a significant transformation in the concept of charity during this epoch of wholesale cultural change. See, John Bossy, \textit{Christianity in the West, 1400-1700} (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1985).
\item[18] Williams, \textit{Lost Icons}, 71.
\item[19] Williams, \textit{Lost Icons}, 80.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
relationship with truth through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5), from which Christians cannot separate (Romans 8:39). It is primary to faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13:13) and the key to understanding the Old Testament law (Romans 13:8–9).21

The question of love as it relates to theology was one of the challenges the Apostle Paul faced as he underwent the task of re-interpreting the law through the lens of Jesus as the Messiah who had come to fulfill the law. He concluded, ‘owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.’22 Love of God and love of neighbour-as-self are inseparable because the relationships of the lover (that is, the believer) are inseparable. If the rules become nothing more than rules, rather than a positive affirmation of relationships, then the law will fail to fulfill its function as a law of love.

In his book *A Theology of Love*, Contemporary European Protestant theologian Werner Jeanrond, notes a deep cultural pessimism about love and the law in late Capitalist cultures, even the possibility of an internal law of conscience that predetermines right from wrong.23 Love has come to be associated with freedom rather than obedience, which means that the Christian emphasis on love as a commandment has produced a conflict of interests within itself as a concept. If the modern notion of free love is assumed— that is, adopted by osmosis as one participates in the life systems of one’s culture—an inevitable question arises: is it even possible for love to be commanded?24

21 Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, 81. In chapter two, Jeanrond offers an overview of the biblical material on love and the challenges of developing its diverse testimony into a single theology of love.

22 Romans 13:8


24 In a summary article on a theology of love, Jeanrond has identified a further seven cultural challenges to developing a theology of love in the contemporary Western context, each of which could have been explored further here to make the same point, that destabilisation of the conceptualisation of love in the cultural contexts into which theology speaks necessarily complicates the reception of Christian teaching on love. The seven challenges Jeanrond identified are i. the process of globalisation has made Christian theologians aware of both the similarity and the diversity in theologies of love from different religions (and none); ii. compared with medieval and early modern Europe, fewer people are supported by firmly structured communities, associations or groups; iii. love appears to be the only socially structured escape from loneliness; iv. children are considered the ultimate object of pure ‘otherness’ love, but they grow up and demand mutuality; v. sociologists have identified a desire for pure relationships rather than longevity, which has radically changed expectations of marriage and intimacy; vi. romantic love as mythology
For example, Australian theologian and ethicist Andrew Cameron noted the shift in Australian society's 'common objects of love' in relation to marriage law. 'Our society now loves the idea of love; it loves freedom of expression; it loves eradicating differences . . . and these changes-of-loves are what make it seem that marriage can be renegotiated.' Just as the normative values of love have changed the public discourse in Australia about same sex marriage law, so they have also impacted the theological discourse about love of God and neighbour-as-self and these social influences need critical examination.

This illustrates two tensions in the linguistic construction of love that complicate its use in discourse. First, the meaning of the word 'love' is inextricably entwined in social processes in its construction. That is, one cannot know what love is without relationship, and the distinct characteristics of those relationships will shape the meaning of the word love. Saint Augustine identified this in his theory of language, that there is a process between the senses recording concrete sensations, an early process of association or labelling of those sensations through human interaction, and then a refinement of those labels over time. Hence, love has a history, a geography and a network of relationships each of which influences the meaning in the particular instance in which the word is invoked. The sociality of love is revealed in cultural discourses about love and the law, but is often not apparent until underlying shifts in the social dynamics of a community begin to disturb the normative assumptions about the meaning of love.

A second distinguishing feature of love's linguistic form is the way in which a single, four letter word (in English) applies to a multitude of experiences and expressions in the world-of-life, maintaining a unity in its diversity through an

predominates the cultural mindset about love; vii. there is an internal pressure from Christian theology itself, to be constantly interacting with the actual world in which the Church loves, which, along with the self, is always emerging. Werner Jeanrond, "Love," in The Oxford Handbook of Theology and European Thought, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison & Graham Ward (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2013), 249-50.
26 See the discussion in Saint Augustine, “The Teacher,” in Against the Academicians: The Teacher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 1.20. This shall be explored later in the thesis in chapter three, section 3.2 as well as chapter five when Augustine’s theory of love and language are dealt with in detail.
underlying commonality.27 The eminent, nineteenth century philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein labelled this category of language ‘family resemblance’ words. In Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein’s illustration is the word ‘game,’ which has a meaningful generic reference to a category of activity with their own set of rules and objectives but a common theme of being played for enjoyment or competition.

But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions— namely the disjunction of all their common properties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "Something runs through the whole thread— namely the continuous overlapping of these fibers.”28

Something runs through the whole thread of linguistic applications of the word love. It is recognisable at face value as a particular set of human experiences, but each circumstance or expression is distinctive in relation to the particular objects and subjects. In other words, the linguistic construction of the concept of love functions by gathering together a range of meanings that all have a family resemblance to one another, while not being identical.

Jeanrond’s approach in A Theology of Love recognises both of these linguistic difficulties concluding, ‘in spite of all the differences in detail, human experience, wisdom and knowledge lead us to approach love as a summary concept for certain kinds of human relationships.’29 But also, Jeanrond insists on an emphasis on ‘the actual encounter with the other and ongoing critical and self-critical reflection.’30 Love’s actions have cultural expressions that offer evidence of inner worlds. Both of these worlds—the inner and the outer world-of-life—influence the linguistic construction of meaningful love language.

In the twentieth century, significant theological discourses on love include those of

27 Christian theologians have often tried to get around this by referring to the Greek language words for love. However, the complex and contested history of interpretation in regards to the meaning of eros, agape, philo and storge suggests this is not a sufficient solution.
29 Jeanrond, A Theology of Love, 5.
30 Jeanrond, A Theology of Love, 6.
systematic theologians—Barth\textsuperscript{31} and Tillich,\textsuperscript{32} Rahner,\textsuperscript{33} von Balthasar\textsuperscript{34} and Lonergan\textsuperscript{35}—where love is dealt with in different contexts of God’s revelation and the life of faith. Furthermore, a number of significant works have been produced on love as a theological subject.\textsuperscript{36} Influential protestant projects have included Nygren,\textsuperscript{37} Brümmer,\textsuperscript{38} Fromm\textsuperscript{39} and Outka\textsuperscript{40} and more recently Jeanrond.\textsuperscript{41} In addition, significant evangelical/pentecostal theologies of love have been proposed by Yong,\textsuperscript{42} Post,\textsuperscript{43} Oord,\textsuperscript{44} and Olthuis.\textsuperscript{45} In the Catholic tradition, Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical of \textit{Deus Caritas Est} expounds love as the basis of the church’s mission based on an understanding of God-who-is-love.\textsuperscript{46} Also of significance is Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological theology of eros\textsuperscript{47} and Catholic feminist


\textsuperscript{34} Von Balthasar sums up the theological aesthetic of his voluminous series of systematic theology in a short volume which describes love as key to understanding both the subject and the object of the gospel which can only be communicated effectively with a loving epistemology and hermeneutic. The sign of Christ can only be deciphered if his human love and surrender “even unto death” is read as the manifestation of absolute love.’ Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Love Alone: The Way of Revelation}, ed. Alexander Dru (London: Compass Books, 1968), 81.

\textsuperscript{35} See chapter four ‘Religion’ in Bernard Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology} (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1971), 101-124. ‘As the question of God is implicit in all our questioning, so being in love with God is the basic fulfilment of our conscious intentionality.’ Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 105.

\textsuperscript{36} In addition to what follows, British Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth’s theology of love from an Orthodox perspective, due out in 2007 is still awaiting publication. Andrew Louth, \textit{Love: New Century Theology} (London: Continuum, 2007/pending).


\textsuperscript{40} Gene Outka, \textit{Agape: An Ethical Analysis} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972)

\textsuperscript{41} Werner Jeanrond, \textit{A Theology of Love} (London: T&T Clark, 2010)


\textsuperscript{46} Pope Benedict XVI, \textit{God Is Love (Deus Caristas Est)} (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana)

This present research differs from these works in that it is not primarily a study on the Christian theology of love. Rather, it is an enquiry into the theological tools required to conceive of love as a guide to Christian theology without a culturally normative expression of love. Any sense of shared certainty about the nature of love in practice—that is, the morality or ethics of love—has been lost. When a Christian theological culture is stable and structured, a defined set of actions and relationships provide form or shape to the concept of love as a non-empirical illustration of theological propositions. In that context, questions about the finer details of conceiving love fall into the background, because everybody ‘just knows’ what love is. But this is far from the case in the present environment of theological discourse. Hence, this project seeks to re-consider the function of love in hermeneutics, seeking a framework that draws attention to the unstable conceptualisation of love at the same time as positively affirming its ongoing usefulness as a conceptual framework for theological hermeneutics. It seeks to maintain faithfulness to the Christian tradition whilst updating its application to the world-of-life.

1.3 Methodology

Given that the question for this thesis is essentially about theological method, it is unsurprising that the methodology for the project evolved in relation to the current literature of theological hermeneutics. This research started with a group of proposals in the current literature for a ‘hermeneutic of love’ but found that they rely upon a normative cultural conception of love that in contexts of cultural change is problematic. This led to an interdisciplinary partnership with a theoretical construct from social anthropology—in preference to the more usual philosophical partnership with theological hermeneutics—in order to focus on the sociality of discourse in relation to its cultural contexts. This is the choice of liminality theory that is outlined in detail in chapter two of the thesis. With insights from liminality theory into the social process of change, methodologies from the field of contemporary mystical theologies began to present themselves as

matching frameworks for the cultural critique. A method for theology that privileges contemplation and apophatic method\textsuperscript{49} follows the same dialectical pattern of unfolding discourse from structure, through anti-structure, to re-formed structure, as identified in the process of sociality described in liminality theory. The outcome is a method that couples liminality theory with contemplative spirituality to form what will be called a 'hermeneutic of love in liminality.'

**Social science hermeneutics and liminality theory**

Anthony Thiselton, a foundational theorist in late twentieth century theological hermeneutics, introduced love as a primary metaphor for a particular type of hermeneutical apparatus that expresses an open disposition towards new worldviews.\textsuperscript{50} A theological 'hermeneutic of love' aims to respect the particularity of one's own perspective, grounded in real life experience the exact circumstances of which cannot be replicated, at the same time as being radically open to the particularity of another's perspective, grounded in real life experience. The identification of difference is met with curiosity rather than competition. Thiselton states, 'in theological terms ... love represents the major transforming force of all systems and criteria of relevance.'\textsuperscript{51}

The 'hermeneutics of love' has since been picked up as a descriptor for a particular type of theological hermeneutics by a number of theologians and biblical scholars including David Tracy and the aforementioned Jeanrond.\textsuperscript{52} Tracy developed an hermeneutic that particularly dealt with the plurality of possible interpretations in a method of 'critical correlation' that 'mediate[s] the significance of ... the

\textsuperscript{49} In this thesis ‘apophatic’ method refers to that method in the classical tradition of theology that utilises propositions about God to refer to a reality beyond itself that cannot be adequately language. It is explored in detail in chapter three, section 3.4 of this thesis.

‘Contemplation’ refers to that set of spiritual practices that function without a narrative structure, such as meditation. The emphasis is on the practice itself, but may also refer to spiritual experience, such as the case with ecstatic dreams and visions. This terminology is discussed in chapter four, section 4.2.


\textsuperscript{51} Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 612.

phenomena’ by laying limited propositions side by side in comparative relationship. Jeanrond similarly applied Tracy’s method in a hermeneutic of love to describe a particular approach to inter-religious dialogue. He argues that a hermeneutic of love builds ‘larger bodies of understanding and self-understanding in which not only an intensification of relationality may be explored, but also an examination of truth—always accompanied by critical and self-critical moves.’ A person who loves, pays close attention to the world of the beloved. In other words, love for the beloved expands subjective horizons whilst maintaining the distinctiveness of the object of affection.

Thiselton, Jeanrond and Tracy stand in a tradition of philosophical theology and each of these suggestions for a hermeneutic of love employ an a priori philosophical framework. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, hermeneutics has been increasingly associated with a mode of philosophizing ‘establishing . . . interpretation as the central, fundamental problem of philosophy.’ Early philosophical hermeneuticians such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey are sometimes associated with the philosophical romanticism of late-German idealism. However, as the sub-discipline matured, its advocates such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricouer, argued that interpretation was a necessary methodological acknowledgement of the limitations of subjectivity, that there is no subject-independent objects in either texts or culture being read as text. Hence, in a summary article on hermeneutics in the social sciences, Paul Petzschmann describes a methodology whereby the researcher ‘moves back and forth between the parts of a text, the whole of the text, and the text’s relationship to its cultural and historical context, in a never-ending

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54 Jeanrond, “Toward an Interreligious Hermeneutic of Love”, 57.
55 A theological project between Miroslav Volf and Islamic Scholar Ghazi bin Muhammad might be an example of this complimentary openness to other whilst respecting the particularity of the self. See, A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor. Edited by Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad & Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).
56 The disadvantage of the a priori philosophical approach is discussed more fully in chapter five, through James A. Andrew’s comparison of Jeanrond’s hermeneutic of love with Augustine’s hermeneutic laid out in On Christian Doctrine.
process of interpretation.\textsuperscript{58}

The disadvantage of a philosophical hermeneutic for this project is its focus on the social narratives rather than social events. When the text under consideration is a set of cultural expressions rather than literature, the frame of reference shifts focus. A social science hermeneutical method focuses on individual experiences as social events and seeks to outline the social processes complicit in the construction of meaning of those experiences as enculturated enactments of experience. Social-anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to this process as the external 'expressions' of internal experiences.

It is with expressions—representations, objectifications, discourses, performance, whatever—that we traffic: a carnival, a mural, a curing rite, a revitalization movement, a clay figurine, an account of a stay in the woods. Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness.\textsuperscript{59}

In other words, analytical frameworks are employed to interpret cultural expressions and understand their inter-relationship.\textsuperscript{60} Social-anthropology focuses on that which can be observed from a chosen subset of a person's (or people group's) expressions, and organises data from those observations into theoretical interpretations.\textsuperscript{61}


\textsuperscript{60} Interpretivist approaches to culture in social-anthropology stand in contrast to structuralist approaches, the difference being the latter assumes that by studying singular instances of cultural expression an underlying pattern of the whole can be discerned. Structuralism is oft criticized for assuming foundationalist essentialisms. The interpretivist approach, illustrated by Clifford Geertz in what follows, utilises a constant cycle of interpretation to combat essentialism, similar to Gadamer's 'horizon's of influence' but with a set of cultural expressions as the text.

\textsuperscript{61} It is important to distinguish how this social-anthropological category of experience differs from 'experience' as conceived in the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Phenomenology describes what can be observed in the interpretative systems of sense-making, assuming that what can be understood of the world-of-life is inextricably linked with our theorising (meaning-making) about it both socially and personally. Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlines the phenomenological method as a way of describing rather than analysing. It is 'the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences.' In this view, essence is a means to understand rather than an end in itself, for the apparatus for discerning meaning cannot be isolated from the experience of being in the world (and the world-of-life itself). 'It is a matter, in the case of
In relation to this project, the advantage of a social science hermeneutic, as opposed to a philosophical hermeneutic is demonstrated by reference to Thiselton’s original description of a hermeneutic of love. Thiselton, Tracy and Jeanrond all use love analogically to describe a particular type of thinking. An analogy relies on a shared understanding of the meaning of love and a simple phenomenon to which the word refers.

To illustrate, consider Thiselton’s metaphor of a hermeneutic of love which is based on the example of a young man and a young woman ‘falling in love.’ Apart from the fact that romantic relationships have a distinct set of love characteristics to other love relationships (parenting, friendship, patriotic and so on) there is cultural diversity in the way that romantic love is expressed between couples. For example, a recent US study comparing multi-cultural expressions of falling in love in college students found that the reporting of the relationship varied between cultures, suggesting that ‘the social world in which they take place provides a framework that gives this universal experience many flavors.’

If expressions of love differ across time and culture, then love cannot act as a reliable analogy for a defined set of expressions in contexts where the normative expressions of love are contested. That is, love relationships and behaviours are too complex in times of cultural transition to have an assumed meaning. A hermeneutical method ‘of love’ must first determine and define what love is, or create a framework by which a whole range of expressions might be incorporated into the hermeneutic. It is the latter that this present project seeks to explore.

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62 Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics, 608.


64 It is cultural complexity that is most in view in this project, but social-anthropology is not the only discipline that indicates there is an irreducible complexity to experiences of love. For example, some psychologists would argue that the ‘falling in love stage of love that Thiselton refers to in his analogy should be categorised—at the very least—as a subset of the full phenomenon of love, with a neurobiology distinct from the neurobiology that forms and then later sustains long-term relationships. For example see Helen Fisher, “The Drive to Love: Neural Mechanism for Mate Selection,” in The Psychology of Love, ed. Robert J. Sternberg & Karen Weis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 87-115.
The particular tool utilised in this research is liminality theory and is outlined in detail in chapter two. Liminality theory is a tool through which researchers can examine the unfolding process of sociality in transition. In a recent volume on the application of liminality theory to political boundary setting, Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra have described it as ‘a prism through which to understand transformations in the contemporary world.’\(^{65}\) As a frame of reference through which to analyse cultural expressions it presents a hermeneutical tool for outlining a variety of expressions of love prior to any theological interpretation about their place in the Christian tradition. Liminality theory observes that there is a dialectical process to the evolution of cultural expressions. At times of stable sociality, cultural expressions are organised into normative systems of relationships, behaviours, rituals and the like, but at times of cultural transition these expressions morph into an unsystematic web of radical particularities, as the social assumptions which organized them into systematic meaning systems are reformed. In the search for a hermeneutical framework that could work with anti-structured sociality, a step into the research of mystical theologies became a logical next step.

**Mystical Theology and Contemplative Spirituality**

A concern about the gulf between theological rationality and the life of faith has given rise to a group of contemporary mystical theologies\(^{66}\) that seek to reintegrate theology and spirituality in academic theological discourse. Rowan Williams and fellow Cambridge scholar Sarah Coakley, are particularly influential in this research.\(^{67}\) Other significant contemporary mystical theologies include Western engagement with Orthodox Theologies and the ‘mystical turn’ in French

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\(^{66}\) Mystical theology is distinct from ‘theology of the mystics.’ What is in view in this term is the theological method rather than the theological content of those who write from mystical spiritual experience.

\(^{67}\) My priority in choosing interlocutors for this thesis has been to select those who demonstrate an integration of spirituality and theology in their approach. I am aware that my choices might be criticised for the narrow voice of white, Western, protestant scholarship mainly represented. However, there has been significant benefit in critiquing and developing that theological discourse within which I stand as a theologian and an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Melbourne, dominated historically by its British heritage and spiritual traditions. This does not discount what would undoubtedly be a valuable ‘next step,’ engaging the theological hermeneutics developed in this thesis with theological hermeneutics emerging from Asia and Africa as their cultures—very different from my own—come to terms with the liminality propagated by the globalising influence of capitalist market culture.
philosophical theology. In a book outlining contemporary theoretical approaches to Christian mysticism, Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi explain the complexity of interpreting a tradition that is obtuse at almost every level. 'The theories from which they originate are complex and the theories which challenge them are even more so.' Relevant to this current discussion on methodology and its accompanying hermeneutical framework, it is useful to outline two approaches to mystical theology that have emerged from different sources.

The first of these is associated with the existential philosophies of French deconstructionism and phenomenology. The mystical category is an expression of the perceived limitations of the human intellect and therefore the need for philosophical strategies to manage this 'limit.' This is often called the 'mystical turn' in philosophy and is associated with Continental philosophies following Martin Heidegger.

Following this methodology in relation to questions about love would have led into a study of Jean-Luc Marion’s 'erotic phenomenology.' For Marion, love resists all objective definitions and must be spoken of in the terms in which it is felt, in the first person. ‘Am I loved?’ is the fundamental question of human existence and theological investigation into this existential identity reveals God to be the prime Lover and us to be the Beloved before we have even conceived of ourselves as Lovers in the human sense. ‘Consequently, if love is only said like it is given—in one way—and if, moreover, God names himself with the very name of love, the theologian must conclude that God loves like we love, with the same love as us.’ Marion’s strategy for analysing love as a saturated phenomenon is to focus on the particular experience of love in one’s self and from there engage with the world-of-life and the theological tradition.

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69 Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill & Bradley Onishi, Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches (Surry, UK: Ashgate, 2009), vii. Nelstrop, Magill & Onishi categorise different approaches to mystical texts into four methodologies: perennialist accounts, contextualist positions, performative language readings, and feminist readings.
70 For a description of the mystical turn in Continental Philosophy see Nelstrop, Magill & Onishi’s discussion on Derrida and Marion’s approaches to ‘negative language’ in Christian Mysticism, 225-240.
71 Jean-Luc Marion, The Erotic Phenomenon.
72 Marion, The Erotic Phenomenon, 9.
Whilst Marion’s method draws the theologian into the complex internal world of experience from whence she or he might then reflect anew on the inherited teaching of Christian tradition, it bypasses the social world of enculturated expression. Thus, in a critique of *The Erotic Phenomenon* Vincent Lloyd asks, ‘might Marion’s project not work better if, instead of a reduction, love were a Gestalt switch to a new way of looking at, and experiencing, the world, a mode of experiencing the world different from, but not prior to, the facticity of the world?’

Without that framework of sociality, there is no tool by which to critique the role of human sociality in shaping both the inner experience and external expressions of love. Without a tool to critique the sociality of discourse, a theologian cannot assess their particular perspective in relation to the whole history of discourse, nor challenge the inevitable bias of human constructs of the divine.

A second stream of mystical hermeneutics is associated with a re-engagement with classical sources of theology. In the classical tradition of early Christian mysticism theological knowledge is strongly connected to prayer, particularly the public prayers of the church in historical liturgies. They utilise apophatic techniques that emphasise such knowledge as a different kind of epistemology. For example, reflecting on the Russian Orthodox theology of Vladimir Lossky, Rowan Williams describes an approach to theological knowledge that is more grounded in ecstasy than intellect, resulting in a theological method that seeks ‘a fully conscious (though non-intellectual) relationship of personal confrontation between man and God in love.’

This more classical conception of mystical theology has an underlying foundation in spirituality and ecclesiology that is more akin to a social-anthropology hermeneutic than the method of philosophical mysticism outlined above. That is, theological reflection takes place in relationship to ‘expressions’ of internal

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74 The French Roman Catholic school of *Ressourcement* can probably be considered an influential precursor to this movement of new mystical theologies for it extended the range of classical texts available to twentieth century European theologians. Another influence was exposure to Orthodox theologies through the Russian émigrés into Paris in the 1920s and 30s.

spiritual experience or perceived encounter with God. The privileging of contemplation in this methodology is the privileging of a particular set of expressions. The complexity of establishing methods for theology in this mode is that these expressions are obtuse realities such as silence, poetry and iconography.

However, not all mystical hermeneutics located in the classical tradition have an undergirding hermeneutic that is compatible with the kind of cultural critique desired in this present project. For example, in Mark McIntosh’s *Mystical Theology*, he considers Sandra Schneider’s social science approach to spirituality and dismisses it due to a concern that it might further perpetuate the division between spirituality and theology that he is trying to redress in his work. Instead, McIntosh locates spirituality within a theological category, emphasising a conception of spirituality as human connection with ‘other’ both human and divine. ‘It is this beckoning of the other . . . that draws us from provisional existence into real life, into the unfolding of true personhood, and so ultimately into the most real form of life there is, namely the interpersonal Trinitarian life of God.’

Whilst McIntosh’s concerns to avoid the separation of spirituality and theology in the process of theological reflection are valid, they would be a premature reaction to this current project, which seeks to linger long in the methodological constructions prior to theological discourse, in order that theological discourse might reconnect with the radical messiness of the world-of-life. On the contrary, it would seem prudent to give spirituality full consideration in its own right, to critique the human aspects of what McIntosh calls connection and understand their particular dynamics as an interpreter of the theological tradition. A full consideration of the conception of spirituality as a category within hermeneutics is therefore discussed in chapter four of this thesis.

In 2013 Sarah Coakley released *God, Sexuality and the Self*, the first of a projected

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77 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 19-23.
78 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 22.
79 Chapter Four, section 4.2.
four volumes of systematic theology done in a mode she calls *théologe totale*.\(^8^0\) Coakley privileges contemplation as the starting point of theological reflection then uses a variety of critical resources in the ‘refinement of desire’ as it emerges from contemplation. Philosophy, science, social sciences and aesthetic expression all play a part in confronting systems of power and control in the sociality of theological discourse and Coakley uses each of them in conversation with contemplation to interpret scripture and tradition.\(^8^1\)

Some critics of *God, Sexuality and the Self* have noted the need to carefully attend to the relationship between critique and the ongoing ecclesial context of *théology totale*.\(^8^2\) In this present research, an emphasis on the dialectical unfolding of theology through a movement of liminality—be it contemplation or cultural deconstruction—reaffirms the relationship theological discourse has with the church as well as culture. It uses liminality theory to investigate how these relationships are complicit, even when they are unconscious or unformed in languaged discourse. The refinement of sociality in liminality adds clarity to the social dimensions of Coakley’s refinement of desire in contemplation.

This closer attention to the refinement of sociality in Coakley’s methodology may go some way to allay the concerns of some feminist scholars who are critical of an essentialist gender theory and pessimistic anthropology in Coakley’s strategies for

\(^8^0\) Coakley’s full articulation of her theological methodology—*théologe totale*—is outlined in the first of a proposed four volumes of systematic theology which was released late in 2013, when this present research was already well evolved. Had Coakley’s *God Sexuality and the Self* been published prior to the start of this research, I would have had access to a methodology suited to my purpose from the beginning. Instead, it evolved into its present form separate to Coakley’s most clear outline from that volume, but it was significantly influenced by an essay on the transformation of epistemology through contemplative practice, Sarah Coakley, ‘Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing,’ in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002): 3-39.

\(^8^1\) In his review of *God, Sexuality and the Self*, Kevin Hector locates Coakley’s social science approach as part of a more general ‘renewal of what has been called a “theology of culture,”’ Kevin Hector, ‘Trinity, Ascesis, and Culture: Contextualizing Coakley’s God, Sexuality, and the Self,’ in *Modern Theology* 30 no. 4 (Oct 2014), 565.

\(^8^2\) This is an unsurprising critique from Orthodox Theologian Radu Bordeianu, “Triadologie Totale: An Orthodox Reflection on Sarah Coakley’s Spirit-Centred, Iconographical Perspective,” in *Modern Theology* 30 no. 4 (Oct 2014), 567-574. However, it is also the single area of weakness identified in the glowing review of Coakley’s work from Eugene Rogers, “Prayer, Christoformity, and the Author: New Sites of Discussion for Theology,” in *Modern Theology* 30 no. 4 (Oct 2014), 552-560. In a sense this is the dilemma contemplative theologies all face, negotiating the silent sociality of individual practices.
the refinement of desire.\textsuperscript{83} In her critique of God, Sexuality and the Self, Mary Catherine Hilkert wrote, ‘for all of Coakley’s celebration of sexual desire as intrinsic to desire for God, creation remains fallen and contemplative prayer is most often described in the mode of purgation.’\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, it shall be argued that Coakley’s desire need not be the only expression of love to shape the critical unfolding of Christian theology and that a methodology that refuses any exclusive conception of love is ultimately affirming of the human capacity for love in its own right, not just in relation to God.

This is the key difference between Coakley’s project and this present one: Coakley’s exclusive priority of eros as a category of love which guides Christian theology is rejected in favour of an inclusive approach to all conceptions of love in theological discourse. Coakley’s ‘desire’ is the classical Platonic tradition that relates love and wisdom and is a common philosophical companion to classical contemplative theologies. However, there are other philosophical traditions of love that also structure debate. For example Stephen Post represents a group of U.S. theologians who are reclaiming a pre-Enlightenment notion of agape for Christian theology.\textsuperscript{85} If eros and agape stand as linguistic markers for different histories of interpretation in the Christian tradition, together they represent a fuller description of the conceptualisation of love in the Christian tradition. The methodological approach in this thesis seeks to remove the competition between different conceptions of love—in any form—proposing instead that an ongoing dialectical conversation between different conceptions of love accommodates the refining process of sociality in theological conceptions of love. In chapter five, through an engagement with Augustine’s neo-Platonic hermeneutics, it is shown how this might lead to an affirmation of all expressions of love, which in turn leads into a deeper theological engagement with love in relation to God.

1.4 A Theological Hermeneutic of Love in Liminality


\textsuperscript{84} Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Desire, Gender, and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley’s Feminist Contemplative Theology," in Modern Theology 30 no. 4 (Oct 2014), 575-581, 581.

This thesis puts forward an approach to theological hermeneutics to be utilised in contexts of transition. Its scope emerges from a global culture in transition but its concern is quite specific: a careful consideration of the mechanisms of scholarly theological discourse in the Western tradition. There are three theoretical frameworks which are put together in this thesis to develop a theological hermeneutic of love suitable to the specific requirements of cultural transition. Chapters two, three and four explore and explain this methodology before chapter five uses it to explore how love might function as the key guiding principle within it.

To commence, chapter two outlines liminality theory as it was first conceived in the realm of ritual theory by social-anthropologist Victor Turner and developed in successive decades into a general theory of a dialectical process of evolving sociality. A metaphor of ‘open-space’ gives an image to a movement into anti-structure and anti-form in socialised expressions of meaning. Liminality theory reveals a three-stage unfolding of the sociality of human experience, the middle being a period of liminality—betwixt and between, where the old has gone but the new has not yet come. Liminality is a context of change, transition and transformation. In liminality, love must be allowed to let go of the rules and prescribed roles in order to reconfigure its expressions and reclaim its radical capacity as a type of thinking.

Political anthropologist Bjorn Thomassen has demonstrated how liminality theory can be applied to different layers of sociality and different levels of experience. That is, all social events move through an open-space of liminality in dialectical unfolding—whole societies, institutions, small groups and individuals. This theory about the underlying structure of experience suggests that the process of liminality can be observed in intentionally invoked liminal experiences, such as the practice of contemplation. Thinking theologically through these ‘controlled environments’ of liminality brings insights that can then be tested on the uncontrolled environment of mass cultural change.

Next, chapter three turns to questions of thinking and knowing in liminality. Not only does liminal experience have a unique epistemology, but a particular hermeneutic is also required to be able to relate that epistemology to the
movements of reason before and after. Liminality theory makes a distinction between the limit of philosophy as a threshold rather than an end-point, which brings liminality theory into close conversation with classical apophatic methods in theology.

Rowan Williams is the primary interlocutor in this chapter for it shall be demonstrated that his approach provides a way of holding liminal knowledge in discourse in order that it might maintain its liminal distinctiveness in dialectical relationship with structured forms of theological knowledge. For Williams, theology is a complex dialectical conversation that holds an open-space for transformative theological reflection, much like a traditional ritual enactment of a rite of passage might hold an open-space for people undergoing a transition from one place in the social world to another. In essence, theological discourse is open-ended, multi-vocal and requiring of liminal movements within it, where our formed knowledge is allowed to fall away and be transformed by a very different kind of knowledge of God, the self and the world.

Having established a strategy for holding an open-space for thinking, chapter four further explores the spiritual experience of liminality as it relates to the development of theological knowledge. In this chapter, it is demonstrated that spiritual experience is the necessary birthing place of theological knowledge without proscriptive form—that is, without the usual structures of discourse that have fallen away in contexts of liminality. It explores the concept of ‘dark knowing’ from classical mystical texts of Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa and the function of apophatic methods to bring into discourse that which cannot be adequately languaged.

86 In 2013 Williams took up the mastership of Magdalen College at the University of Cambridge. He spent two decades in episcopal ministry and ten years as the Archbishop of Canterbury, during which time he continued to read and write theologically on both church and civic issues, promoting public conversations on a diverse range of subjects, including religious freedom, ecumenism and spirituality, sexuality, social and economic justice, and the peace movement. His work is characterised by an engagement with scripture and its historical interpretations, particularly early monastic and mystical sources in the Christian tradition, and by a determination to engage with the intellectual and cultural contexts in which he writes. In 2013 he presented the Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology at the University of Edinburgh, drawing together in a sophisticated theory of language, his vast theological interests. See Thomas Merton, "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?,” in Love and Living, ed. Naomi Burton & Brother Patrick Hart Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 34.
Sarah Coakley's work is examined as a kind of case study in this coupling of contemplative theology with liminality theory. Her proposal for a théologie totale that privileges contemplation as a ‘crucible of prayer,’ is compared to the crucible of liminality, both of which equip the theologian to respond to cultural contexts of change. Coakley’s development of the deconstructive concept of power-in-vulnerability, which is complicit in silent prayer, leads to an understanding of the refinement of desire in theological discourse as both an internal and external refinement of the sociality in theological understandings. There is such similarity between the particular dynamics of relating complicit in the crucible of prayer that Coakley outlines, and the relational dynamics of liminality outlined by Turner, that this chapter concludes with an argument for the notion of ‘contemplative communitas’ to describe the sociality of theological discourse in contexts of liminality.

Finally, chapter five turns to the specific challenge described in this introductory chapter: how can love continue to be a guide for theology when what has been known about love needs radical transformation? It allows Saint Augustine to frame the question through his work on the interpretation of scripture, On Christian Doctrine. Augustine’s influence on the unfolding of theology since patristic times cannot be understated. Having played a seminal role in adapting the Platonic philosophical tradition, he is considered the founder of Western theological hermeneutics. His writing on love has also dominated Western conceptions of love through a variety of influences and interpretations. Our engagement with Augustine is necessarily limited to these two aspects of his vast legacy.

Through the lens of liminality, we notice what has been ignored or sidelined in Augustine’s hermeneutics in order to satisfy the Enlightenment impulse for rational and empirical knowledge. The experience of love is central to conceiving love in theology, first because of the role it plays in the construction of language,

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87 At the time of writing, Coakley is the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Murray Edwards College at the University of Cambridge. She is a systematic theologian with a strong commitment to the use of patristic sources for theology, and an interest in both the Continental and analytical philosophical traditions (though she identifies more strongly with the analytic school). Her specialties include Trinitarian theology and pneumatology, theological methodologies relating to gender theory, and religious experience (specifically that of contemplative prayer). In recent years she has been involved in interdisciplinary projects with evolutionary scientists developing a ‘natural theology’ of design.
and second because the personal encounter of divine love transforms the constructions of love we have imagined in human terms. In the crucible of liminality, divine and human loves, perfect and imperfect, romantic and platonic, sexual and non-sexual, of things and of people—all loves—mingle together and are experienced as a complex phenomenon cut of one cloth. Furthermore, in the crucible of Augustine’s soul, we encounter a divine love that is in itself a complex phenomenon of love and love’s relationships. We encounter a God-who-is-love, the source of all that is love, from whom all experiences of loves emanates in loving connection.

This project is a work of theological hermeneutics. It is interested in how theological method is affected by the demands of a context of cultural change, particularly the global epochal shifts of the twentieth and twenty-first century contexts of Western theology. It draws upon liminality theory in order to understand the demands this context makes upon theological method, and it also uses liminality theory as a lens through which to view the classical project of theology joined with contemplative spirituality, to show how the hermeneutical resources from that tradition provide the resources required by contexts of change. In the crucible of prayer, we gain the theological knowledge required to navigate the crucible of liminality. Theological discourse must find ways to allow for the socially constructed notions of love to be suspended for a time, in an open-space designed for the re-formation of knowledge, not just its deconstruction. Love guides us across a threshold of limited rationality—from an epistemology where understanding arises from a grid of stable and established frameworks, into thinking what is difficult, complex and amorphous. By opening up theological discourse to this process of dialectical unknowing, love continues to guide the theologian through the complex maze of spontaneous, intense and egalitarian relationships of liminality, the connections of contemplative-communitas.
Chapter 2

Liminality Theory

This world is the closed door. It is a barrier, and at the same time it is the passage-way.¹

2.1 Introduction

If the challenge of contemporary theological discourse is dominated by its contexts of rapid cultural change, the challenge to create a method for theology that works within change is imperative. The reassertion of historical propositions that do not make sense to the contemporary mind, because of an underlying shift in cultural worldview and experience, creates a rupture in our thinking that at times feels like being forcibly fitted out in a suit of beliefs that no longer fits. How can theology honestly confront the disjunctures in its discourse while also continuing in faithfulness to the tradition in which it stands? The rose-coloured glasses of blind faith must be replaced by a lens that can ‘prove the things not seen.’² The opening quote above, from twentieth century mystical philosopher Simone Weil, is intended to indicate that this experience of discontinuity is not only a normative aspect of life, it is the means by which humans encounter truth in everyday life.

This chapter develops an understanding of the concept of liminality as a sociocultural lens through which theologians can better understand the complex challenges of rapid cultural change, a cultural phenomenon that dominates contexts for theology in the early twenty-first century. The concept is first outlined in terms of its origins within the ritual theory of anthropologist Victor Turner, and its subsequent expansion to a general social theory, before examining some

² Hebrews 11:1, Contemporary English Version.
preliminary developments of liminality within the field of theology. The concept of 'liminality' provides a lens through which the distinct global environs of theological contexts can be discerned, and provides a creative frame of reference for performing theology in this context. Liminality is a sphere of open-space—sometimes physical, sometimes metaphysical—through which individuals and groups move as a normal process of socialised life. This open-space, between what has been known in the past and the as-yet-unformed possibilities of a future, is a place of paradox and play, spontaneity, anti-structure, radical egalitarianism and creative freedom.

Liminality theory helps the theologian understand and respond to contexts of change in several ways. At the macro level, it is important to perceive the effects of globalised capitalist-consumer culture and how this interacts with local contexts from within which theologians conduct their work. The impact of this epochal cultural change cannot be underestimated, for it affects fundamental notions of the human person. Furthermore, liminality theory proposes that there is a normative structure to all change, hence the theological hermeneutics required to negotiate the challenges of globalized capitalism are the same theological hermeneutics required to negotiate personal and individual instances of change. There is a substantial advantage to this because the latter offers the theologian a test laboratory to understand how theological hermeneutics are working throughout the process of changing internal perspective. Furthermore, occasions of liminality can be considered as a normative function of the natural unfolding of theological discourse over time, and contexts of change are an opportunity for renewed engagement with God, where the limitations of human knowing might be confronted and redressed.

Liminal expressions do not play by the rules of structure and empirical explanations are replaced with a different epistemology—for a time—in a constructive fashion: 'Liminality is indeed not any concept. Liminality does not and cannot “explain”. In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is world of contingency where events and ideas, and “reality” itself, can
be carried in different directions.\textsuperscript{3}

The purpose of understanding liminality is to equip the theologian to work in the context of change, while the world is still undergoing transition. The theological hermeneutic that this project puts forward is a methodology for the work of theology \textit{within} the context of change itself. When definitive statements of truth and knowing do not make sense in relationship to the social world of enacted theology because the social world is in the chaotic throws of redevelopment, how does the theologian pursue faithfulness to the tradition in that context of rupture? In other words, liminality theory provides a frame for making sense of a world that cannot, in this moment, ‘make sense’ of historical Christian teaching.

\section*{2.2 Liminality as open-space}

Since the experience of liminality is amorphous and unpredictable, a key image shall usefully frame its diverse applications to a variety of contexts and keep an exposition of liminality on track as it is applied to discourses of theology.\textsuperscript{4} A sphere of ‘open-space’\textsuperscript{5} is proposed as a depiction of liminality first conceived through the social processes of ritual. It is an image found in landscape, in architecture, in the body and breath, in relationship and conversation. Open-space evokes a memory of liminality in the context of ritual—physically and metaphysically—but finds its most powerful expression in relation to the inner open-space, the space of contemplative spirituality.

Traditional, ritualised gatherings of a community most commonly take place in an open-space: a piece of land that might be a clearing, a waterhole, a desert or a grassy knoll. Alternatively, a cave or a specially constructed shelter provides an enclosed open-space, clear of all symbolism or comforts, into which liminal persons withdraw for the clearing away of their old inner identity. In one sense this is just a practical requirement of finding enough room for a whole community


\textsuperscript{4} The employment of a metaphor to expost liminality theory is in keeping with Bjorn Thomassen’s development of liminality as a ‘descriptive model and a “typology”’ that identifies various expressions of enculturated experience and social events. See Bjorn Thomassen, \textit{Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between} (Surry, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 89.

\textsuperscript{5} The hyphenation of ‘open-space’ is an innovation for this context, with the intention of emphasising the image of not just any space, but open, free, unstructured space.
to gather; however, it also takes on symbolic significance. Often the group itself creates an open-space: sitting, standing or dancing in a circle, holding a boundary with their bodies to create a middle ground for the enactment of the ritual. This open-space—be it bounded by the landscape or the bodies of the community—is the physical location and key metaphor of liminality.6

Open-space in landscape is framed by its contrasting landmarks—trees, rocks, earth walls, rivers or valleys. The vegetation in the open-space is minimal or absent altogether—a sand bar, an expanse of dust, a slab of slate—free of shapes that structure the land. Where the open-space is a clearing, the plane above is dominated by a vast expanse of sky. In the imagination, this is often cloudless and clear, electrifyingly blue in daylight, full of stars by night. It matters not that the firmament is an illusionary perimeter, while the plane below is solid ground: both effectively demarcate the space as an arena for liminality. Sometimes this landscape of open-space is taken into the field of urban planning, where a green belt—a space left free of built structures—might be described as a liminal zone. Van Gennep notes that stones, trees, lakes and rivers provide borders for ritual crossings even between tribes—that is, they are obvious markers of the landscape.7

In architecture, a liminal space is often a vast, open entrance hall or corridor in which people might linger a minute as they transition from ‘outside’ to ‘inside’ the building. Betwixt and between structure, there is open-space. In relation to time, the before and after are linear and inevitably somewhat binary as a consequence, even in those instances when liminality is seen as a constant and continuous process. However, when liminality is defined by space, the limits hem in the openness on every side, and we conceive its limits as multivarious and multifaceted. A variety of planes function as floor, ceiling, horizons and borders. Doorways act as thresholds; windows frame a view in and out. Physical open-space is three-dimensional, reminding us that time in liminality also loses its linear characteristics, and other dimensions of time and space are conceived. Liminal

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time might be dialectical, but liminal space is multi-dialectical. The edges form some kind of fully enclosed space, with multiple planes of limit surrounding the openness. It is somewhere between a box, with clearly defined, flat planes, and a circle, where the planes above, below and side by side morph into each other to create a seamless circumference. When we seek to understand the experience of being betwixt and between, the multi-dialecticism of liminal space usefully distinguishes it from a linear movement of liminal time. Time as structured principle tends to fall away in liminality. In fact, we discover that the construct of time itself undergoes purgation along with other aspects of preconfigured identity. There is a glimpse of a way of being where time doesn’t matter at all: ‘Some describe them as non-places when in fact they are simply places with a different order.’

Liminal open-space is particularly evident in sacred architecture, which—although varied in shape and symbolic arrangement—almost universally gives priority to high ceilings in the creation of an open-space above the heads of the worshippers. Up in these vaulted cathedral ceilings, the sounds of sacred music rise, testifying to that which is beyond the liturgy. Rising wafts of incense elucidate the shapeless patterns of the liminal air, representing the uncontrollable mystery of God. The high open-space of the cathedral is where the human spirit is lifted to meet with God in a transitory moment of transcendence. The physical architecture bounds the open space like the trees of a clearing, or dancers in a circle. The liminal persons are stretched within their bodies—feet firmly planted on the floor, but soul invited into an inner sphere of freedom. A description of gothic churches illustrates this affect: ‘The soaring columns and intricately vaulted ceilings emphasised verticality and spaciousness, drawing the eye upward. The astounding spaces enclosed the faithful within a metaphorical heaven of awesome proportions infused by divine light. Simply by being inside such a church or cathedral, one

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9 I employ the term ‘soul’ here in a grasping for language that refers to the experience of having an ‘inner life.’ I could equally have chosen ‘psyche’ or ‘heart’ or ‘mind’, for their non-technical definition is intended.
might experience divine power.'\textsuperscript{10}

The metaphor of open-space grows in pertinence when we move to consider inner experiences of liminality. For example, it is common to speak of an inner open-space in the experience of meditation, either ecstatic or ascetic. When meditation uses the breath as a focus point, attention is directed to the end of the out breath, where there is a space, a moment of pause, an invitation to stillness. We breathe in oxygen, filling our bodies with the essentials for life, and we breathe out carbon dioxide, letting go of whatever is not needed for our health and wellbeing. When we breathe in, the diaphragm flattens and moves downwards as the intercostal muscles move the rib cage upwards and out. Then when we exhale, the diaphragm and intercostal muscles relax and return to their resting positions. Like a ballerina disciplining herself at the barre, we return again and again to first position, which, in fact, is a space of openness and rest. Breathing frames this inner open-space.

The liminal sphere of the psyche or the soul fills it. Kerry Walters has called it ‘desert freedom,’ the open-space of the soul identified by mystics across the ages in response to God, who is without form.\textsuperscript{11}

This inner open-space becomes a kinetic threshold for the centre of being, the place of the soul or the grounding of one’s inner reality. The breath becomes a vehicle for awareness and attentiveness to that which exists beyond language—human and divine. In Christian prayer, the pray-er seeks to open up this space within themselves and wait, wait for God, not striving or seeking, simply devoting attention to whatever comes. This open-space of the body and breath is described by Rowan Williams in an account of his experience of praying with the ‘Jesus prayer.’\textsuperscript{12} In a recent essay on spirituality, he begins to lay the groundwork for a very particular type of theology that is birthed from this open-space of the body. For Williams, the practice of the Jesus’ prayer is ‘a time when you are aware of your body as simply a place where life happens and where, therefore, God

\textsuperscript{12} The Jesus Prayer is a common spiritual practice from Orthodox Christianity in which the words ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ are spoken silently or aloud in repetition for an extended period of time.
'happens': a life lived in you.'

The open-space of the body and breath is not confined to singular human experience; personal open-space is something that can be shared. For example, Harrison Owen, founder of 'Open Space Technology', a dialogue tool employed in a wide variety of corporate and community settings, uses the two key images of circle and breath to describe his technique for leadership conversations. Owen writes that 'my experience tells me that the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. A circle has no head or foot, no high or low, no sides to take; in a circle, people can simply be with each other—face to face.'

In Owen’s method, people gather in a circle, up to twenty in a group, and the master of ceremonies issues an invitation for a set period of time to share the conversational space with no set agenda. Owens argues that the synergy and momentum that comes from Open-Space Technology provides the group with the resources to solve almost any conflict or difficulty in their communal context. Significantly, Owen cites his incidental involvement in a traditional African rite of passage for boys in a town called Balamah as the key inspiration for his facilitation technique. The ritual moved from the periphery of the town to the centre, where there was a circle of open space:

The circle came alive with ceremony, speeches, and above all, dance. Intensity rose to a peak, and then peaked again, until at last it ebbed as villagers flowed outward to their homes. It was as if the village were breathing, and just as no planning committee is required for respiration, none was needed in Balamah either. It seemed to me that in the geometry of the circle and the rhythm of breath I had found two of my basic mechanisms of meeting.

Open-space as a metaphor for liminality acts as a kind of organising principle, as the slow argument for a theological hermeneutic capable of mining the particular resources of liminal theological knowledge for the sake of constructive theological discourse in contexts of change. The key elements of the unstructured open-space

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15 Owen, Open Space Technology, 5.
(that is, liminality proper) and the boundary that ‘holds’ the space open (that is, its limit) shall be explicitly applied to hermeneutical strategies for theology with a complex dialectical structure.

2.3 Conceiving Liminality

As a conceptual tool, liminality originated in the discipline of anthropology with Arnold van Gennep coining the term in the 1909 publication *Rites of Passage*, a study into the function of ritual in tribal culture. Van Gennep argued that he had detected a universal pattern in ritual form: a sequence from separation, through transition, into incorporation.\(^{16}\) Or, as he also terms them, pre-liminal | liminal | post-liminal.\(^{17}\)

From these origins, liminality has become a general anthropological theory indicating a universal process of social change. That is, when individuals or groups transition into different roles within the social structures of their community, this basic pattern is observable: pre-liminal | liminal | post-liminal. Implicit in the term is an understanding of the complex process of socially constructed and mediated identity and meaning, implicit in all human interactions. This aspect of experience is referred to as ‘sociality’: those aspects of human being and thinking, complicit in external expressions of culture as well as internal expressions of human longings, construction of meaning and discernment of actions in the world, which are acquired through relationships with other human beings. In her study *Sociality as the Human Condition*, Rebekka A. Klein notes that even though theories of human personhood differ between cultural systems, ‘since antiquity, sociality has been considered a basic condition of human existence.’\(^{18}\)

Liminality theory is essentially concerned with the refinement of sociality. In a stable social environment, it is a function of the individual’s need to transition between different positions in the cultural system as the natural consequence of

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\(^{16}\) Whilst van Gennep’s nineteenth century proposal assumed a certain functionalism in social structure, successive generations of liminality theorists have more nuanced theories of universal patterns in cultural systems. For example, Bernhard Gisen, “In-betweenness and Ambivalence,” in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. By Bjorn Thomassen, Agnes Horvath & Harald Wydra (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015)

\(^{17}\) van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.

\(^{18}\) Rebekka A. Klein, *Sociality as the Human Condition: Anthropology in Economic, Philosophical and Theological Perspective* (Leiden; Brill, 2011)
time: to grow up (or through) the cycles of life from infancy through to adulthood and then old age. In an unstable social system—that is, during times of mass cultural change—liminality is a function of both individual and group needs to mediate between the old and the new ways of being society. In both cases, the experience of liminality is the stripping away of sociality embedded with the outdated identity and meaning.

There are several advantages to appropriating the concept of liminality in this project that shall become evident as this chapter outlines the scope of liminality theory as conceived in anthropology. First, the imagery of ritual that pervades the early development of liminality theory throws up some insights that are easily translatable into theological reflections about spirituality, religion and the symbolic worlds with which theology contends. Second, it is a tool for critiquing systems of human sociality, lest the theologian be caught in constructing concepts of God that are captured wholly by her or his own imagination. Third, the dynamic of liminality can be observed at different levels of human sociality, enabling the theologian to make links between internal, individual spiritual experience and the communal task of discerning Christian truth. Subjectively, liminality can be experienced as a personal experience of the psyche, the emotions or, as traditional theology would call it, the ‘soul.’ Objectively—that is, in the world between individual persons—liminality can be experienced by whole groups of humanity as a period of cultural transition.

**Origins in ritual theory**

Van Gennep’s original conception of liminality theory was lost in the politics of early French anthropology until Victor Turner developed the concept extensively through the 1960s, 70s and 80s. Turner picked up *Rites of Passage* quite incidentally, at a time of personal liminality, waiting for the arrival of a visa so he and his family could relocate from the United Kingdom to the United States. Van Gennep’s theories on the three-stage social process contained in traditional rituals and rites not only made sense of his own experience but Turner perceived that it could also be employed to organise the observations from his own fieldwork.

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19 In this sense, liminality theory acts as a contrasting grid for the refinement of subjectivity that has troubled philosophical minds over the past century.
In 1969 Turner published *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, applying Van Gennep's ritual processes to interpret his observations of the Ndembu tribe of Central Africa. Turner concentrated his attention on the rites-of-passage rituals, drawing conclusions about social structure through the clues available in social behaviour, namely the place of liminality and ritual in the evolution of social structure, which tells us something about sociality more generally: 'For individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. . . . Each individual's life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, as to states and transitions.'

Turner identifies a dialectical contrast between structure and anti-structure in the social process, but this is not an oppositional binary in the sense we usually associate with dialectics. Liminality, or anti-structured sociality, is a unique phase that people move through in order to arrive at a new phase of structured sociality. It is a transitional middle, betwixt and between old and new structures of sociality. In its ritual context, liminality unfolds within itself, so that within this middle movement there are dialectical unfoldings and complex social processes. As liminality is experienced outside of ritual, in de-ritualised societies, this dialectical process is an even more complex phenomenon, requiring careful attention to discern its dynamic movements. Liminality is a 'middle' where social identity is suspended, in order that it might be reconfigured. It is a purposeful stripping away of identity and form, in order that the old might fall away and the new might emerge. In ritualised liminality this is expressed symbolically by dress and physicality, such as dressing a bride in white and accompanying a groom from his

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21 Turner, though brought up in the British school of structuralist anthropology, distances himself from Lévi-Strauss so that 'the units of social structure are relationships between statuses, roles, and offices; . . . “social” is not identical with the “social-structural.” There are other modalities of social relationship' to which his dialectal theory of social process speaks. Turner, *Ritual Process*, 131.


23 In its use beyond anthropology, liminality is easily confused and conflated with *marginality*. The marginalised peoples are without power, ignored or unseen, discarded as unimportant in the dominant social system; it is an edge and an end. Liminality, on the other hand, is always transitional, located in relationship with a before and after in terms of time, and a beyond in terms of space.
mother's household to a neutral place.

Turner contrasts the liminal phase of this social process – what we have called the open-space – with its pre and post phases of social stability. In liminality, kinship rights and obligations are suspended, along with all identity markers of status, property, wealth, organisational rank and sexuality. The experience is characterized by homogeneity, anonymity, social equality, humility, unselfishness, simplicity, sexual continence and silence. Persons in the liminal space of ritual are engulfed in the totality of the ritual life-world and expected to submit themselves fully to the sacred institution, its instruction and its transformative spiritual power. A harsh environment, tests of endurance and survival, the affliction of pain and suffering, all function to strip away an ‘old self’ in preparation for a transition back into social structure at a new level of identity, role, status and rank.24

In traditional rites of passage, for example, individuals are stripped of identity markers—clothes are removed, hair is often shaved, and the body might be covered with paint. They are physically removed from their old dwelling place—a household, a village or a campsite—to be sent into a designated place of transition. The liminal space is often a harsh environment—a desert, forest or mountain—aimed to test the participants of the ritual, so that they may prove themselves worthy of the role they are about to assume. At the close of the ritual they are brought into their new or restructured dwelling place and take up a new position within their community. They are re-clothed appropriately and welcomed by the cohort of the community to which they now belong. These types of rites of passage include rites marking the movement from childhood to adulthood, marriage, integration of a foreigner, and funeral rites.

Liminality, in this strict anthropological use of the term, is only experienced in relationship with other states of sociality and is located in a concrete process of movement, with a ‘before’ and an ‘after.’ It is a symbolic means by which personal identity ‘updates’ its sociality through a more or less linear progression through concrete time and space in order to effect cultural meaning and identity. The

24 Turner, Ritual Process, 106-107. Turner lists these characteristics in a table, noting that it is not an inexhaustible list, and the experience of liminality will vary depending on the type of ritual, as well as the type of social status being mediated.
exposure of the limits, the borders of the liminal sphere, paradoxically reveals their socialised subjectivity, and often the liminal time and space are experienced as a suspension of the ordinary rules of time and space, a crush of multiple possibilities beyond what our human minds can conceive of.

**Communitas**

Turner identified a particular style of intense, spontaneous and creative social relationship that arises in liminality, which he called *communitas.* The absence of prescriptive social norms, coupled with an intense shared purpose in the crucible of liminal experience, results in a heightened emotional state in which acute emotional bonds naturally arise. This is not an absence of sociality per se, but rather a suspension of sociality *in the form that it has been* in order that it might be deconstructed then re-formed. The group prioritises whatever is necessary for survival in the sphere of liminality, which leads to heightened states of innovation and invention, producing great feats that might seem implausible at other times. *Communitas* is the social realm of creativity and ingenuity, often speculative and fantastical, generating imagery, ideas, poetics and new mythologies. Turner was deeply interested in understanding this type of community because of its ingenuity and potential to effect epochal social change. 

*Communitas* stands in contrast to structured community in the three-stage process of social change, ‘as though there are here two major ‘models’ for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating.’ Communal relations are not broken but are permitted to move through a different style of connectivity, for the purpose of transition and transformation. The continuation of ‘community’ is dependent upon that group's capacity to move through the immediacy of *communitas* to the structured sociality of a new form of community, in a constant...

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25 He also notes that *communitas* arises in other contexts as well, breaking in through the interstices of structure, at its edges, its margins, and from underneath in liberation movements. It is the ‘other’ to social structure. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 128.

26 Social theorists since Turner have also been interested in tapping into the energetic resources of *communitas,* not always with noble intentions. See, for example, Szakolczi’s suggestion that twentieth-century European communism deliberately fostered liminal experience in order to reap the rewards of economic productivity, in Arpad Szakolczai, "The Global Monastery," *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 53, no. 1 (2010). Similarly, Mike Frost argues that missional Christian communities deliberately aim to foster *communitas* for the purpose of transforming secular culture, in Mike Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2006).

unfolding of the community’s ‘tradition’ as it updates itself. Just as a group of people in a liminal state cannot sustain *communitas* indefinitely, so also stable and structured community cannot sustain its life or maintain its core identity over extended periods of time, without the transformative interruption of *communitas*.

Beyond the bounds of ritual, Turner distinguishes between three types of *communitas* in de-ritualised liminality. First, *existential* or *spontaneous* *communitas* arises in moments where the stable and structured rules of community have fallen away. This is the type of *communitas* found in ritualised liminality, but it also arises through an unintentional shift in culture brought about by an external disruptive force that dismantles community norms. Natural disasters and invasions by hostile forces are two examples of a spontaneous shift into *communitas*, where a different way of organising resources becomes immediately and urgently required. Should there be a need or a desire for extended creativity and radical camaraderie, however, *communitas* will move into *normative* or *ideological* forms. But these extended and intentional relationships begin to require organisation. Therefore, ‘it is the fate of all spontaneous *communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a “decline and fall” into structure and law.’

In the chapters that follow, Turner’s descriptions of *communitas* will be compared with the relationships complicit in theological discourse: between the self, God, the church and the world. As for liminality, this dialectical unfolding of structured and unstructured sociality explains a dynamic that theologians in the contemplative tradition have grappled with through a strategy of apophatic method. Within what is known about God (and about the self, the world and the church) there sits that which is *not* known, or at least not able to be known within the confines of the discursive language desirable for a systematic theology. All knowledge, all experience is relational, but the modes of relationship in liminality are radically different from its pre- and post- states of stable community.

**Permanent liminality and liminoid experience in de-ritualised contexts**

While true liminality, being a mode of transition, cannot be sustained indefinitely, there are liminal-type experiences in certain communities that are preserved in a

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permanent or institutionalised form, that are formed with the intention of creating normative or ideological communitas. Monastic communities, millennial religious movements and the hippy communes of the 1960s are all examples that Turner considers, identifying in them an attempt to live in an ongoing suspension of the broader cultural norms, continuing in some kind of permanent liminal-like state, as a prophetic, creative and liberating way to live.29

Turner reflects upon monasticism in medieval Europe, of which he considers St Francis and the Franciscans to be the preeminent examples, in relation to the paradoxical desire for permanent liminality. First and foremost, Turner sees St Francis’s insistence on poverty—whereby his monks and nuns forfeited their economic and social position in the hierarchical medieval culture of farming, trade and privilege—as expressing a desire to live in opposition to ‘worldly’ sociality, as a means of critique. ‘Religion for him was communitas, between man and God and man and man, vertically and horizontally, so to speak, and poverty and nakedness were both expressive symbols of communitas and instruments for attaining it.’30

As Francis’s influence grew and a group grew around him, rules and regulations were required to communicate Francis’s ideas to an audience beyond his personal circle. Greater numbers across an extended geographic region required a different technical apparatus of vows, superiors and regulative rules of conduct, initially of course aimed at reproducing the charism of St Francis, but inevitably taking on the social structure required of a religious order. St Francis himself withdrew towards the end of his life, returning to the communitas of an intimate group of hermitages in Umbria and Tuscany. Meanwhile, the Franciscan Order found its commitment to poverty at odds with the political machinations that were a necessary part of being in relationship with the institutional church: influence, money and long-term social structures go together. Permanent liminality can only be sustained through the renewal of the process—like St Francis’s withdrawal to his hermitage—and not through an indefinite extension of a single liminal moment. As already noted, liminality has its own natural process, and will move towards a new structured sociality of its own accord, unavoidably.

Turner clearly distinguishes between this kind of permanent liminality—or what might be better expressed as continuously evoked or provoked liminal experience—and a de-ritualised version of ongoing liminality that mimics some but not all of the characteristics of liminality as observed in the ritual context.\(^{31}\)

Liminality is essentially a bounded experience—without a beginning and end the experience translates into something else, because human sociality requires structure to sustain a network of relationships. Liminality requires a bounded space wherein sociality falls apart. Without ritually held, bounded space, liminal-like moments might form, which take on many of the characteristics of liminality—ambiguity of roles, deconstructed identities, suspension of social rules and norms—but in which the transformative capacity of liminality is missing. ‘The liminoid is a break from normality, a playful as-if experience, but it loses the key feature of liminality: transition.’\(^{32}\)

These experiences, which Turner calls ‘liminoid,’ lack a capacity for transformation because there the limit of liminality is not felt.\(^{33}\) When there is no demarcation of a pre-liminal and post-liminal experience, there is no journey from one world-of-life to the next, and therefore no progression, no growth, no maturation for the individual in relation to sociality. For example, if an individual ages but does not ‘grow up’ through the cycles of the social structure, the personal and the social eventually slide out of sync. Liminoid phenomena are transitory, fragmentary, plural and intermittent. They often ‘play’ at ritual without enacting any of the social processes of ritual. Hence in post-ritual societies they are often leisure performances like sport or theatre.

After providing further outline of liminality theory in this chapter, this thesis draws upon resources from the monastic and mystical branches of Christian religion and theology, with their experimental strategies for sustaining liminal experience as a place of encounter with the divine. That is, an embrace of spiritual modes of liminality might act as a guide for the theologian who must negotiate the broader social movements of epochal cultural change. This assumes that the

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\(^{32}\) Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” 15.

\(^{33}\) Turner, “Frame, Flow and Reflection,” 492.
concept of liminality can have several applications while retaining its core meaning as a state of transition 'betwixt and between,' where the old sociality has gone but the new has not yet come.

2.4 The Applications of Liminality

One hundred years after the publication of van Gennep’s thesis, political anthropologist Bjorn Thomassen argued that scholarship, though slow to investigate van Gennep's claims in the first half of the twentieth century, has basically proven him to be right and that 'the universality of the tripartite structure is not to be underestimated.' When cultural change is mediated by some version of identifiable and effective ritual, liminality is an agent for change. However, there is significant variety in the way the term is used, as liminality theory has been picked up as a context for cultural analysis, critique and construction of various forms. Not only has liminality been developed in its original sociocultural discipline; it has also been explored in the fields of literature, health care, organisational theory and performance criticism.

Types of liminal experience

Bjorn Thomassen has succinctly outlined ‘The Uses and Meanings of Liminality’ in an opening address and consequent journal publication for a conference edition of International Political Anthropology in 2009. He indicates a wide range of usages of the word through different types of subject (individuals, groups and whole

34 Thomassen, "The Uses and Meanings of Liminality," 7.
societies), temporality (time length) and spatial scale (geographic) dimensions. Thomassen’s descriptions demonstrate the range of possible applications of the term ‘liminality’ to describe human realities, including, of course, a confluence of different circumstances of liminality, which would intensify the experience. ‘Most experiences of liminality are circumscribed by some kind of frame, whereas others are closer to ‘pure liminality,’ where both spatial and temporary coordinates are in play. . . . There are degrees of liminality, and the degree depends on the extent to which the liminal experience can be weighed against persisting structures.’

At the individual level of subjects, liminality can arrive in a fleeting moment of time as a sudden event, deeply disruptive of one’s life, such as an unexpected divorce, death or accident. These are usually distressing experiences of liminality, unwelcome yet unavoidable. At other times, moments of liminality can be instituted intentionally as a rite of passage and tend to be positive and life affirming, such as in baptism and marriage. Sometimes these transitional stages of life are drawn out over an extended period, such as in puberty or an engagement period prior to marriage, hence they spill out beyond what could be contained within a ritual and liminality is experienced as a feature of everyday life. They might even be invoked to expand across a life-time, sometimes as a choice, sometimes not. The experience of transgendered individuals, for example, is a lifetime negotiation of the liminality in-between male and female identities, but the dedication of oneself to a monastic vocation is more likely a choice by the individual.

When liminality is experienced by a group of people the experience of liminality is as a cohort of individuals undergoing the above types of liminal situations as a somewhat homogenous unit. Graduation ceremonies and gap year programs, for example, are shared by students leaving the same educational level. Monastic vocations are expressed as communities and social minorities are organized into ‘associations.’ Hence, this level includes institutional church denominations and its various religious and theological associations.

41 Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” 18. Thomassen arranges these uses of liminality in a table of individual, group and society levels of subjects broken down into examples of liminal moments, periods and epochs, creating a grid of nine separate categories.
Finally, at the societal level, liminality can descend as a mass movement in a moment, imposed upon a whole society by a sudden event where social distinctions and normative hierarchy disappears. A cataclysmic natural disaster is the prime example, with a massive loss of lives, landscapes and infrastructure making the old rule of law impossible. At other times, liminality arrives slowly but with a final initiating event, such as the outbreak of war or revolution. Occasionally also, as is being argued is the case for the present era of global capitalist culture, liminality is felt as a prolonged political and economic instability with accompanying intellectual confusion.

Liminality is not a social problem to be eradicated but rather it is an aspect of the previously established socialised existence. When multiple layers of liminality are experienced simultaneously, its impact intensifies exponentially. Therefore, when a whole society or group are within the liminal sphere, personal experiences of liminality can be deeply disturbing and disorientating, because the society or group do not hold the boundary for the transition in a way that mimics the community’s role in ritual transitions. The drift into anti-structure is total and unsupported. When all of these three categories apply—the societal, group and individual—liminality is thrust upon the individual: it is a creative opportunity, a crucible of experience to be coupled with the crucible of prayer and faith.

Thomassen goes on to argue that the most far-reaching application of liminality in current scholarship is through its coupling with social theory, to describe large-scale crises or structural movement in whole societies. If this is correct, liminal epochs of a society’s history should be paid special attention, for those are the eras in which the agenda of long-term stability is achieved:

The playfulness of the liminality period is at one and the same time unstructured and highly structuring: the most basic rules of behaviour are questioned, doubt and scepticism as to the existence of the world are radicalized, but the problematisations, the formative experiences and

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42 Thomassen discusses the collaboration of anthropology and social theory in detail in "Anthropology and Social Theory: Renewing Dialogue," European Journal of Social Theory 16, no. 2 (2013): 198. When discussing liminality in this context, he recounts Victor Turner’s collaboration with social theorist Shmuel Eisenstadt, who recognised that in Eisenstadt’s comparative-historical approach to the study of civilisations, the concept of liminality could readdress the question of change and continuity.
the reformulations of being during the liminality period proper, will feed the individual (and his/her cohort) with a new structure and set of rules that, once established, will glide back to the level of the taken-for-granted.\textsuperscript{43}

In other words, during times of cultural or social instability, the values, processes and systems of normative social behaviours and relationships are in purposeful disarray. It is like reshuffling the cards in-between hands in a card game. The game stays the same, but the deck is arranged differently, which can lead to a different outcome. Thomassen’s categorisations of liminality allow liminality theory to be applied to a variety of situations so that those situations can themselves be compared and contrasted. This is the case, liminality theory asserts, because liminality is an aspect of social experience that repeats itself time and again, in the unfolding of life. That is, without circumstances of disruption or breach, human life does not move forward in either time or circumstance.\textsuperscript{44}

This project utilises the theory of liminality in three distinct ways. First, by understanding the social liminality struggling to come to terms with the destabilising effects of globalisation upon culture, the theologian is equipped with a useful lens through which to understand the particular challenges of her or his context. Second, applying an understanding of the unfolding of theological discourse through a liminal process, theologians are able to address the doctrinal and hermeneutical questions thrown up by this current societal level of liminality. Third, it will be argued that by drawing on the resources gleaned through personal liminal spiritual experience, theologians are equipped with hermeneutical tools for negotiating the unfolding of theological discourse through periods of liminality.

\textbf{Liminality in the structure of experience}

Late in his career, Turner encountered the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, which prompted him to explore the full extent of his liminality theory beyond the context of ritual. In an article published posthumously in 1986, Turner proposes a

\textsuperscript{43} Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” 20.
\textsuperscript{44} Celia Deane-Drummond, a theologian working on an interdisciplinary project with evolution biologists, has even applied liminality theory to a dialectical unfolding through anti-structure within the evolutionary biology of life. It is how the personal and the public, the individual and the communal interact and evolve into their unique particularities. Celia Deane-Drummond, \textit{The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming} (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2014)
synthesis between his own understanding of social drama, Dilthey's philosophical observations about the structure of experience, and John Dewey's process of experience with stages of initiation and consummation. Specific experiences that erupt to disturb the normative unfolding of everyday life propel the process of both individual and communal relationships, identity and meaning. Turner noted that for Dilthey, 'mere experience' does not have an arbitrary beginning and ending, cut out of the stream of chronological temporality but has a consistent structure of breach | crisis | reflexivity | reintegration.

In ritual process, Turner identifies a movement from structured sociality, to anti-structure, through to renewed and reordered structure. He also applies these observations more broadly, through the concept of social drama, whereby the liminality of the ritual space is encountered through some kind of disruption to public life. Social drama involves a process of breach—an interruption of what had previously been experienced as normative. Next there is a threshold—a limen, an invitation to move through the immediacy of the crisis to something else, the moment in which the person considers her or his committed response to the new situation. After the threshold comes redressive action—an authorised agent organises what needs to be done and begins the process of reintegration. The agent might be certain people, if the experience is social, but it might also be an internal voice or principle, when the experience is within the inner life of an individual. This is the creative stage of liminality in de-ritualised form, experimental and surprising, often utilising elements of ritual in the 'performance' of the redress. Finally, the process leads itself to reintegration—the re-establishment of order integrated together with the fresh insights or necessary reformations gleaned from the disruption.

46 The social drama is an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behaviour. It is propelled by passions, compelled by volitions, and it overmasters at times any rational considerations. Yet reason plays a major role in the settlement of disputes which take the sociodramatic form, particularly during the redressive phase—though here again nonrational factors may come into play if rituals are performed (performance here being in terms of regularizing process) to redress the disputes. In other words, there is a structural relationship between cognitive, affective, and conative components of what Dilthey called lived experience. Victor Turner, "The Anthropology of Performance," in On the Edge of the Bush, ed. E. Turner (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 180.
In his engagement with Dilthey’s work, Turner began to see how experience and social drama operate together for the creation of shared meaning systems. Wisdom is born out of the process of experience: of undergoing the process of life in a dialectical relationship between what is normative and what arrives as unexpected and foreign. Meaning is *constructed* in the social process, just as it is constructed internally in a parallel process. By ‘experience’ Turner is referring to the individual, internal processes that occur prior to ‘expressions’ of sociality—the cultural manifestations of these processes. The scale of the breach to social normativity, determines to a large extent the scale of liminality (that is individual, group or societal). Where individuals having shared the same occasion for the breach in social normativity, they might be supposed to share a similar experience of liminality, which would be evidenced by their expressions.  

If Turner is correct, there is a consistency of process from ritualised liminality to de-ritualised liminality, when the conditions of form are met—that is, the suspension of ordinary, inherited and normative sociality and the initiation of a period of change, transition, transformation. It is only with the suspension of ordinary form that re-formation can take place. Meaning never unfolds out of nothing; there is always a prior experience, a context, a history, a set of relationships already in place—this is the essential sociality of meaning. Hence, if new meaning is to emerge, then it must necessarily re-form what is already there. To step over the threshold of the breach—to employ Turner’s terms—is to step into disturbed, disrupted and disordered experience. If the work of liminality is performed, then this experience returns to something ordered, to a transformed sociality.

As the proposal for a theological hermeneutic for contexts of liminality unfolds, it shall build upon this connection between the personal, internal structures of experience and the cultural expressions of liminality involving cohorts of people on both micro and macro scales. That is, in Thomassen’s terms, individual experiences of liminality become a resource for the theologian working in contexts of group and societal liminality. This is particularly the case for contemplative modes of spirituality, which deliberately invoke spiritual practices that expose the

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47 See the discussion in Chapter One, section 1.3.
individual to a liminal encounter with themselves and God. In the open-space of non-languaged spirituality, be it silent meditation or mindful movement, the crucible of prayer becomes the crucible of liminality.

**Liminality, globalisation and (post)modernity**

Liminality theory applied to societal epochal movements of culture leads us to a parallel theory of globalisation. In recent decades, social theory has applied various frameworks to the web of fresh cultural expressions emerging in the second half of the twentieth century. Globalisation theory has developed alongside various permutations of postmodernity theory, which are conceptually similar but not equivalent. Technically speaking, globalisation encompasses the socioeconomic and political aspects of postmodernity, though these might be listed with other philosophical attributes (e.g. the loss of metanarrative) or aesthetic practices in art and design (e.g. bricolage and collage). Postmodernity theories tend to operate in the other direction and are criticised for their indeterminateness. After several decades of theorising about postmodernity, there is still no scholarly consensus as to its relationship with modernity. Is postmodernity an extension or fulfillment of modernity (as for Giddens); a negative reaction to modernity (Lyotard); a distinct new era after modernity (Bauman)?

When Thomassen argues that liminality as a concept can be most usefully applied to social theory, he proposes a view of modernity, not postmodernity: ‘Modernity cannot be pinned down with reference to any specific institution or ideational structure, as modernity in its most general sense refers to change, transition and contingency . . . the present having overcome the past, . . . a continuous transgression of boundaries and the breaking down of traditions.’ However, drawing on a different set of cultural markers, the very same argument can be made for postmodernity as liminal. For example, consider this description of the postmodern era by postmodern cultural critic Jean Baudrillard:

> We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting

49 Thomassen, "Anthropology and Social Theory," 203.
strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of wandering and simulating animals that capital, that the death of capital has made of us—because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand—the jungle of signs is equal to that of the forests—the vertigo of simulacra is equal to that of nature—only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which work buries work, in which value buries value—leaving a virgin, sacred space without pathways, continuous as Bataille wished it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand.  

While both Thomassen’s and Baudrillard’s descriptions are evocative of the liminal state, it is difficult to identify the boundary markers that might define a liminal epoch within theories of modernity. In contrast, identifying the creation of liminal and liminal-type cultures as a result of the processes of globalisation enables us to narrow our focus to the experience of living in the contemporary world, rather than theoretical constructs about it. Our attention shifts to the impact of globalisation upon cultures—infinitely plural—among which we might locate ourselves in several cotermoinously.

In contrast to (post)modernity theories, globalisation theory takes the economic sphere—the globalised market economy—as the foundation for culture. The British political theorist David Held has defined globalisation as a historical process characterised by stretching (from local to global), intensification of magnitude, quickening pace, and a deepening enmeshment of global and local:

Globalization denotes the intensification of worldwide social relations and interactions such that distant events acquire very localized impacts and vice versa. It involves a rescaling of social relations, from the economic sphere to the security sphere, beyond the national to the transnational, transcontinental and transworld.

The process of globalisation is able to provide boundary markers for the start of liminal phases of social process, because the destabilising effect of global upon

local has economic and political manifestations in local subcultures.\textsuperscript{52} The fact of the global economy makes demands on individuals and groups everywhere. Nation-states must interact through the market’s terms and conditions, negotiating debt, productivity and the potential for trade. New terms for the economic-political ordering of a society inevitably lead to a need for new forms of relationship (social structure) and ways of living (culture). The fast pace of change in the market ensures a constant flux in social structure, which is liminality.

If globalised capitalist culture is in fact a societal epoch of liminality—that is, a period of instability while a post-industrial socioeconomic political system gives way to a post-digital socioeconomic political system, or something other as yet unimagined—then globalisation theory describes a world re-forming itself to the demands of the market economy. Sovereign nation-states no longer have the autonomous power they wielded in the world wars of last century, but corporations now wield a similar kind of international power in terms of the market. Corporations may run the economic systems of the emerging global culture, but they fall short of providing other aspects of stable society, which creates the situation of liminality: large social networks of people are in flux as an old social system based on local economics gives way to a new social system emerging from a wrestling of local culture with the demands of a global market.

**Religion as liminality in modern secular society**

Turner theorises that religion in post-industrial societies emerged from the translation of ritual into an institutionalised form of permanent liminality. The liminal moment is now carried by a definable subgroup of liminal representatives in a society, rather than a calendrical process participated in by everyone.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, Turner argues, institutionalised liminality is given responsibility to perform liminality vicariously, on behalf of the whole society, mediating the need for individuals to progress through the social structure over a lifetime and for society itself to renew and re-create itself continuously.

\textsuperscript{52} ‘Local’ in this sense need not be geographic. Systematic theology forms a kind of subculture through localising interests—network community formed through a shared project rather than geography.

Grace Davie, discussing the development of critical sociologies of religion in the early twentieth century, has noted how the rise of secularisation has dominated debate and the development of social theory about the function and place of religion in the supposedly secularised West. In fact, it is more correct to say that religion has been deinstitutionalised or reorganised within the process of sociality, for religion continues to exert a strong presence in globalised culture. For example, in several so-called European countries, religion might now be described as having a ‘vicarious function’ whereby religion ‘is performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, *who implicitly at least not only understand but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing.*”

It may be that Davie’s observations about vicarious religion in secular societies intersect with Turner’s observations about the spiritual association often made between people undergoing liminality and experiences of mystery, magic and the sacred. He suggests, therefore, that the liminality could be contrasted with stable social structure in terms of a secular |sacred |secular movement, which has led to attempts to apply the category of permanent liminality to institutional religion as a whole. With the liminal movement bleeding into general culture, its ritualised boundaries deconstructed, Turner develops a particular theory of religion in secularised society, where religion represents the sacred in liminal and liminal-like spaces, scattered throughout a culture rather than ritually bound.

However, reducing religion and religious experience to a single stage of social process is problematic. John Milbank discusses this as a strategy for allocating religion to a level of society that functions to mediate the exceptional or the problematic, and cites Talcott Parsons and Clifford Geertz as two influential social theorists who have attempted such a task: ‘Thus we have another way of “encompassing”: religion is to deal with the inevitable *lacunae* thrown up by a social or ideological system.’ Such a strategy cannot deal with the whole functionality of religion in any given society, which often as not is employed to support the social structure rather than mediate changes to it through

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destabilisation. Hence, while there might be religious movements that can be characterised through the descriptor of permanent liminality, it fails as a category that can be applied to all religions as social institutions.

In a slightly different vein, political anthropologist Arpád Szakolczai argues that globalised capitalist culture might be seen as a form of permanent liminality, representing a secularised, bowdlerised version of a global monastery—that is, of institutionalised transitoriness. The ever-expanding demands of a market economy are well served by the intense creativity and innovation implicit in liminal experience. Szakolczai argues that behaviours developed in this environment bear a strong resemblance to the permanent liminality of the monastic traditions in both their advantages and disadvantages, through the invocation of aesthetic practices, albeit secular rather than religious. 'But at the price of living in a permanent state of excitation, of hectic change, cutting themselves increasingly off from the very possibility of a stable home, a normal, ordered everyday life.'

Applying Szakolczai’s theory to the whole of the world’s culture(s), as he does, might not be necessary in order for it to be relevant to this present project. Rather, liminality theory gives us a clear insight into the mechanisms of globalisation upon local contexts for theology and suggests that the key challenge in these contexts is that they are in transition.

2.5 Liminality Theory and Theology
At the outset we suggested that there are several ways that liminality theory might throw light upon the current challenge of doing theology in a period of epochal cultural change. Liminality theory, as developed in its original discipline of anthropology, gives us tools for understanding the necessary work of liminality in relation to sociality of discourse. Through a liminal movement of deconstruction, the social aspects of human identity—including the systems of meaning and belief about the world with which theology is most preoccupied—are guided into a state of anti-structure and anti-form as a part of the process of restructuring and re-

forming the human’s place in, and perspective of, the social world. Turner observes that liminal experience, being so dominated by an absence of form and rule, is often associated with mystery and the sacred dimensions of social life. Hence liminality theory also offers an anthropological lens through which to view the function of spirituality during contexts of change: it is a way into understanding the social processes at work and is a key to the refinement of structured sociality. Thomassen’s typology of the uses of liminality has readied us for a discussion of the resources available to the theologian through her or his own personal experiences of liminality, particularly liminal spiritual encounters with God beyond human form.

Casting a glance over contemporary theological discourse globally, there are several identity markers for liminality perceivable at Thomassen’s level of the group.\(^{59}\) Theology has suffered a loss of status in the academy and the world, ambiguity about theology’s distinctive contribution to cultural discourse, preoccupation with questions of theodicy in the first half of the twentieth century and questions of the body and sexuality in the second half, a radical democratisation of theological authority (particularly seen in relation to theological blogging and social media), a turn to the mystical in philosophical theology, and a resurgence of interest in pre-modern theological resources.

Global capitalist culture, itself at least liminal-like, has a kind of domino effect, producing liminality in local cultural contexts, which in turn creates liminality in any theological discourse. The personal life-contexts of theologians also, inevitably, produce experiences of liminality, either as a consequence of crisis or as a result of the natural progression through life stages, and these experiences also impact upon those who engage in the tasks of Christian theology. When any or all of Thomassen’s categories apply—the societal, group and individual—liminality is thrust upon the theologian, whether it is identified and acknowledged or not. If the movement of liminality is recognised, it can be embraced as a creative opportunity for the refinement and further development of theological knowledge forged in the crucible of experience.

To date, liminality theory has received relatively little attention in theological discourses. It has drawn some interest from missiologists striving to work at the connection between church and world;\textsuperscript{60} and only isolated usage in liturgical studies (which is surprising given the origins of the term in relation to rites of passage).\textsuperscript{61} However, identifying globalisation as a form of liminality in some respects runs parallel to postcolonial critiques of theology.\textsuperscript{62} For example, Kwok Pu Lan, a prominent Chinese-American theologian who specialises in postcolonial critique, writes: ‘Christian theology does not emerge out of a vacuum, but develops in constant negotiation with political and ecclesial empires and with other power dynamics throughout history.’\textsuperscript{63} Ecclesial empires of the institutional denominations have crumpled late in the twentieth century, thereby, in the definition offered above, entering into a state of liminality.

Like all interdisciplinary resources, there is some skepticism as to the relevance of liminality as a concept,\textsuperscript{64} some overenthusiastic usage,\textsuperscript{65} and some mistaken applications of the term. For example, in her 2013 doctoral thesis on church in the Australian context, Helen Jamieson includes a description of the Australian church as being located in a ‘liminal’ Australian place: mostly though, she is not describing liminality but rather the marginalisation of the church—a confusion of terms that has already been discussed.

When Jamieson describes the church as ‘on the edge,’ occupying ‘a quiet corner of secular space,’ embodying pain and grief, these are descriptions of marginality, not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{60} Alan Roxbrough, \textit{The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality} (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).
\item \textbf{64} See for example, Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 123-28.
\item \textbf{65} Michael Frost, \textit{Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture} (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006). Frost advocates ongoing liminal living as a place of creativity and connection beyond the institutional church, without much insight into the effects of making liminality permanent.
\end{itemize}
liminality, for they contain neither the indicative transitional qualities of liminality nor any element of movement within the dynamic evolution of social structures. She comes closer with a description of Australia’s red centre: ‘The arid interior of Australia with its intense heat, cold, sun, shadow and beauty is an ambiguous place. . . . An Australian church can attempt to avoid the dangers of a metaphorical desert in its own life by making a comfortable place on the edges to retire and end its days.’ Liminality only arises in relationship with its edges: we go into the desert—where nothing is familiar or sensible to us as coastland visitors—and we come out again. If we have allowed the desert to do its work, we come out transformed, with new resources for living ‘on the edge’. That would be a liminal experience worth exploring theologically in the Australian context.

British theologian John Milbank has expressed skepticism about the usefulness of liminality theory for the discipline of theology. Milbank’s critique of liminality theory arises in the context of his overall critique of sociology and social theory. Milbank’s concern is that social theory, whilst purporting to offer a critique of the sociality of theology, either intentionally or accidentally ‘sublimes the sublime’ by segregating the sacred in order that it might be ‘policed’ by secular social theory. Milbank argues that Turner and van Gennep’s theory of liminality contributes to this relegation of religion to the margins by locating religious experience within a transitory state of sociality. That is, religion is simultaneously reduced to its social function mediating social transitions and marginalised as an aspect of normative social life.

Douglas Ezzy has assessed the influence of secular anthropology upon Turner’s work, arguing there is a development over the period of his work such that the latter years of Turner’s work seems to be less influenced by the secularizing pressure of which Milbank writes. This suggests that Milbank’s criticism of social theory needs to be distinguished from individual social theorists, who might be

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66 Helen Jamieson, “Embodying Christ: The Call to Be Church in an Australian Context” (Charles Sturt University, 2013), 231.
67 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 106.
68 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 123.
expected to have some interaction between the discipline and their own personal viewpoints. Furthermore, the adjustments to the influence of ardent atheism on Turner over a lifetime suggest that the discipline itself might have progressed beyond the criticism leveled at it by Milbank.

In a recent volume on the application of liminality theory to political theory, Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra claim that ‘as a methodological tool it is well placed to overcome disciplinary boundaries, which often direct attention to specific structures or sectors of society.’\textsuperscript{70} That is, rather than marginalising the liminal subject matter, the dialectical nature of liminal theory insists on an integration with a broader perspective. A social science example might first demonstrate the nature of liminality theory as an integrative disciplinary tool. An essay from Michel Dobry in this volume echoes Milbank’s concern that segregating methodologies results in a reduction of the influence of political crisis: it makes that which is messy and mysterious manageable by reducing it to an ‘outcome.’\textsuperscript{71} However, Dobry demonstrates how the structured narrative of political history is enriched when liminal political events are seen within that historical unfolding. Hence, contrary to Milbank he concludes that ‘the continuity perspective, far from being paradoxical, is a necessary condition for understanding what can be considered specific or particular to such seemingly extraordinary phenomena.’\textsuperscript{72}

The dialectical nature of liminality theory should function to bring the transitional aspects of sociality into relationship with structured sociality, so that the spiritual, mystical or mysterious insights of the liminal movement are integrated into the secular. In other words, the dialectical shape of liminal theory actually safeguards against Milbank’s concern with social theory as a whole, that an absolute separation of sacred and secular, ephemeral and epochal, fluid and structured, is denied in this constant evolution of sociality through the dialectical unfolding of structure—anti-structure—structure. This specific way that anti-structured spirituality affects the unfolding of a structured theological tradition shall be taken up in detail in chapter four in relation to Sarah Coakley’s adaptation of Troeltsch’s


\textsuperscript{72} Dorby, “Critical Processes and Political Fluidity,” 94.
church-sect-mystic type.73

Sang Hyun Lee

A substantial application of liminality somewhat comparable with this project has been written by Sang Hyun Lee, in reference to the experience of Asian-American Christians. Rather than use the term ‘marginal’ to refer to the experience of migration, he argues that liminality alerts us to the creative possibilities of dual national identities, and the experience of living at the edge, because of being in between two countries, two cultures, two identities.74 There is a sense of journeying with these social boundaries, of potential evolution, or at least of persistent disappointment at the lack of post-liminal integration.

Sang Hyun Lee uses Turner’s categories to draw out the unique, prophetic voice of a liminal-formed community, a people formed in relationship to a life-changing encounter of God, who for our sake entered into the liminal space of human form. The Asian-American community, who are in a liminal state of being in life, become a gift of embodied wisdom for the whole church. ‘One cannot relate to the alienated of the society if one is not ready to meet them at a liminal place. One cannot be a prophetic voice against the dominant center if one is a part of the structure of the center.’75

While Sang Hyun Lee provides an example of contextual theology located in liminality, some aspects to his work extend the construct too far. First, he claims a theological preference for the liminal context, suggesting that God had a special intention in placing Jesus in a liminal social context as a Jewish Galilean. Indeed, in the story of God’s dealings with people, God does seem to ‘use the weak to shame the wise’ (1 Corinthians 1).76 The difficulty in deploying the term in this way arises when we consider the eschatological questions associated with liminality. Is all of human life liminal (theologically speaking), with heaven the before-and-after stable social structure? Must one occupy a certain social position ‘on earth’ in order to transition into a spiritual position ‘in the kingdom’? Liminality is part of a

73 Chapter Four, section 4.2.
74 Sang Hyun Lee, From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), x.
75 Sang Hyun Lee, From a Liminal Place, 179.
76 Sang Hyun Lee, From a Liminal Place, x.
sequential process, necessary for humans negotiating change in linear space and time, but does *divine* time and space function in the same way?

It is not the focus of this project to apply liminality theory to the subject matter of theological discourse but rather to its methodology and hence a critique of Lee’s eschatology is necessarily brief. It is easy to see the attractiveness for Lee to use liminality theory as a lens through which to understand the unfolding of theological time, but however the linear projection of temporality is problematic. In the first instance, theologians disagree as to the nature of eschatological time but liminality itself should not be understood in purely temporal terms, which the linear projection implies.

An alternative example can be found in Latin liberation theologian Vítor Westhelle, who applied the category of liminality to eschatology through a social framework, more than a linear framework. Westhelle argues that if the theologian takes a Hegelian shift to view eschatology through the lens of an immanent historical process rather than an other-worldly historical end-point, then it brings the focus of eschatology into the immediate context. Here liminality might better be applied to a sojourning community between social worlds. In this sense Westhelle says, ‘eschatology is a discourse on liminality, on that which is different in an ontological, ethical and also epistemological sense.’

Second, Sang Hyun Lee explores the place of liminality in the triune Godhead, suggesting that Jesus’ incarnation introduced liminality into the very nature of God. Trinitarian studies necessarily lean upon an analogical imagination but must also be wary of it: to what extent can human categories help us understand the divine? Liminality is a tool for mapping human experience; applying it to other-than-human experience is necessarily a metaphorical comparison and encounters a significant obstacle when used as a metaphor for God. Liminality is indelibly tied to *limit*, but the Christian God is thought to have no limit (unless self-imposed). For example, in the experience of silent prayer, there is an experience of liminality for

77 A similar example can be found in Steven Richard Bechtler, *Following In His Steps: Suffering, Community, and Christology in 1 Peter* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998).


79 Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, xi.
the human person, but should a person happen to meet God in that space, do we assume it is also a liminal experience for God? Both of these suggestions from Sang Hyun Lee would require an application of the concept of liminality beyond what has just been outlined.

**Piet van Staden**

Piet van Staden, a South African pastor-theologian, has recently utilised the theory of liminality to describe the constant unfolding of traditions of theology. Van Staden proposes that van Gennep’s three stages of social process can be applied to the unfolding theological discourses, renaming the stages as ‘beacons, thresholds and webs.’ By drawing on the example of his own Reformed theological tradition, he describes the process by which theology creatively unfolds, evolves, corrects and renews itself because ‘[t]heology is always seeking for new possibilities of expression in order to overcome the constraints.’

‘Beacons’ are expressions of the theological tradition that set it on its course. They are the notions and symbols (personalities and organisations) that become the dogmatic standards of orthodoxy. ‘Thresholds’ are the transitional experimentations in theology, when ‘liquid theology’ is detached from tradition without yet any expectation or aspiration for orthodoxy. ‘Web’ is the integrated network of beliefs where different perspectives meet. In a healthy theological tradition, this process is allowed to ebb and flow, displaying faith in the divine grace to maintain faithfulness to the gospel as the ages evolve.

What van Staden’s review of the Reformed theology discourse reveals is not only that the stages of liminality are unavoidable, but that a tradition that avoids the work required to move through liminality will cease to flourish. If the wisdom of a liminality is unique, then it cannot be ignored, because it is necessary for the personal and vocational traverse of the middle movement of social process. Furthermore, doing the work of the liminal context is essential to glean the

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80 Piet van Staden, "Beacons, Thresholds and Webs: Theology as Creative Endeavour," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013). I am not an Afrikaans reader or speaker. The abstract to this article is available in English and I used an online translation tool to browse the whole. My supervisor, Rev’d Dr Ockert Meyer, himself theologically educated in Afrikaans, provided advice and translation as required.

81 van Staden, “Beacons, Thresholds and Webs,” 1.
resources required for mature formation and development in the discipline of theology. In other words, the work of liminality is essential to the ongoing development of theological discourse.

**Theological discourse in contexts of change**

It has been shown how liminality theory might be applied to different levels of sociality and therefore it can address the processes of change at multiple levels. It has been argued that at the societal-epoch level, the influence of global capitalist culture has led local contexts for theology into cultural liminality. Furthermore, the scholarly discipline of theology has entered into a time of profound change and transition. Evidence of this is found in the voluminous philosophical debates about epistemologies, subjectivity and otherness—the reassessment of theories of personhood is a primary task in such an era and necessarily disturbs more practical theologies that are founded on its assumptions.

Further to the societal level of the transition with which contemporary theological discourse must come to terms, van Staden’s use of the theory alerts us to the liminal process at work in theological discourse as a group, at which point we discover that liminality is a continuous and persistent aspect of any scholarly discipline. Within each theological tradition, the natural unfolding of the discourse over time follows the three-stage dynamism of inherited and authorised doctrine being challenged by liminal, speculative doctrine, and then developed into an updated, integrated doctrine. Doctrine is subject to the process of liminality because, as with all knowledge, it is inherently social, and sociality changes. In other words, it is not just the context that leads theological discourse into a process of liminality; it is the natural unfolding of discourse itself.

Rowan Williams identifies this process in his early essay on “The Discipline of Scripture,” where he argues for an approach that holds *diachronic* and *synchronic* readings of scripture in tension.\(^2\) Interpretation of the sacred texts explores the world from which story or meaning of the text arises, but also the worlds in which they have been interpreted over time. Theological truths unfold over time, *in via*, in the course of ongoing conversation between scripture, the world, God and the

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individual making sense of it all. This is necessarily an open enquiry, with the emphasis on questions rather than propositions, so that new identities can be genuinely explored without fear of premature judgment. If theologians refuse this movement of liminality, where the discourse is permitted a certain amount of disarray in the process of change, the necessary updating of the social aspects of theological knowledge is neglected and the doctrinal aspects of theology fall out of step with the lived experience of theology.

Finally, Thomassen’s grid of the uses of liminality directs our attention to the personal experiences of liminality that theologians will encounter in the natural unfolding of their lives. On the one hand, these experiences are ‘imposed’ upon the theologian, as a consequence of her or his involvement in social life. However, when theology is worked, as has traditionally been the case, in tandem with spirituality, the regular disciplines of liturgy and prayer introduce intentional invocations of liminality that provide, at least in theory, a regular liminal space for the refinement of conceptual truth.

Hence, the first implication of liminality theory for theological method is the re-application of the lex orandi lex credendi principle—the law of prayer is the law of faith.83 Orandi is the field of liminality, credendi the field of structured and stable faith formulations. Prayer gives rise to theology because the symbolic gives rise to the concrete just as the mysterious God beyond words entered into the incarnated word. This is not just a Ricoeurian route to meaning through the symbol, as shall become evident in the next chapter. As Anglican theologian W. Taylor Stevenson has said, ‘lex orandi has the priority, lex credendi is essential but logically and ontologically derivative. The dialectical relationship between the two halves is intimate and pervasive.’84 In particular, the liminal sphere of silent prayer is where the pray-er makes room for God beyond limited human understanding. Intended and intentional liminal spiritual practices provide a forum for the theologian to ‘practice’ liminality and observe the methodological tools required to think theologically in that mode of prayerful discourse.

2.6 Summary

In the introductory chapter we asserted that theological discourse must come to grips with the distinct processes of cultural change if it is to make meaningful truth claims about God in the current context of massive epochal change. Liminality theory, as conceived in its original context of anthropology, provides a frame of reference for that task but also directs attention towards the resources a theologian might employ to respond to contexts of transition. Through personal experiences of liminality, a theologian learns first-hand the chaotic epistemology of knowledge without sociality, and is formed by the experience of direct engagement and immediate forms of relationship, rather than by socially mediated forms of knowledge, identity and community. If Turner is correct and there is a correlation between the processes of internal experience and the processes of external, social experience—with its accompanying cultural expressions—then there is also a correlation between the refinement of sociality in the crucible of liminality and the refinement of theological knowledge in the crucible of prayer. The remainder of this thesis seeks to explore the possibilities of such a correlation as it develops a theological hermeneutic that can work the unique context of liminality on its own terms, for the sake of honouring the past, being faithful to God and the kerygma in the present, and updating the tradition in its presently unforeseeable future.
Chapter 3

Open-space Dialectics

Keep your mind in hell and despair not.¹

3.1 Introduction

It is one thing to say that theologians must come to terms with what it is to operate in the context of liminality, it is quite another to be able to identify how that might be done. Liminality is characterised by lack of structure, lack of clarity, lack of identity and lack of permanence—characteristics that will keep it at odds with most approaches to scholarly discourse. But is essentially transitional, bounded by what has been and what is yet to be but essentially independent from both, in a process that pervades all of life as a constant process of evolving sociality. In other words, liminality is always in dialectical relationship with its structured frames of reference, the boundaries that hold the open space.

Since this thesis is concerned with the particular challenges of doing theology in contexts of liminality, the focus must now sharpen to questions of discourse. How might theological truth be known and communicated in liminality? What kind of knowledge is possible? How are the social aspects of theological knowledge going to be refined, remodeled and renewed in liminality so that a future movement back towards reformulated socialised knowledge may be truly transformed knowledge that makes sense of both the tradition and the context in which it must be lived?

This chapter explores the type of knowing and thinking unique to contexts of

¹ These words are accredited to Saint Silouan of Mount Athos, early twentieth century. For the context, source and commentary on the quote see, Nicholas Sakharov, "St Silouan the Athonite and Archimandrite Sophrony," in Mount Athos, the Sacred Bridge: The Spirituality of the Holy Mountain, ed. Dimitri E. Conomos and Graham Speake (Bern: Peter Lang), 141-162.
liminality and suggests a hermeneutical strategy for conceiving theology in these states of transition. By a careful consideration of the concept of 'limit' in its relation to liminality, it shall be argued that the way limit is broached determines whether a thinking may move into a creative liminal space of exploration or retreat into the crisis of unknowing. Liminality theory treats a limit as a threshold through which knowledge beyond formulated reason might be accessed. Post-Kantian philosophy\(^2\) tends to treat a limit as a roadblock, away from which reason carefully retraces its steps in respectful acknowledgement of what cannot be known. This divergence creates a critical difference in philosophical hermeneutics, the former is representative of Plato's original conception of limit and how is it applied in liminality theory. It is also the conception of limit in the traditional apophatic theological methods of the Monastic Fathers and mystical theology. In contrast, the latter response to limit as an 'end' is the assumed usage in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, which means these need to be carefully distinguished with regard to contexts of change, and if there is to be anything knowable at all in the realm of liminality, this rebound from limit must be challenged.

The theological hermeneutics of Rowan Williams are proposed as a method capable of holding not just one but many limits in place as 'thresholds' through which an open and ongoing theological conversation might happen with integrity. Williams holds an open conversation by means of a complex dialectical structure to theological discourse. Understanding the 'broken middle' proposed by Gillian Rose—a British socio-political philosopher whom Williams credits as an important influence on his return to a Hegelian dialecticism—shows how the middle ground of Williams's theological conversations can be said to be a hermeneutical match for liminal thinking.

Theological knowledge is, of course, a complex kind of epistemology—liminal or not—because God is one of its conversation partners. If God is to be more than a human construction (more than the sociality of theological discourse) then knowledge of God must in some sense be encountered as a gift—that is, as revelation. In this Williams follows in the footsteps of Paul Ricoeur to consider the

\(^2\) 'Post-Kantian philosophy' loosely refers to the philosophical discourse after Immanuel Kant whose influence is so pervasive on the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics. It includes Hegel and Heidegger, Husserl and Habermas.
idea of revelation as a type of testimony. Thinking of theological knowledge in liminality as testimony has strong parallels in liminal theory to the models of communitas, of a particularly creative and direct, egalitarian relating among persons meeting in a liminal sphere. This understanding of revelation as a kind of testimony about an encounter with God places the final building blocks of liminal thinking so that in chapter three we can consider the question of theological knowledge emerging from liminal spiritual experience.

3.2 Limit as Threshold
In the previous chapter, it was revealed that ‘limit’ is the etymological foundation for the concept of liminality. In the same way, the concept of limit is the foundation of liminal knowing. The open-space of unstructured thinking requires a firm boundary to frame the extent of the investigation and introduce a necessary finiteness to the infinite nature of liminal subjectivity. In Victor Turner’s words, ‘there are usually held to be certain axiomatic principles of construction, and certain basic building blocks that make up the cosmos and into whose nature no neophyte may inquire.’ Knowing the limits of critique and the function of that ‘limit’ is critical to the creation of an open-space where knowledge might be transformed.

Plato’s language of liminal reasoning

Liminality theory draws its images—limit, threshold, liminality (that without limit)—from the language of Plato. The nuances of Plato’s meaning in the context of his overall cosmology and worldview are implicit in these concepts but not always carried forward in the adaptation by later writers. A limit in liminality is a threshold over which a person crosses in order to dwell in an open-space of transformation. The limit signals the end of one set of socially constructed meanings and identities and gives way to a transitional period of anti-structure and free form, in order that sociality might be re-formed.

Plato proposed a strategy for moving beyond the limit of human knowing, but prior to comprehending Plato’s limit, the place of the difficulty in his philosophical

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framework must be understood. There are a group of eleven or twelve of Plato’s dialogues that share similar subject matter and a similar outcome. They are concerned with one or other of the Greek virtues and end in what the Greeks called aporia. That is, each of these dialogues contains a stream of thinking that ends in puzzlement, perplexity and an impasse of understanding. In the dialogue of Meno, Socrates’ interlocutor Meno complains that Socrates is being deliberately obtuse, leading to difficulty where Meno originally saw none, and leading to despair about the possibility of knowing anything at all through this diachronic process of thinking. Socrates responds by arguing that encountering aporia is essential because ‘a man does not seek what he knows, for since he knows it there is no need of the inquiry, nor what he does not know, for in that case he does not even know what he is to look for.’ When desire for knowledge is spiked by the difficulty of obtaining it, a different source of knowledge is sought. The philosopher turns to poets and priests, who say there is a memory of perfect virtue contained in our human soul. Knowledge of virtue, and of other subjects of the soul, comes not through teaching, only ‘recollection.’ Plato called it a kind of recollection of the soul. In mystical theology it is more commonly spoken of in terms of the spiritual senses.

Augustine, picks up this idea of memory in The Teacher, arguing that ‘there is a certain kind of teaching through reminding - a very important kind.’ God is sensed by the human soul in an analogous way to the intellect receiving information from the physical senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. Christ the inner teacher quickens faith, knowledge and love in the spiritual senses by the gift of the Holy Spirit. ‘Our real Teacher is he who is so listened to, who is said to

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7 Plato, “Meno,” 80e.
8 Plato, “Meno,” 81e.
dwell in the inner man, namely Christ, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God. Theology, therefore, becomes a task of spiritual discernment, starting with the testimony of the Spirit, seeking the wisdom of the paraclete whose role is to guide us into all truth. This approach shall be explored in chapter four and five, first through Sarah Coakley’s theological method that privileges contemplation, then through Augustine himself, in the investigation of his hermeneutic of the double-love command.

Plato’s aporia, the intellectual state of perplexity, is comparable with the experience of liminality, as described in the previous chapter. When the structured forms of knowing fall away, the human person is presented with aporia, with a puzzlement that appears irresolvable. However, following Plato, this can be seen as an opportunity rather than a crisis. It is not a crisis for all knowing, only for dialogical reasoning (in Plato), and (in liminality) for the socialised aspects of knowledge that no longer represent meaningful sense or truth about the world, both visible and invisible. Aporia does not indicate the end of thinking, if the thinker is prepared to step into a different way of knowing and receiving knowledge. Hence Rowan Williams says,

the only honest beginning is with difficulty; that is to say, we cannot 'start thinking', but 'begin' only with the acknowledgement that what we say is already put in question. . . . The action taken in the moment of suspending the ethical is an act not of self-assertion but of self-dispossession or even self-gift.'

Furthermore, for Williams, this aporia of thinking is given expression in aporias of language. In The Edge of Words Williams argues that language itself has means by which to indicate difficulty, through extreme words, silence and the breaking of rules of grammar and the like. These aporias of language are of particular interest to theologians. The limitations of language lead the thinker into an investigation of

14 Rowan Williams, The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)
‘how its limits are displayed.’ In relation to theological language, this leads into
encounters with the sacred that are ‘inseparable from its silence or marginality.’\textsuperscript{15}
The aporia of language illustrates the difficulty of thinking, not as an endpoint of
knowledge, but as a marker in the discourse. At the edge of thinking there is an
invitation to listen with different ears, speak in a different mode, investigate
beyond reason.

Having established that liminality can be greeted as an opportunity for a new type
of knowing rather than a necessary retreat into despair of knowing, it is critical to
understand the gateway into liminality, which, in Plato’s terminology, is the
threshold of limit.

**Limit (peras)**

Liminality theorist Arpád Szakolczai argues that Turner’s use of limit should be
linked with Plato rather than Kant’s reading of Plato, which means that the
development of limit situations in German Idealism is not a straightforward
theoretical match for liminality theory. The post-Kantian limit makes
fundamentally different assumptions about the function of the limit, its
relationship with the whole of reality, and therefore the appropriate philosophical
response to the experience of limit in thinking and reason.\textsuperscript{16}

In Plato’s Greek, the word for limit (peras) is closely associated with unlimited—
(apeiron)—which is sometimes called the ‘first word’ of classical philosophy,
central to Pythagorean thought and significant for both Plato and Aristotle.\textsuperscript{17} The
relevant discussion of limit appears in Plato’s final work, *Philebus*, where the
characters Socrates, Philebus and Protarchus discuss the question: what is
better—pleasure or wisdom?\textsuperscript{18} In the unfolding of the conversation, Socrates gets
his friends to agree on some basic principles of reality: that everything that is,
is both one and many,\textsuperscript{19} which, he goes on to argue, are functional equivalents of that

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 179.
\textsuperscript{16} Szakolczai, "Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Tranformative
\textsuperscript{17} Szakolczai, "Liminality and Experience," 142.
\textsuperscript{18} Plato, "Philebus," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* ed. Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns
\textsuperscript{19} Plato, "Philebus," 14c-17e.
which is limited and unlimited.\textsuperscript{20} The limited and the unlimited exist in all things concurrently, mingling together in the nature of its material reality, whatever form of reality that is.\textsuperscript{21} We start \textit{thinking} about reality through its limited expression, but that provides a threshold into its \textit{unlimited} ontology.

It might be important to point out that this is a conversation about \textit{how} we know rather than \textit{what} we know. As Constance Meinwald says in his commentary on \textit{Philebus}, ‘the metaphysical and methodological equipment is meant to aid in the inquiry into pleasure and reason as contributors to the best life.’\textsuperscript{22} Plato’s cosmology lies behind the text: the famous relation of the Absolute, the memory of which is carried in the soul, the desire for which drives the philosopher. The mind is following the journey of memory back to its source.\textsuperscript{23}

Knowledge of the infinite, therefore, is an aspect of ontological reality or experience, as opposed to an intellectual construct. The limit is the threshold between intellect and soul. It is in the soul where memory of the infinite is stored and retrievable. The threshold of philosophical limit operates as an open doorway through which deeper or more expansive knowledge may be obtained, as it exists in relationship with both the one limited thing that started the investigation and the greater network of all reality, physical and metaphysical, particular and universal. The limit is a standpoint from which the philosopher, standing in the doorway—at the threshold—might view different perspectives. On the one side is that knowledge which is already known (formed), and on the other side is that knowledge which is not yet known (without form). To \textit{transverse}\textsuperscript{24} the threshold of what is known is to \textit{transform} knowledge. The form of that which has previously been known is allowed to expand, reconfigure and \textit{re-form} within a newly conceived context across the other side of the limit—that is, the broader horizon of its infinite form. In other words, Szakolczai says, ‘for the Greeks, the limit as a

\textsuperscript{20} Plato, “Philebus,” 18a-e.
\textsuperscript{21} Plato outlines four classes of things: most things (most importantly) are a combination of limited and unlimited nature, while some things are pure limited, some are pure unlimited and, finally, some are the cause of the combination of limit and unlimited nature. Plato, “Philebus,” 23c-d.
\textsuperscript{23} For an examination of the impact of Plato’s cosmology upon his ethical thinking about the world see Gabriela Roxana Carone, \textit{Plato’s Cosmology and Its Ethical Dimensions} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
\textsuperscript{24} To move across, beyond, through.
separate device was inseparable from the idea of actually going through the limit—
implying the experience of being on the limit.'

Szakolczai argues that the father of German Idealism, Immanuel Kant, is credited
with reintroducing Plato’s conception of limit as a fundamental theme of
philosophy. Post-Kantian philosophy has utilised the concept of limit to explore
possible responses to the perceived problem of subjectivity in epistemology. However, Kant’s understanding of limit, its function and its relationship with the
unlimited is fundamentally different from Plato’s, stemming from a fundamentally
opposite worldview and experience of reality. Szakolczai argues that this
distinguishes post-Kantian limit from the meaning of limit in liminality theory,
such that they become incompatible theories.

Kant believed the world to be problematic and difficult, so setting a limit was a
strategy for keeping chaos and confusion at bay. For Kant, then, limit functions as
an end, a boundary in rational thought, at which the philosopher should turn back
to herself, to understand the limit of her own intellectual capacity. Hence, even
though the limit itself is a construct of thinking, it in fact determines what it
bounds, giving shape to reality through the Cartesian principle of ‘I think therefore
I am.’

This is demonstrated in Karl Jasper’s development of Kant’s limit in his boundary
situations. The event of reaching the boundary results in a ‘rebound’ back into
reason, rather than a meeting of transcendence with a transformation of reason;
therefore the open-space of liminality is not engaged as a resource for
consciousness. Rather, Jasper says:

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\text{limits as such, limits I merely come up against, will not induce a transcending. They jog my existence; they startle me; but they leave no residue in my consciousness. The point is to distinguish between limits. They can be relative frontiers, limiting at the time and potentially passable; if so,}
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\[\text{25 Szakolczai, "Liminality and Experience," 151.}
they challenge the scientist but provide no philosophical impulse. Or they can be absolute boundaries, limiting in principle, putting a stop to research but opening the doors to philosophical transcending.28

Regardless of whether Jaspers’s insights on limit are helpful or correct, they are fundamentally different from the limit of Turner's liminality theory. The movement is different: for Kant the limit is an experience to be stepped away from; for Turner the limit is to be stepped through. In liminality, transcendence of consciousness comes through transformation of what is assumed to be true, moving through the liminal experience towards re-forming that which is taken for granted, and returning to a conscious knowledge such that unconscious social relations might again be assumed.

In contrast to the post-Kantian limit situations of late twentieth-century Continental philosophy, the limit conceived through liminality theory reflects Plato’s original threshold conception of peras in at least three important respects that should already be evident. First, a limit that bounds liminality is a threshold to be crossed into greater knowledge, rather than an end to what is possible to be known. In this respect, we might consider Turner's liminality as taking on a dialectical relationship with its before and after that is similar to Plato’s hermeneutical enquiry into the infinite and Absolute. Moving over the border of an open-space to dwell in liminality leads into a broader field of epistemology, where knowledge is transformed rather than obliterated. Complicit in this is Plato’s assumption that limit and unlimited mingle together in their form—one and many—in ongoing relationship to one another. Retaining the threshold imagery in the etymology of limit as peras assists us to understand the nature of limit in liminal philosophy.

Second, the crossing of the limit into liminality for Plato is a positive engagement with reality that continues to be ‘good’ rather than chaotic, as Kant perceived. Stepping across the threshold might be uncomfortable, as Turner suggests, but it has purpose and promise. The experience of disorder in liminality is a function of crossing the threshold, rather than of being thrown into a direct experience of a

28 Jaspers, Philosophy, Vol 2, 83.
fundamentally unbearable reality. Again this reveals an underlying connection between the limit and the unlimited or limited: they are of the same substance, and an intermingling of reality.

Third, for Plato, peras is a class of things that actually exist: limit and liminality are categories of material experience rather than thinking. For Kant, limit is a heuristic device, a function of thinking, a conceptual tool that shapes reality by its application, but it is not a category of existential reality itself. Recovering the pre-Kantian conception of limit strengthens the case posed within liminality theory, of limit being read as an anthropological category through which we view experience in the world, rather than a philosophical hermeneutic in and of itself.

Plato and Kant represent two different responses to a crisis of knowledge. Victor Turner’s speculative extension of liminality theory into a basic category of human experience suggests that crisis, which includes intellectual aporia, brings the human subject to the point of change or, perhaps better said, evolution of her or his being in the world. In the natural unfolding of social life, reaching the limit of thinking requires a response: either we breach the impasse in the search for some other form of knowing or we retreat into rationality, perhaps to reorganise or reframe what we reasonably know, but remaining in the same epistemological field of material reality. This distinction between Plato’s crossing of the threshold of limit and Kant’s retreat from it cannot be underestimated and delineates a major difference between traditional apophatic approaches in theology and contemporary so-called apophatic innovations in philosophy.

The Platonic conception of limit as threshold is evident in contemplative practices of spirituality and theology, and is particularly associated with apophatic or negative theological methods.29 Prayer and discourse take on forms of a particular type of unknowing, in faith that the One-who-is-beyond-knowing might be encountered on the other side of intellectual failure. That is, what is negated in apophatic method is the human thinking, not the process of knowing per se. This dynamic is reminiscent, therefore, of the turn away from intellectual reasoning and

towards remembering the knowledge of the soul just discussed in Plato's philosophy. It is this response to the limit of liminality that shall be explored in detail in the following chapter.

The post-Kantian limit is demonstrated by the philosophical theologian David Tracy’s methodology, which uses the concept of ‘limit situation’ to describe the kinds of moments that, for him, form the basis of a basic definition of the ‘religious’ aspect of human existence: ‘Fundamentally, the concept refers to those human situations wherein a human being ineluctably finds manifest a certain ultimate limit or horizon to his or her existence.’30 They can be either positive (e.g. love, joy, hope) or negative (e.g. grief, anxiety, depression) but they take us into a disturbing place of feeling, experiencing, knowing the limitations of our human capacity. The negative situations envisioned by Tracy are the boundary situations described by Jaspers, and the concept of limit is inherited through the Kantian tradition via Ricoeur and Ian Ramsey.31

Tracy’s hermeneutical strategy is based on the assumption that religions engage with infinite, unknowable knowledge, but can only speak within the confines of language, which is essentially finite and limited. A religion or religious discourse, therefore, has an intrinsic limit, by virtue of human capacity, rather than divine capacity. Reality itself is unlimited and unknowable, as it was for Kant. To humbly accept this limit is a philosophical strategy, trusting in the mind’s capacity to impose a boundary (or have a boundary imposed upon it) through conscious awareness or mental intention—hence Tracy’s proposal for an a priori philosophical hermeneutic, where limit is pre-empted by philosophical pessimism about systematic propositions about God.

This discussion of words and worldviews in the etymology of liminality and the meaning of limit has revealed two possible responses to the experience of reaching the end of structured, rational thinking. The thinker may cross over the limit as if it were the threshold to a doorway into a different type of experience, with its own unique epistemology and hermeneutics—this, it has been argued, is the doorway

31 Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, 111, n. 11.
into liminal thinking. Alternatively, the thinker may rebound from the limit as if it were a roadblock, and the way ahead is impossible to access—this is not the kind of thinking that happens in liminality. Liminal thinking constructs new rules for knowing in the very process of living it. Liminal reason makes things up as required, discerning good, bad, indifferent or other in the moment as it arrives. It has resources in what has previously been known, but there are a new set of resources present in the experience itself that become the primary means of knowing truth in the place, remembering that that the task of liminality is always an act of transition, transformation, restructuring.

Williams is highly critical of a-theistic apophaticisms, especially when they try to dress themselves up as something akin to negative theology. He says, 'the risk of negative theology in abstraction, the identification of the sacred with the void, is the purchase it gives to a depoliticised—or even anti-political—aesthetic'\(^{32}\) That is, in the move into unknowing, the sociality of knowledge must not be abandoned, but rather the essential relationality of theological knowledge leads us into deeper engagement with God and neighbour. Apophatic method, in the classical sense, is neither atheistic or individualistic.

**Critique**

A further point about thinking arises from the conception of liminality theory in the experience of ritual transformation. Turner describes the type of thinking that occurs in rites of passage as 'a period of reflection . . . [where] neophytes are alternatively forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos and the powers that generate and sustain them.'\(^{33}\) For the duration of this open-space moment, questions become imperative, and meaning is partial, provisional, speculative, unsystematic and intuitive. Fresh insights come from crisis, experimentation, different forms and locations of knowing within the body, and different types of rationality. Beyond the ritual context, this is particularly evident in the communication techniques of 'brain-storming' or 'open-space dialogue groups,' where the normal rules for problem-solving are suspended in the hope

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that new ideas might emerge that can then be explored systematically and strategically. There is a paradox inherent in liminal epistemology, though, for its limitlessness is made possible through the sustaining of its threshold limits.

There are obvious similarities between the three-stage social process, with a liminal middle, and Ricoeur’s hermeneutical arc, with its middle of deconstructive engagement with the symbolic systems of language. However, there are important differences between the function of critique in liminality and in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion. Liminality theorist Tom Boland outlines a movement in liminal reasoning such that it is only the first stage of liminality that can be classified as a Ricoeurian critique of the symbolic world. ‘When structures are suspended there is potential for critique but only within certain limits.’

Boland’s analysis shows how liminality itself undergoes a three-stage process of transition, of which only the early stage is preoccupied with critique and deconstruction. A second stage follows, marked by a heightened sensitivity to the sacred and/or the highest values of social life, before, in the third stage, there is a gradual dawning of integrated wisdom. The loss of liminal transitions and the extension of what he calls ‘interminable liminality’ result in a culture of ongoing, unresolved critique in modernity, which in essence is liminoid rather than liminal. ‘The incompleteness of ritual transformations can be considered as one necessary condition for the proliferation of critique, as transition leads not to a renewal of structure but to chronic crisis.’ In de-ritualised contexts, liminal epistemologies require a partner hermeneutic that can substitute for the boundary provided by the ritual context, where a frame of reference can be held securely in order for the work of critique to move towards new insights rather than existential despair. In ritual, the boundary is primarily physical, but what is required by a discursive open-space is a metaphysical boundary.

In liminality, the subject matter under investigation is a restricted area of investigation determined by the particular limits that frame the experience of

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35 Tom Boland, “Towards an Anthropology of Critique,” 230.
36 Tom Boland, “Towards an Anthropology of Critique,” 232.
liminality. In other words, at least some of the broadest assumptions or observations about the world-of-life remain intact, while their content or organising principles might be critically challenged and reordered. This observation further distinguishes it from Ricoeur’s middle movement of critique. Turner observes that in the ritual process, this is often held symbolically by a master of ceremonies who can be trusted to hold firm the boundary of the investigation, not just the boundary of the ritual time and space. We have already discussed the situation where the ritualised boundary is not held for liminality, resulting in liminoid phenomena. Where a master of ceremonies is not present to hold the entry and exit point of the open-space, another functionary must be found to maintain the integrity of the intellectual task within liminality. In other words, liminal types of knowing do not arise from unending openness, but rather from bounded openness, where—in Plato’s terminology—the infinite is related to the finite.

Open-space needs a boundary if it is to be a place of transformation, which is true liminality. It has been shown how entry into this space is over a threshold; it is now clear that this limit, boundary or doorway into liminality must be a ‘threshold’: it must hold the open-space. Theological discourse, therefore, must not only seek to pass over the difficulty of thinking; it must also find a strategy to contain thinking what is difficult. The open-space must be held.

3.3 Open-space Dialectics

We have already noted how Williams has found the postmodern version of negative theology untenable because he perceives that it avoids confrontation with the machinations of power implicit in any construction of discourse. Instead, in his

37 From here on, this thesis will use the grammatical innovation ‘threshold’ to bring these two functions of limit in liminality together. The peras is crossed over into new ways of being and knowing, and yet it must hold firm so that it functions as a border or an edge to that which is unlimited or as yet unformed in liminality.

search for the deconstructive tools required by a Derridean articulation of difference, Williams turns to the dialectical thinker whom Derrida is most critical of: G.W.F. Hegel:39

In the Logic, Hegel, having begun by discussing the nature of 'understanding' (Verstand), proceeds to give an account of 'dialectic' in terms of power, which makes it clear that the power in question is essentially the irresistibility of the motion of thought. Because there is no moment of pure, unmediated identity in the actual world, there are no discrete and simple objects for thought to rest in.40

Williams’s concern is for a method of speaking that can deal honestly with the power relations of a discourse, given that the relational dynamics are so often sublimated in the sociality of the text. That is, how does the thinker become conscious of the relations complicit in the conversation such that each may have a free voice. His turn towards Hegel for this function has much to do with the scholarly influence of his friend, the socio-political philosopher Gillian Rose. Rose died prematurely in 1995, but her influence on Williams is ongoing. Like Plato, Rose and Williams see opportunity in aporia: in thinking through what is difficult. Only through complexity, messiness and brokenness can reality be truly and honestly represented.

To maintain thinking what is difficult, the theologian needs a strategy for demarcating the limits of the investigation. In the terms outlined above, entering into that space where thinking is difficult requires a threshold limit—a holding strategy in order that it is possible for unstructured knowledge to interact in a refining capacity with structured knowledge.41 In the remainder of this chapter, we consider how Williams does that in his theological conversations by employing a reimagined Hegelian dialectical method: 'For Williams (following Hegel), discourse, narrative, exchange, negotiation, history—these are not the problem but

39 Williams explains, ‘Derrida complains that the negative moment in Hegel is simply 'contradiction'; the cancelling of what is there, to be cancelled in its turn by the negation of the negation which (re)establishes identity.’ Rowan Williams, “Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,” 29.
40 “Logic and Spirit in Hegel,” in Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 37. Williams cites 80:113-15 and 81:115-19 as the specific passages in Hegel’s Logic to which he is referring.
the very medium through which emancipation occurs. The social labor of thinking is the only path to social transformation.\textsuperscript{42}

The image of a sphere of open-space has a particular function as we consider these dialectical strategies, for Williams does not have in mind a dualistic binary of either/or. Drawing upon open-space as the key image for liminality illustrates the more-than-two-dimensional nature of liminal dialectics, with potentially multiple poles or sides to the frame of liminality. If conceived only through time, this is too easily reduced to a binary dialectic, but Williams invokes various limits of sociality as the poles of his dialectic, so even in the case of historical conversation, there are multiple voices and perspectives, not just one story from one date.\textsuperscript{43}

Furthermore, the poles put in place in the dialectical conversation frame the investigation rather than form the subject of the investigation themselves. If limits are a threshold over which the thinker crosses into a complex way of thinking, our attention is on the open-space \textit{in between} dialectical structures, rather than the dialectical poles that hold the structure. If a dialectical investigation has multiple poles that frame the subject matter, the poles can be used to refuse both singular and binary reduction. The poles \textit{hold open} the space. They become a network of limits or thresholds through which to enter into a new conversation between multiple voices, encountered differently because their location in our perspective is different.

In relation to theological discourse, this open-space dialectic will be a conversation that demands integrity between self, other and God. The early paradigmatic essay that opens Williams’s book \textit{On Christian Theology} demonstrates the primary place of this principle of conversation in his theological method.\textsuperscript{44} To have integrity in the theological task, one must be willing to examine the relationships implicit in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{43}] Latin Theologian Vítor Westhelle has demonstrated the difference in application between a linear temporal eschatology and a special, social eschatology resulting in greater emphasis on the call to justice in Christian living, through making this distinction in liminality theory. Vítor Westhelle, “Liberation Theology: A Latitudinal Perspective,” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology}, ed Jerry L. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 311-327.
\end{itemize}
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the process of coming to know truth. 'Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final. . . . And it does all this by showing . . . that it accepts . . . there are ways in which it may be questioned and criticized.'

The theologian must attend to a conversation with her or his inner self, acknowledging that human identity is multi-vocal both psychologically and sociologically. Experience—both individual and communal—is inescapably contextualised in language, culture, tradition, religious practice and affective commitments. Theological conversations, as with most human interactions, are susceptible to a two-level discourse where there is a stated language and subject but also an unstated and frequently unconscious level to the conversation.

Williams urges the theologian never to forget that God is always present as a conversation partner in every theological conversation. 'Speaking of God is speaking to God and opening our speech to God’s.' God is known only in relationship, and therefore by revelation, though not to be received uncritically.

For the Christian theologian, God who became flesh is always a personal and intimate conversation partner, hence talking theology must include an aspect of talking to God or with God rather than just about God.

This dynamic conversation between God and the theologian is not primarily individual. It is carried into conversations between inherited traditions of theology and the present world and church, to whom the theologian wishes to offer communicable sense. In the contemporary globalised context, this demands a dialogue that refuses simplicity: difference and difficulty are beyond even our capacity to comprehend. It means a conversation that is always open-ended, allowing for the possibility of further and deeper understanding of the mysteries of God and life beyond what we already know. Moreover, it demands a diachronic reading of scripture, constantly engaging not only with one’s own material context, but also with the historical context of the writers and interpreters of scripture

45 Williams, "Theological Integrity," 5.
46 Williams, "Theological Integrity," 8.
47 This is true even in a-theistic theological discourses such as Buddhism: god may be a construct, but when dealing with the transcendent, we are always dealing with constructs—conceptual frameworks for allocating meaning to that which defies normal human conceptualisation.
across time and space.\textsuperscript{48}

**The broken middle**

It is instructive to turn from Williams to Rose for an understanding of machinations of Hegelian dialectics complicit in his theological method of conversation.\textsuperscript{49} For Rose, post-Kantian philosophy misreads Hegel and places the emphasis on the dialectic poles rather than on the conversation between them.\textsuperscript{50} By contrast, Rose conceives a dialectical process as a means to dwell in between propositional limits, in a messy, complicated, unfinished, ‘broken middle.’ Rose argues that to force singularity upon this middle is a *diremption* (tearing asunder) of a properly understood Hegelian dialectical conversation, a violently imposed division or rupture to complex argument where one would otherwise not exist.\textsuperscript{51}

The task of thinking, for Rose, must begin in this broken middle. She is not speaking of chronological beginnings, for there is a past to every idea and relationship; rather, this is the location of logical thinking and critical analysis that is the starting point of us thinking about the world *as it really is*. Beginning thinking in the middle is equally necessary and difficult, for it is a space of confrontation, refusing the human desire for certainty, simplicity and systemisation. It relinquishes those things that give us an impression of the world as manageable, containable, and the idea that knowledge of it is within our grasp: ‘The more deeply we look into beginning—anxiety of beginning and beginning of anxiety—the more we will be returned to the middle.’\textsuperscript{52} Critical thinking in the broken middle will refuse to reduce the complexity of material encountered there—reduce it by looking at once back to the stable structure from which it came, and then forward to some new resolution or expression of truth and love—and will instead lead to the present, to the work that must be done to pass from one to the other.

Rose argues that the nihilistic philosophies emerging in late modernity struggle to

\textsuperscript{49} Williams debt to Rose is evidenced in “Between Politics and Metaphysics.”
\textsuperscript{51} Boland, “Towards an Anthropology of Critique,” 232.
\textsuperscript{52}Rose, *The Broken Middle*, xii-xiv.
negotiate the anxiety of a transition out of oppositional dialecticism and empirical rationality, remaining present to the inherent insecurity and instability of the present. She is critical of modern theories for absolutising dialectical poles and turning them into binary oppositions, and also critical of postmodern theories for colonising the middle as a place of redemption, both of which, Rose argues, are a flight into fantasy: ‘Mended middles and improvised middles betray their broken middle . . . because [imposed holiness] would sling us between ecstasy and eschatology, between a promise of touching our own most singularity and the irenic holy city, precisely without any disturbing middle.’ An ‘imposed holiness’ is a calculated move to deny the brokenness of reality by an assertion of some kind of pre-ordained code of acceptable behaviour.

Rose’s broken middle is demonstrated in a paper presented at a conference on postmodern theology at Kings College, Cambridge, in 1990, titled ‘Diremption of Spirit.’ In it, Rose criticises John Milbank (postmodern theology), Mark C. Taylor (a/theology), Don Cuppitt (post-theology) and George Steiner (rediscovered Judaism) for ‘replacing old Athens by new Jerusalem [which] involves consigning the opposition between nature and freedom to one of any number of arbitrary, binary, metaphysical conceits—instead of recognising it as the index and indicator of the tension between freedom and unfreedom—and then proceeds to complete such deconstruction’ in holiness. That is, as with all distortions of Hegel’s dialectical thinking, they refuse to keep the conversation open-ended and critical in the middle, which introduces a diremption of spirit and a betrayal of what is actually real and true: ‘In fact we have here middles mended as “holiness”—without that examination of the broken middle which would show how these holy nomads arise out of and reinforce the unfreedom they prefer not to know.’

For example, Rose argues that Milbank’s proposal for a nomadic holy city, in which everyone may dwell without distinction, is a political imposition of a complete

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55 All of these, except Steiner, were fellow presenters at the Kings College conference, and their papers are similarly published in Philippa Berry and Andrew Wenick (eds), *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), Conference Papers.
56 Rose, *Broken Middle*, 277-96.
solution for a problem of broken law and order. The failure of the church—in the secular era—is repaired by the arrival of the eschatological church—a projected perfect future—hence eradicating the need for theology to interact with social theories that might actually be a pathway to redeeming the secular present and (supposedly) Christian past. Milbank’s holy city (an adaptation of Augustine’s City of God) is a mediator for individuals trapped in an inconsolable, unbearable middle, offering a way out rather than a way to reap the rewards of a deconstructing, recalibrating, transitioning middle: ‘Holy middles corrupt because they collude in the elimination of the broken middle by drawing attention away from the reconfiguration of singular, individual and universal at stake.’

In terms of the theory of the social process of liminality, Milbank’s solution offers no resource for transitioning through the moment of liminality. Milbank imposes theoretical constructs upon human experience and expects the soul to turn a blind eye to the world of life in which it actually dwells. That he attempts to do so with theological theory should alert us even more to the untenable diremption of theology and spirituality. Taking refuge in the holy nomadic city is an empty promise to return to stable structure without change in identity, social status or wisdom. One cannot enter another time into a mother’s womb, but nor can one grow in holy wisdom until one is born again—there is no heaven without rebirth and there is no rebirth without labour pains. Holiness cannot be imposed upon an individual or a community: it is a transfiguring, or re-forming, of the human person through the crucible of life, suffering, prayer, love, struggle.

Rose’s broken middle, then, might be aligned with Turner’s liminal middle of social process: a middle where work must be done to grow and to mature, and—as all knowledge is intimately involved in the relational web of human life—a middle that is required in order for individuals to transition from an old social order to a new social order. Rose describes for us the kind of philosophical work that needs to be done in this middle, whereas Turner describes the kind of suspension of social order required to do that work. The liminal middle requires a specific kind of attention to reality that is different from other moments in the social process.

When theological propositions and positions are treated as boundary markers for an open-space dialogue, rather than limit situations in and of themselves, theological discourse remains in the broken middle. Williams might describe this as a kind of dispossession of the limit, or the proposition—or, theologically speaking, a confrontation with the limit of theological language. ‘Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God.’

Allowing theological language to unfold into complexity rather than simplicity might not make the theological thinker comfortable, but it will more likely be honest speech about God. This is the nature of knowing in liminality. In the words of Matheson Russell, in an essay on Williams’s Hegelism: ‘when we undergo “experiences” (Erfeharungen) so profound that they bring us to a critical self-awareness that our fundamental interpretation of self and world is inadequate, we experience a conversion (of sorts) and we, like a snake shuffling out of its old skin, transpose ourselves into a new mode of subjectivity, a new fundamental interpretation of self and world.’

For both Rose and Williams, this process of vulnerability, dispossession and transformation is fundamentally a function of love for the other. This is evident in the example of Williams’ charity, offered in chapter one of this thesis. Cultural performances of charity are those acts and activities that allow the freedom of the relation without coercion or competition. But even here, love and coercion are not oppositional dialectical poles that have an impossible coexistence. On the contrary, in an open-space dialectic, love and violence are seen together as two sides to passion. Williams says,

Love stakes a position, and so cannot help risking the displacement or damaging of another. . . . But when violence is taken out of this dialectical understanding, when it becomes more and more clamant and insistent because its expectation of recognition is more and more eroded, the ‘love in violence’ is more and more securely imprisoned,

58 Williams, “Theological Integrity,” 8.
60 Rowan Williams, Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 80.
frustrated in its residual urge towards converse.\(^{61}\)

Love and violence are not binary opposites, but rather love emerges out of the difficult, broken *aporia* and, as such, demands a different kind of knowing, one that makes room for the other to speak without coercion. Hence, the task of the church is to love in the midst of difficulty. It is to refuse the celebration of a premature eschaton and continue the work of justice and to love God and neighbour-as-self in the brokenness of an unfolding eschaton rather than a prevenient perfection. In Williams, this becomes the diachronic discourse of historically grounded revelation.\(^{62}\)

In a very philosophical autobiography, Rose locates the work of the dialectical broken middle as the work of love. Rose ruminates on what is required for love to be able to flourish and concludes that ‘to live, to love, is to be failed, to forgive, to have failed, to be forgiven, for ever and ever. Keep your mind in hell, and despair not.’\(^{63}\) She quotes here from Staretz Silouan, a nineteenth-century Russian monk from Mount Athos, a phrase that in fact she chose as the epigram to frame her memoirs: ‘keep your mind in hell, and despair not.’\(^{64}\) Andrew Shanks explains in his biography of Rose, ‘According to Silouan himself, these are words that he once heard spoken to him, by a disembodied voice, at a time when he was plunged into deep depression. He was praying. And he understood this to be a direct response to his prayer, from Christ.’\(^{65}\)

Rose describes a love relationship as the most intense and demanding open-space a person is required to navigate. In love, the Beloved holds absolute power over the Lover, for they hold that which the Lover desires above all else: the Lover must risk rejection, difficulty, failure, misunderstanding, if they are to have any relationship at all with the Beloved. Hence, Rose suggests, the twin of passion is faith. If I desire relationship with my Beloved, I must make myself vulnerable, trusting in whatever evidence there is that my love might be returned, or at least respected. And yet, if the Lover draws too close to the Beloved, the air required for

\(^{62}\) Williams, "The Discipline of Scripture," 58.
\(^{64}\) This quote stands at the opening of this chapter. See note 1 for details.
love’s fire to flourish is suffocated, and the Beloved is forced to retreat to create more space, or the love between them is smothered. The reverse is also fatal to love—to leave too much space for the fire to breathe is to allow gusts of wind from the world to rush in and blow the flame out. This dance between Beloved and Lover requires constant attention to the middle, to allow for just the right amount of breathing space.

The work of the broken middle is a philosophical life-work undertaken as a commitment to 'love in the submission of power.' In love, we hold the boundaries to allow vulnerability and power to breathe and give the other freedom. In dialectical discourse, we hold the boundary so that every possible permutation and consideration may be heard and honoured within its own terms of reference. The open space permits complex particularity, which in turn creates a capacity to deal with real reality, rather than our fantasised, theorised versions of it. The metaphysical hermeneutic of radical particularity gives rise to closer attention to individual and multiple ontologies.

Love and knowledge both demand vulnerability; to have integrity in either is to require vulnerability and submit to the tests of authenticity: ‘There is, for Williams, then, a deep connection between the "dispossession" of properly dialectical thinking and self-sacrificial love of the other.’ Having been made aware of our brokenness, we are lead by the work of love into the work of mourning, recognising that the truth, peace and harmony we wish for is a fantasy. More specifically, Rose deals with the inability of law to provide the positive outcomes humans desire of it. In this sense, the law operates as a threshold limit for open-space dialectics.

In Mourning Becomes the Law, the final work of Rose’s life, which is often read in conjunction with Love’s Work, the phrase ‘mourning becomes’ is designed to evoke ‘the gradual process involved in the construction of knowledge, and the connotation of “suiting” or “enhancing” the law in the overcoming of mourning.’

66 Rose, Love’s Work, 61.
It is an embodied, emotional, social, psychological and sometimes radical rationality that involves thoughts, emotions and all the five senses, just as mourning does in the experience of grief and loss. In other words, this is more than pure rationality in the crucible of the middle; it is the whole, integrated experience of thinking engaged with living that is in view. Rose urges, ‘let us continue to chase spirits back into their bodies, back into the history of their development, in order to comprehend their law and their anarchy and to complete the work of mourning.’

We begin in the middle, but that is so we may complete the past and put it to rest, so we may mine the depths of our lost worlds in order to nurture within us resources to step into a new one. The metaphor of mourning alerts us to the fact that something has been lost or a living connection has been broken. An end has come, but the period of mourning is not yet the commencement of a new era. The period of mourning is a space for the work of grief, of transition, reframing, recalibration. Only through the work of mourning the past can a different future emerge.

Rose introduces the metaphor of mourning in relation to social systems of law and order, in particular the philosophical representation of a Hegelian dialectic in Western thought. She argues that any time a ‘law’ is proposed and enacted—socially, politically, noetically—there is a necessary next of disappointment: the law is fallible, incomplete, unrefined. If the work of mourning, the work of knowing and responding to the law’s imperfections, is not permitted, we step into a fundamentalism that insists upon theoretical construct over and above human experience. Hegel’s dialectical approach reveals that such absolute, first-time representation in law was never intended, that the work of mourning enables the law to come into being in full, that law is incomplete without the mourning: ‘The law, therefore, in its actuality means full mutual recognition, “spirit” or ethical life, but it can only be approached phenomenologically as it appears to us, modern legal persons, by expounding its dualistic reductions.’ Any attempt to ‘qui eten and deny the broken middle’ is a refusal to continue both thinking and becoming, because the dialectical conversation is one of otherness and self-relation in constant exposition.

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69 Gillian Rose, Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 12.
70 Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 71.
Hence, Rose envisions a progression through critique to a knowing and acting in the world that has dealt honestly with the limits of the past, the limits of subjectivity and the limits of rationality. This is a work that is never concluded, but neither is it a work that has no progression. Indeed, Rose was particularly interested in a type of knowing that resulted in integrated, ethical action. This work of mourning is the spiritual-political kingdom—the difficulty sustained, the transcendence of actual justice. . . . in activity beyond activity.71

3.4 Revelation in the Open-space

In systematic theology, the declaration of God’s voice is properly understood as ‘revelation,’ and all theological hermeneutics must, in one way or another, come to terms with what it means for an infinite God to become known to a finite human. The notion of revelation can be a maze of unconscious assumptions, for at the root of our choices about how we perceive the revelation of divine knowledge are deeply rooted dynamics of power, vulnerability and control. There must be a resistance to authoritarian control over the reading of what is taken as ‘given’ in its discourse, lest it be nothing more than a violent assertion of one human perspective over another human perspective. This represents a negative motivation for invoking the category of revelation in relation to theological knowledge—who gets to say what God says?

There is also a positive motivation for framing theological knowledge with reference to the idea of revelation. Williams states the dilemma thus:

In spite of everything, we go on saying ‘God’. And, since ‘God is not the name of any particular thing available for inspection, it seems that we must as believers assume that we talk about God on the basis of ‘revelation’—of what has been shown to us by God’s will and action. If the word occurs in our speech and is not obviously vacuous, we are driven to conclude that we are—so to speak—authorized to use it. . . . Theology, in short, is perennially liable to be seduced by the prospect of bypassing the question of how it learns its own language. We can only talk intelligently about ‘authorization’ if we attend to this question; otherwise, authorization simply becomes an appeal to unchallengeable authority, and theological language is thought of as essentially

71 Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 75.
heteronomous, determined from an elusive 'elsewhere'.

On what basis, however, is God revealed? What kind of knowledge is this? For Williams, this requires an examination of how we learn, how do we know what we know? A careful separation of this philosophical task from the theological is a necessary precaution against the potential abuse of power relations in theological discourse. It makes us pause to consider the source of knowledge and assess the trustworthiness of that source.

Such is also the concern of Paul Ricoeur in his important essay Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation: how does theology avoid a concept of revelation that is opaque and authoritarian and replace it with 'a concept of revelation and a concept of reason that, without ever coinciding, can at least enter into a living dialectic together and together engender something like an understanding of faith'? Ricoeur establishes the multiplicity of forms of revelation in scripture, showing that 'the confession of faith expressed in the biblical documents is directly modulated by the forms of the discourse wherein it is expressed.'

In order to maintain both this multiplicity of form and the personal or social (historical) reality of its origin, Ricoeur proposes a concept of revelation as a form of poetics, mediated through a vehicle of testimony. 'Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world, a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my own most possibilities. It is in this sense a manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation.' This positioning of the text then allows Ricoeur to proceed with his hermeneutics of suspicion, which for him makes this an areligious sense of revelation, but one that he argues restores the dignity of the biblical text and supports the development of faithful theology by creating a 'homology' between the world of the revelatory text and the world of

76 That is, a shared evolutionary ancestry.
theological discourse.\textsuperscript{77}

Williams, however, emphasizes the importance of the historicity of revelation in the process of its interpretation. Hence he couples Ricoeur's analogies of poetics and testimony with R.L. Hart's idea of 'memory' so that the generative event, its interpretation and its transmission are always held together:

\begin{quote}
Revelation is certainly more than a mythologically slanted metaphor for the emergence of striking new ideas: the whole of our discussion so far presupposes that the language of revelation is used to express the sense of an initiative that does not lie with us and to challenge the myth of the self-constitution of consciousness.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

The transmission of meaningful sense in liminality (about the world and our place in it) requires symbolic form because the discursive interpretation of the semiotic meaning has been disturbed. In this sense, it parallels Ricoeur's observation that 'you must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand.'\textsuperscript{79} For Ricoeur, the first stage of hermeneutics is that of 'simple phenomenology'—a recognition of the symbols, a mapping of the terrain. It is a surface reading with its own internal coherence so it can be read on its own, but a deeper stage of understanding beckons persistently for those dissatisfied with a surface approach to meaning. A dawning realisation of the inadequacy of a simple reading of the semiotic precipitates the second stage of the process, an excavation below the symbols in a direct engagement of the reality to which the symbols refer. Once we see the image of that further reality, however imperfectly, a second naïveté in relation to a plain reading of the symbol is possible, and this is the third arc of Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle. Regarding this three-stage process, Ricoeur states, 'I am convinced that we must think, not behind the symbols but starting from symbols according to symbols, that their substance is indestructible, that they constitute the revealing substrate of speech which lives among men.'\textsuperscript{80} In

\textsuperscript{77} Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," 16.
\textsuperscript{80} Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," 299.
other words, attending to the symbolic map of language (Ricoeur's primary concern) and culture, followed by a critical movement whereby the interpretative sense-making of the semiotic is problematised and allowed to be reordered by attention to lived reality, is the only way to trust that the symbolic system and reality maintain a meaningful connection, particularly in relation to the subjective self's desire to communicate with an other.

When we problematise the semiotic, we are glimpsing something beyond our limited selves to which the human word is incapable of giving full expression. Ricoeur recognises the existential discomfort of the middle moment of critique and the necessity for it to either give way to a second naiveté or scramble back to belief without understanding. The alternative is to get stuck in the void of critique that is a 'desert of criticism.' Transitioning through the deconstruction of semiotic interpretation requires critical skill if one is to move forward. Hence, even within the dark, shapelessness of unknowing, there is a particular intelligence at work, different from the easy functionality of discourse both before and after.

The Kantian pessimism about knowledge beyond the limit is illustrated in this comment from Ricoeur: ‘the idea of something secret is the limit-idea of revelation. The idea of revelation is a twofold idea. The God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him.' Ricoeur would stop speaking of God at the limit, or at least speak in purely symbolic terms, because beyond that is unknowable. On the one hand, Ricoeur is still correct when he concludes that 'to say that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God is to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing [and therefore] to overthrow every totalitarian form of authority which might claim to withhold the revealed truth.' However, if there is no knowledge accessible by traversing the threshold of the limit, the philosophical theologian can only turn back on themselves, which leads to a different kind of self-authentication loop: it may be a social construction with different voices, but they will be like-minded rational voices, albeit speaking in humble tones. How, then, can we speak of God speaking?

\[\text{References:}\]

Between Schleiermacher and Barth— a ‘theology of conversation’ in liminality

Known as the grandfather of liberal theology and a founding figure in hermeneutics from experience, Friedrich Schleiermacher argued against the scientific rationalism of early nineteenth-century European high culture, proposing that attention to feelings and intuition was a better pathway to knowledge of theological truths. On this basis, he describes the divine as the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’—the glimpse of truth that an individual gets sometimes, in fleeting connections with the transcendental sacred. In a passage that fits very clearly into a category of liminal experience, Schleiermacher describes the agony of trying to articulate the theological truth of an encounter with the divine:

That first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception, before intuition and feeling have separated, where sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, before both turn back to their original position—I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away. But I wish that you were able to hold on to it and also to recognize it again in the higher and divine religious activity of the mind.

This moment before intuition and feeling have separated is a liminal space in the human mind. For Schleiermacher, it is the location of theological truth, but it is difficult to translate into a communicable form that might be shared as the kind of structured, socialised knowing that is the foundation of religion. Experience of God and making sense of God are two very different things. They are known by different neurological and social systems with different rules and roles, presented to consciousness as different types of information. Experience is one land, with its own unique culture, customs, language and landscape. Sense-making is another land, with its own unique characteristics. Between them is a deep gorge, which cannot be crossed without conscious attention to the creation of a bridge, which

84 Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Second Speech: On the Essence of Religion," in On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 112. Andrew Dole has argued that contemporary scholarship tends to have an interpreted understanding of Schleiermacher, particularly through the work of Rudolf Otto, and it is important to understand naturalistic intention in the concept of ‘intuition’ for Schleiermacher. See Andrew Dole, “Schleiermacher and Otto on religion,” in Religious Studies, 40, 4. (Dec 2004), 389-413.

might pass over from one land to the next.

In the following century, Karl Barth famously struggled with Schleiermacher's Romanticism, being an early enthusiast but an eventual critic. He accepted an invitation to write an introductory preface to a collected works of Schleiermacher, stating his admiration for the man's faith, wanting in his heart to agree with Schleiermacher's approach, but convicted in the end that he could not connect this intense focus on spiritual experience with the ongoing tradition of revealed truth, which, for Barth, must be the foundation of Christian theology. For Barth, theology is the study of the revealed truth of the Word of God. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the decisive act in God’s revelation, an act that is also a Word, and a Word by which all theology takes its bearings. Barth saw this as diametrically opposed to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic from spiritual experience.

If revelation is treated as a speech of testimony, though, does that create a possible middle road between Schleiermacher and Barth? Can Barth's proposal for revelation based in the theological Word of God be a matter of testimony to a personal encounter? Does that address Barth's concern about spiritual experience being a closed circuit of self-authenticating knowledge? Williams addresses this dilemma by reference to intertextuality and historicity. If spiritual experience is to be used as an authority in the development of a claim to theological truth, individual experience must connect to the ongoing unfolding of a theological tradition: to concrete historicity as well as interior authenticity.

For Williams, the task of theology is one of conversation—between God, the theological thinker, the church and the world. To have integrity in the task of theology is to display personal integrity in each of these relationships, to treat each with love, respect, honour and freedom. 'A lack of integrity in speech is manifestly a political matter. To make what is said invulnerable by displacing its real subject matter is a strategy for the retention of power'. It is now possible to say something more about these relationships as they occur in liminality, which

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87 Williams, "Theological Integrity," 4.
clarifies why Williams's relation strategy bridges the gap between structured and deconstructed theological knowing in the unfolding of theological discourse.

In liminal theology, these relationships take on liminal characteristics that Turner called *communitas*. In chapter one, Turner’s theory of *communitas* was introduced. It is a particular type of intense relationship extending only for the duration of liminality, where the previous social status of the individual is suspended, leading to egalitarianism, creativity and productivity impossible outside of the bounds of ritualised liminality. In de-ritualised liminal spiritual experience, where the old rules for knowing God have fallen away—either spontaneously or by intention—entirely different ways of relating to self, others and God are encountered.

This is the testimony of mystical authors: that in the darkness of liminal spiritual experience, God sometimes reveals God’s self—gifts knowledge of God’s self—in personal encounter. Mystical theology in this sense is direct testimony of a person’s experience of relationship with God, as the mystical theology scholar, Bernard McGinn has argued: ‘the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.’ More broadly, this understanding of theology as personal encounter also dominates the Orthodox tradition, which is more strongly influenced by early monastic mysticism in its methodologies. British Orthodox theologian, Andrew Louth summarises this by saying, ‘the first step in the pursuit of Orthodox theology . . . is the rediscovery of this sense of standing before God . . . and pre-eminently standing before God in church.’

It makes sense, then, in the conjoining of liminality theory and Christian contemplative theology, to join these two perspectives in the phrase

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88 Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi argue that not all mystical texts should be read as a report of direct spiritual experience. Sometimes the language seems to be a projection of experience, employing extreme language—in Williams’s sense—to get around the narrative limits of representation. But even the projection of direct encounter with God presumes its possibility, and hence the association of mystical theology with divine encounter remains valid. Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill & Bradley Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Surry, UK: Ashgate, 2009).


‘contemplative-communitas.” Contemplative-communitas describes the type of relationship that emerge in the experience of Christian contemplative prayer, which by default suggests that all of these relationships are theological in the sense that prayer is always suggestive of divine encounter. In the open-space of contemplative prayer, William’s theological conversations with the self, God, the world and the church have two distinctive characteristics. First, they are held by the open-space encounter with God, hence they can be described as spiritual and experiential conversations and, by extension, spiritual and experiential knowledge. Second, they are distinctly liminal relationships—without form or structure, predictability or convention. They must be renegotiated within the unfamiliar terms of the open-space prayer. It is not just God that appears herein (beyond form), it is the unconscious self, the mysterious connections between all human persons (and the rest of creation), the mystical and mysterious unified nature of the universe.

This concept of contemplative-communitas draws William’s theological conversation away from any misconceived propositional thinking. In the following chapter it shall be described how this is in fact better named a ‘practice’—a liminal spiritual practice that intentionally evokes the dynamics of liminal knowing and relating. As anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport says, ‘the revelation of the hidden oneness of all things and of one’s participation in such a great oneness may be the core meaning of communitas.’ The emergence of knowledge from this kind of liminal encounter can only be described as testimony because the absence of propositional constructs is complicit in this kind of prayer. From contemplative-communitas comes a very particular form of revelation as testimony, which might then be brought into dialectical discourse with non-liminal, structured forms of theological knowledge.

Personal spiritual experience is not enough to establish theological knowledge as revelation, as Schleiermacher’s approach seems to suggest. However, Williams argues that to establish the integrity of one’s own theological position, the

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91 The hyphenation of contemplative-communitas is an innovation by the author and shall be used forthwith to refer to this concept of liminal relating in theological conversations.
theologian must first address the problem of intertexuality and give evidence for the internal logic of one's own discourse.\textsuperscript{93} Williams suggests that there are two possible approaches to this dilemma. The first is to create a monothematic structure that might unify a discourse by way of a theme or 'linguistic symbol', such as Barth attempted in his theology.\textsuperscript{94} The second position is the demarcation of particularities, laid out clearly so that parallels between different themes can be compared and contrasted, such as in David Tracy's pluralistic embrace of limited theological knowing.\textsuperscript{95}

Williams takes a typically synthetic approach. In agreement with Barth, Williams believes that an internal integrity to the Christian discourse may be obtained through the thematic structure of Jesus Christ. This is not a simple literal meaning, however, but engages Ricoeur's philosophical understanding of symbol and therefore requires constant dialectical conversation with itself. Christ provide us with a unified point of contact with that which is beyond the text: 'The history of Scripture . . . is being read as the production of the meaning of a corporate symbolic life that has some unity and integrity. We simply do not know of historic Christian communities that do not introduce people into their structures by a ritual of identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus.'\textsuperscript{96} A plethora of events, persons and patterns of behaviour draw together their relationship with Jesus.

However, it is not just Jesus Christ, in himself, who is the organising principle around which the Christian discourse may find its internal logic: it is the particularity of Jesus Christ bonded with the particularity of Christian lives. 'We constantly return to imagine the life of Jesus in a way that will help us to understand how it sets up a continuous pattern of human living before God. Who Jesus is must be (and can only be) grasped in the light of what Christian humanity is.'\textsuperscript{97} Jesus remains trapped in the historical particularities of the text, until we

\textsuperscript{94} Karl Barth, The Word of God and Theology, trans. Amy Marga (London, T&T Clark, 2011)
\textsuperscript{95} David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996)
\textsuperscript{96} Williams, "The Discipline of Scripture," 56.
\textsuperscript{97} Rowan Williams, "The Unity of Christian Truth," 25.
begin to explore the relationship between this Jesus and the infinite number of human encounters of Jesus across time and place. Williams argues this process takes place by way of analogy—we can locate ourselves in the text by identifying with other responses to Jesus. As new human beings interact with Jesus, new knowledge—revelation—is formed or found. The interpretive presence of Jesus in Christian truth is non-reducible, but the outcome of interaction with Jesus is always open and hence the truth of Jesus is forever unfolding.

Further to the internal integrity of testimony, Williams stipulates how the historicity of the testimony is an essential aspect of its authenticity as revelation: ‘The “world of scripture,” so far from being a clear and readily definable territory, is an historical world in which meanings are discovered and recovered in action and encounter.’ That is, the union of the two create something new and alive—something spiritually loaded with personal meanings: ‘It is . . . a generative moment in which there may be a discovery of what the primal text may become (and so of what it is) as well as a discovery of the world.

In what way though, can ‘Jesus Christ’ be said to be a coherent conversation partner? If Williams is correct and the historicity of revelation is essential to its authenticity, surely there is no such thing as genuine testimony from this source, steeped as he is in mythology and colonised systems of ecclesial power? How does one avoid a spiraling hermeneutic of suspicion that has no end in meaningful sense? Is it, as Michael Jensen has argued that William’s hermeneutic is reduced to ‘judgement’ as the main directive rather than Jesus, or the Scripture as testimony about Jesus? Surely Jesus must be more sign in this regard than conversation partner in theological dialogue?

Williams’s worry, as it was for Rose, is that if discourses are treated as static, they create a breeding ground for ‘theocratic totalitarianism.’ The loss of ongoing conversation results in an end to discovery, an end to unfolding revelation, a

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premature expression of the end of eschatological time that denies hope for a
renewing future.101 When the ‘living’ nature of a text is lost, the meaning gets stuck
in a historically specific rut, unable to remain open to new interpretations or
interact with other discourses in a way that brings genuine, personal meaning for
new audiences. In contrast, Jesus’ model for engagement was to elicit a response
by enabling ‘dual self-discovery’ by both object and subject in their convergence.
This process is much as we might describe the spark of romantic love between a
man and a woman. When each Christian (community) comes to the text, something
between and beyond them is formed. We might universally have some knowledge
of the ‘spark’ but the shape and experience of their love will be specific to that man
and that woman. In this way, Williams retains a focus on the particular of the
hermeneutical task. ‘The Christian is involved in seeking conversion—the bringing
of judgement of contemporary struggles, and the appropriation of some new
dimension of the transforming summons of Christ in his or her own life.’102

This, in turn, returns to the idea of revelation as testimony. The specificity of
revelation in the lives of theological thinkers is an essential aspect of theological
authorisation. Hence, Williams integrates Schleiermacher’s source of religious
feeling with a symbolic Barthian ‘word’: where the Jesus of personal spiritual
experience meets the Jesus of historical record and interpretation, there is the
constant eyewitness account of an unfolding of revelation in concrete time and
space. This clarity from Williams allows us to step into the experience of liminality
with confidence, knowing that theological revelation is not only possible in the
strange anti-form structure of liminal thinking, but that theological revelation
demands it. A person in the midst of liminal experience cannot accept a
proposition from outside of her or his experience in an act of blind faith. Instead
they must strip themselves of old clothing, old formulations of knowing, and re-
dress with a costume fit for the dance of transformation.

Apophatic Strategies in Theology
The has been a flourish of interest in apophatic method in recent decades,
particularly as it relates to the concerns of existential philosophies. In the

introduction to a recent collection of essays on negative theology, Oliver Davies and Denys Turner suggest three distinct currents of contemporary thinking which drive contemporary explorations of apophatic method. First, it offers the appearance of secularity, which is attractive to the a-theistic preference of late modern academia. Second, it has affinities with existentialist concepts of negation such as difference, absence and otherness. Third, it lends itself to the privatisation of religion. There are, however, significant differences between late-modern apophaticisms and classical apophatic methods of mystical or contemplative theology, discussed already in chapter one, section 1.4. In relation to limit situations in discourse, twenty-first century apophatic methods that rebound from a limit stand in direct contrast to the pre-Enlightenment theological traditions, where the human limit of the theological threshold is ‘passed over’ into theological given-ness. Beyond the threshold, in fact, is theological knowledge purged from human limitation, accessible in a spiritual sense, yet unable to be reduced to the crueness of human forms.

Rowan Williams has argued that ‘Negative theology remains one of the most basic forms of critical theology, sometimes doing no more than sounding a warning not against the idea that we could secure a firm grip upon definitions of the divine.’ Yet it is never intended as a purely scholarly method. Remembering the apophatic approach of Lossky, Williams claims that apophatic theology is ‘bound up . . . with the µεταφυσική of the whole human person . . . [and as such is] an attitude which should undergird all theological discourse, and lead it towards the silence of

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104 For example, twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky writes: ‘Consciousness of the failure of human understanding constitutes an element common to all that we can call apophasis, or negative theology, whether this apophasis remains within the limits of intellection, simply declaring the radical lack of correspondence between our mind and the reality it wishes to attain, or whether it wishes to surpass the limits of understanding, imparting to the ignorance of what God is in his inaccessible nature the value of a mystical knowledge superior to the intellect, … The existence of an apophatic attitude - of a going beyond everything that has a connection with created finitude - is implied in the paradox of the Christian revelation: the transcendent God becomes immanent in the world, but in the very immanence of his economy, which leads to the incarnation and to death on the cross, he reveals himself as transcendent, as ontologically independent of all created being.’ Vladimir Lossky, “Apophasis and Trinitarian Theology,” in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 149-50.
contemplation and communion. Therefore, apophatic theological methods cannot be divorced from the spiritual experience, for this is not purely intellectual nor purely human knowledge.

In addition, negative theology cannot be divorced from the positive theological affirmations that it seeks to negate, that knowledge which can be spoken of using the resources of human intellect. In other words, apophatic method has a kind of dialectical relationship with cataphatic method, in the same way that structured sociality is in a dialectical relationship with anti-structured sociality in liminal theory. There are times in the theological conversation where knowledge of God is structured, rational, ordered, but there are times when knowledge of God is beyond our comprehension and is best spoken of by not speaking at all.

This dialectical shape is perhaps first seen in the writings of pseudo-Dionysius. Oliver Davies has explained how negative theology in the tradition beginning with Dionysius maintains a dialectical relation with positive theology:

A movement of negation, as 'forgetting', is held in tension with a movement of affirmation or spiritual 'practices', and each informs the other. Contemporary appropriations of negative theology, for all their vitality, tend to set Christian negation apart from its affirmations, thus changing it from a negation of experience within a Dionysian dialectic to an experience of negation as such which has cut free from the liturgical and ecclesial contexts that originally supported it.

Notice that, for Pseudo-Dionysius there is more than one possible holding strategy for the dialectical frame of reference in which the ‘forgetting’ of structured and formal categorisations of God can be known. It can be the positive propositions of foundationalist theology, or it can be the ‘spiritual practices’ of theology put into action. The first is the strategy of dialectical discourse being described in this

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106 Williams, "Lossky, the Via Negativa and the Foundations of Theology," 2.
107 This is the argument of Denys Turner in The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See for example, the discussion of dark and light in Pseudo-Dionysius (Chapter two) especially pages 19-21 of The Darkness of God.
109 Davies, Silence and the Word, 3.
current chapter. The second is the role of spiritual practice that is the subject of the next chapter: the embodied practice of apophasis in the practice of contemplation.

In terms of liminal theory, the affirmations of theology perform two important functions for the liminal space of ‘forgetting.’ First, liminality is a period of reformation, rather than – to borrow a theological phrase – ‘creation ex nihilo’: structured and ‘safe’ theological knowing has an indispensible liminal aspect to its unfolding. The negative aspect of this unfolding, however – the forgetting – is also transitional, giving way again to disciplined living and participating in the ongoing tradition, particularly participating as a member of its community. As Coakley says in a summation of her théologie totale, ‘the task of theology is always, if implicitly, a recommendation for life. The vision it sets before one invites ongoing – sometimes disorienting – response and change, both personal and political, in relation to God.’

Second, the affirmations of cataphatic method can be employed as thresholds for the liminal open-space. In the previous chapter’s discussion on dialectics, we noted how a discourse must somehow enact the role of the master of ceremonies in the ritual context. The master of ceremonies holds the open-space safe for exploration and transformation by holding the limits of the liminal experience. One way of performing this enactment of limit in theological discourse is to invoke a dialectical conversation from within the cataphatic statements about God. In a sense this is what Pseudo-Dionysius is doing in the Divine Names – God is all these names, but not any one, and some more than all: the ontological truth about God lies beyond these thresholds.

Rowan Williams provides an illustration for this in an essay from 1996, ‘Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne.’ In the face of scholarly debate about the empty tomb that cannot reach an agreement on its categorization as literature, let alone significance and meaning of the canonical gospels, Williams turns instead to the invocation of an image in the text. Through a structuring frame within the narrative itself, questions of historicity and form might be able to be suspended for a time in order to investigate certain theological questions. The

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resurrection narratives in John’s gospel contain a description of two angels seated inside the tomb, one at either end of the grave slab. Iconographically, this evokes an older biblical image of two cherubim (that is, heavenly beings distinct from ‘angels’) flanking the mercy seat of the arc of the covenant, and Williams proceeds his theological investigation along the possibility that these twin images might send us into fresh observations of the text.

For the cherubim flanking the ark define a space where God would be if God were anywhere (the God of Judah is the one who sits between the cherubim or even ‘dwells’ between the cherubim); but there is no image between the cherubim. If you want to see the God of Judah, this is were he is and is not: to ‘see’ him is to look into the gap between the holy images.111 Images from the tradition are employed by Williams to ‘hold’ a conversation – a different conversation than that which was being ‘held’ by the questions of historicity and form. The two explorations are not in competition with each other, but rather, in the constant unfolding of theological discourse, the insights from each might come together to commence another exploration. For example: if God is to be found ‘in-between’, in the apophatic open-space, how does that affect the writing of the texts about God encountered as unknowable? The apophatic method is bounded by cataphatic method in the same way as liminality is bounded and transitions into something transformed.

3.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the particular type of knowledge that is present in an open-space of liminality and suggested some hermeneutical strategies for maintaining the distinctiveness of that knowing when it comes to systematic theological reflection, which is the task of scholarly discourse. Having allowed liminality theory to introduce the specificities of the liminal experience, it was noted that it is necessary to make a particular philosophical response to the encounter of limit in order for the particular epistemology of liminality to become known. When a limit, or more likely limits (plural), are breached as a threshold encounter into a different kind of knowing, a raft of insights belonging to Plato’s

infinite or the prophet’s wisdom emerge.

It has then been shown how Rowan Williams’s dialectical method of theology as conversation can establish limits as thresholds rather than absolutes, and create an open-space in the middle—a broken middle according to Gillian Rose—where truth is encountered both in its particularity and in its partiality. Knowledge in liminality is messy and incomplete, unstructured and disordered. In some ways it will complete the past but in other ways it will yearn for a future. In this liminal middle of rationality, it makes sense to approach Christian revelation as a category of testimony, birthed from a direct and socially deconstructed encounter between human and divine persons.

To search for theological knowledge in liminality, the theologian must necessarily step beyond the reason of empirical rationality, at the same time as being held by reason as a network of thresholds. Scripture and tradition function to materially locate a liminal investigation into theological truth and knowing, and to maintain its historical continuity in a constantly unfolding and updating formulation. Like Plato, though, the theologian must look to the wisdom of the poets and priests at the point of unknowing, to the resources of direct communitas, of relating to God directly in liminal spiritual experience. This is the next step in this investigation into theological hermeneutic for liminality, and is taken in chapter four.
Chapter 4

The Crucible of Prayer

‘If you are a theologian you will pray. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.’

4.1 Introduction

This thesis has been developing a response to the complex state of truth and knowing in cultural contexts of change. It has argued that liminality theory provides a framework for understanding the social processes at work in cultural change and the different type of thinking it entails. Liminality has a type of unknowing, beyond previously conceived form, which can be perceived if form is used as a threshold to frame an open-space of conversation. Liminality is a type of context; it is a sphere of anti-structured sociality where individuals and groups transform from one normative identity to another. Therefore, we can see how culturally embedded notions of love are undergoing a necessary update in liminality and this process need not be resisted. Instead, the challenge is for Christian theology to transition alongside and in the midst of cultural transitions.

Chapter two presented an approach to liminal thinking that dwells in this messy middle of transitional knowing. Theological discourses in liminality require a form of dialectical conversation that holds open a space of dialogue without resolution. It is a way to go on thinking when thinking is difficult, which theology must do in relation to cultural contexts that are in transition. If a theologian cannot think what is difficult, then s/he cannot contribute to the renewal of cultural discourse. In considering thinking in liminality, it has also been evident that pure reason is not the primary mode of knowing. Plato identified it as a ‘memory in the soul.’

Augustine saw it as a task of discernment of truth by the ‘spiritual senses.’ This chapter now addresses the possibility of spiritual knowing as the primary resource for a theological hermeneutic in liminality.

Spirituality is that aspect of being human that relates to transcendence—to an encounter with ‘otherness’—be that within the self, the natural world, or the world ‘beyond’ that is commonly referred to as the divine. Liminal spiritual experience is the encounter with any of these ‘others’ that defies normative description. It refers to those mysteries that cannot be put into words. They are sensed or evoked but not empirically proven.

This chapter starts with a brief look at spirituality, the partnership between spirituality and theology, and the particular experience of spirituality in contexts of liminality. Far from being an innovation, this approach to theological hermeneutics has a long tradition in contemplative theological discourse, including what is more commonly referred to as mystical theology. From this ancient tradition comes the concept of ‘dark knowing,’ which is here presented as a descriptor of theological knowledge derived from liminal spiritual experience. An encounter with God is described by some mystical writers, in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, as a movement into such brilliance beyond human perception that it might be described as a darkness—a mysterious cloud of unknowing. The darkness refers both to God in God’s self and the quality of knowledge about God. In this thesis, ‘dark knowing’ is a grasping attempt to describe the indescribable encounter with the divine in the human experience of liminality.

To show how a theological hermeneutic might arise from liminal spiritual experience, this chapter examines the British theologian Sarah Coakley’s recent articulation of a theological method that privileges contemplation. There are some significant overlaps between Coakley’s théologie totale and the structures of experience outlined in liminality theory, which draw our attention to key movements in contemplative theology that enable theologians to carry on their work in contexts of change. What emerges is the significance of a contemplative-communitas which re-forms theological knowledge through an encounter with God in a liminal open-space of prayer.
First, Coakley explains how theological orthodoxy is necessarily and continuously evolving 'in via', on the way, through everyday life and regular practices of prayer, and in conjunction with critical scholarly resources refining the formulations of theology laid out in the historical tradition. Second, the practice of contemplative prayer itself is an essential vessel for theology because of the purgative effect of practised letting go of control regarding what is known. In the terms outlined for this thesis, prayer can be invoked as a holding strategy for open-space just as dialectical method was in the previous chapter. For Coakley, what is achieved in this process of contemplation is the refinement of desire. This is the third intersection with liminality theory: the refinement of desire and the refinement of sociality come together in the liminal open-space. The ‘crucible of prayer’ has the power to transform theological knowledge through a direct encounter with God. Vulnerability is essential to the experience of liminality and to prayer, but Coakley, using the concept of power-in-vulnerability, demonstrates how being vulnerable before God, who is not like any other encounter with an other, has a paradoxical empowering effect.

### 4.2 Spirituality in Liminality

From an anthropological point of view, spirituality is ‘the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.’ It is ‘a fundamental dimension of the human being [and] the lived experience which actualizes that dimension’ in real time and place, in real people’s lives, individually and communally. This definition, from the influential work of Sandra Schneiders, a Roman Catholic nun working in the academic field of spirituality, provides a broad range of material for a theologian to work with, in the reconnection of spirituality and theology. It incorporates human experience of otherness, other than divine encounter. That is, Schneiders’ definition does not reduce all human spirituality to a category of Christian theology, but instead spirituality informs a Christian anthropology, which in turn begins a conversation with theology.

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4 This also implies that spiritual experience is not necessarily an interaction with a transcendental ‘other’ and therefore can be free of theological content.
British Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth is a significant influence in theology’s re-engagement with spirituality after the secularising impact of modernity. In a paradigmatic essay from 1971, titled *Theology and Spirituality*, Louth writes,

> Spirituality—prayer—is, I suggest, that which keeps theology to its proper vocation, that which prevents theology from evading its own real object. Spirituality does not exactly answer the question, ‘Who is God?’ but it preserves the orientation, the perspective, within which this question remains a question that is being asked rather than a question that is being evaded or elided.⁵

Louth has a particular set of spiritual experiences and practices in mind as a Christian theologian, rightly called ‘prayer’ by virtue of her or his intention and orientation: they are exercises aimed at connecting with God. From the perspective of theology, prayer is essential to prevent what he describes as ‘the danger of a non- or un-theological spirituality . . . to become a mere cult of devotion, or devotedness, not to anything in particular but just in itself.’⁶ The vocation of theology is to create a system of communication that creates an open-space in which there might be meaningful conversations about God leading to ‘theology interpreting spirituality, and spirituality informing theology’⁷ in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Spirituality is the first building block for a theological hermeneutic in liminality because of this dialectical relationship between spirituality and theology, a relationship of constant conversation that at least in our conscious construction of understanding, *begins* in the liminality of spiritual experience. However, it must be remembered that, as has already been argued, a dialectical relationship does not necessarily imply an oppositional binary; rather, liminal spirituality stands in the middle of a continuous round of refinement through conversation with what has come before in theological discourse.

Philip Sheldrake, another significant contributor to the contemporary project of reintegrating spirituality and theology, argues that because of the inner nature of

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⁵ Louth, *Theology and Spirituality* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1978), 4. One wonders whether Louth has in mind here the ancient avatar of *lex orandi lex credendi*—the rule of faith is the rule of prayer.
⁷ Louth, *Theology and Spirituality*, 12.
spirituality, it inherently occupies the liminal space in scholarship. Spirituality sits in between dogmatic statements or biblical exegesis and the world of enacted faith; it is the crucible through which we test our discursive constructs and interpretations. Hence, Sheldrake says,

Students of spirituality learn to exist in the world of borderlands—between theory and practice, theology and other disciplines, the sacred and the secular, interiority and exteriority. . . . In this, as in so much else, spirituality reminds theology of its task of crossing thresholds and questioning human absolutes.8

In the previous chapter, through a consideration of Rowan Williams’s theology of conversation, it was demonstrated how theology in liminality requires an open-space dialectic such that thinking in liminality can remain open for a time, in order that old ways of knowing might be transformed and updated. However, it was also noted that theological knowledge in this sphere of liminality is different from that of non-liminal, structured theological knowledge, therefore thinking in liminality is not sufficient. If conversation represents relationship, and the relationships of theological discourse—of God, self, church and world—have moved into the transitional sphere of transformative liminality, then these relationships need attention, and these relationships are the foundational experience of connection in spirituality.

**Liminal spirituality**

Liminal spirituality is that type of spiritual experience and its associated practices that function without stable, structured sociality. There are a great variety of ‘non-discursive spiritual practices’ across different religious traditions that endeavor to lead the practitioner into ways of being human that are different from those available through the languaged mind. Non-discursive spiritual practices refer to non-verbal or, better, non-worded activities of the human mind and body that effect an integration of the diverse states of consciousness of the human person. Sometimes the practice might focus on the body—such as in the contemporary, secular mindfulness movement cited above—and sometimes the practice might

focus on transcending the body, such as in the ecstatic movements of various traditions. A non-discursive spiritual practice might have a very particular conception of the divine, such as in traditional Yoga practices, or it might reject any description of the divine as a construct, such as in Buddhist practices.

The open-space of liminal spirituality allows contradictions and falsehoods to rise and fall away, for it demands that attention be given to the lived reality of discourse: that which does not make sense of spiritual experience is put into question. And yet the rejection of problematic discourse is not immediately affected, for liminality does not demand the systematisation of knowledge, and it is enough to say for a time, ‘I simply do not know.’ Confessing ‘not to know’ is an important part of systematic theology.

The open-space of the inner life of the human person—the contemplative open-space—is fundamental to the conception of contemplative theology that features in the discussion of this chapter. The inner open-space, which we have previously imaged by reference to the breath, describes the kind of liminal theological knowledge to which contemplatives and mystics testify. Teresa of Avila, for example, describes this inner space as a vast, seven-story mansion: the ‘interior castle.’ By consciously letting go of rationality, the contemplative steps over a threshold into a very different type of knowing God—knowing through direct personal connection.

In the tradition of contemplative theology, this open-space is most often referred to as the human ‘soul.’ The use of open-space to refer to what has previously been called the human soul emphasises the experience of the person and a particular phenomenon of human consciousness in the broadest sense. Furthermore, it is intended that what is developed here through language arising from liminality theory is an openness to different conceptions of the inner life of the human person that have arisen through scientific studies in the past century—that is, the concept of ‘soul’ is in transition, as it has been in previous epochal periods of

change. For example, the technology now available for neurobiologists to map the physiological grounds of unconscious thought challenges any notion of the soul being an entity in the human person separate from the body and the mind. The theory of matter as energy in quantum physics also deconstructs notions of an isolated soul. Hence, open-space should invoke a sense of one’s own worth in the inner experience of the human person.

It is not that there is no sociality implicit in liminal spiritual experience, but rather that old modes of sociality are undergoing transformation or refinement. In the process, the inherent limit of discursive explanations is exposed. As transitional events, they might be momentary or sustained over a period of time, individual or communal, mundane or ecstatic, spontaneous or invoked by spiritual practice. Words are either absent or inadequate, and therefore any cataphatic or doctrinal approach to theology is rendered impossible—in that moment—because of the loss of language. Instead, a different kind of knowledge emerges in the absence of definition, a different kind of truth, a different kind of human interaction with concrete realities.

Beauty, or aesthetics, has a particular place in liminal spirituality, because of its capacity to move human persons beyond the ordinary planes of empirical, physical existence. In terms of liminal spiritual experience, beauty has a particular way of ‘creating space’ that manifests in a sharp intake of breath, a gasp, a loss of words or speechlessness. In classical philosophy, it is a ‘transcendental’ existing in absolute form in perfect (divine) transcendence. As the contemporary philosopher John Armstrong has surmised: beauty, by way of mimicry, connects us into the nature of the universe and what it means to be human. Or, in the sense evoked by Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological project, beauty portrays the drama of divine revelation.

Some liminal spiritual experiences arise without any intention on behalf of the

individual—a spontaneous event that defies all previous explanations of the ways of the world. They seem to arrive from outside of ourselves and are received as an unsettling phenomenon, rupture or disturbance to an assumed way of life.

Charismatic gifts of the Spirit fall into this category: the receiving of tongues or a word of prophesy, the gift of a vision or a spiritually significant dream. They are experienced as arriving from outside of oneself or beyond one’s control. Moments of personal epiphany might also fall into this category: the sudden uprush of memory or awareness from the unconscious, prompted perhaps by a smell, sight or sound; being held in a way reminiscent of the infant self with an accompanied response of longing, loss or lack (or, indeed, the opposite). Similarly, an encounter with beauty might ‘take one’s breath away’ and a brush with violence might ‘pull one up short’. In each of these examples, there is an unexpected moment where ordinary experience is suspended, a break in normality that brings with it an opportunity to reconsider what you had previously assumed to be true or real.

Other liminal spiritual experiences arise as a hoped for consequence of an intentional spiritual practice. These are spiritual practices centered on a disciplined setting aside of time and attention, the ‘letting go’ of analytical thinking and conscious ‘striving.’ Intentional liminal spiritual practices include meditation, symbolic ritual, ecstatic dance, and fasting. Silence and the breath are primary modes of expression. The affects of this kind of spiritual practice are not necessarily experienced in the short term, but rather over the long term. They can be perceived as the creation of an inner space, an inner stillness, and a less anxious connection between the self and the infinite other. Intentional engagement with art also falls into this category: we go to the theatre ‘to be moved’, or listen to poetry for ‘a different perspective’. The desire is to feel a suspension of everyday life and have our minds and hearts elevated to higher things, however variously that is conceived. It is what Christian religious traditions commonly refer to as asceticism.13

‘Contemplation’ is the oldest term from the tradition of Christian spirituality that is

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13 A broad definition of the term is in view here, where asceticism is about discipline, rather than deprivation.
functionally equivalent in its meaning to liminal spiritual experience.\textsuperscript{14} It commonly refers to spiritual practice and experience directed towards emptying, or as Thomas Merton describes it, ‘a preference for the desert.’\textsuperscript{15} In the early centuries of the church, this type of spirituality tended to be associated with a monastic withdrawal into a whole life devoted to prayer, but it can be applied wherever the movement into self-emptying is implied. Within the contemplative life, Merton defines the practice of meditation as the ‘prayer of the heart’ prescribed in the \textit{Philokalia}, a monastic handbook of sorts, an anthology of quotations from Eastern monastic Fathers. It is an approach to prayer that ‘seeks its roots in the very ground of our being, not merely in our mind or our affections . . . seeking God himself present in the depths of our being and meet[ing] him there by invoking the name of Jesus in faith, wonder and love.’\textsuperscript{16}

Furthermore, in the Christian tradition, liminal spiritual experience has most often been associated with a particular type of wordless prayer: silence.\textsuperscript{17} Not all silence is liminal—prayer without vocalised sounds can be structured with inner sentences spoken by the pray-er, ordered through a list of conscious preoccupations and expectations, or busy with an insistence on right thinking. That experience of silence is a closed experience: predictable and disciplined, taught and therefore embedded within particular social interactions. The pray-er is also conscious of when they are praying and when they are \textit{not} praying, because the character of the spiritual experience is clearly and consciously defined by the rational mind.

On the other hand, the type of silence that might be characterised as a liminal spiritual experience is a contemplation that seeks to go beyond the structure of the mind. It is discovered through interacting with one’s own inner self, and a ‘space’ for a different kind of thinking becomes perceivable when analytical rationality is permitted to fall away. This open ‘nothingness’ is a discipline, sometimes facilitated through the use of a mantra, a visual focusing point, or attention to the

\textsuperscript{16} Merton, \textit{Contemplative Prayer}, 34.
\textsuperscript{17} Merton, \textit{Contemplative Prayer}, 33.
breath.18

Sarah Coakley has written extensively about the experience of contemplation19 throughout her theological career. This thesis proposes that there is an epistemological and hermeneutical match between the practice, expression an experience of contemplation that Coakley has particularly in mind and liminal spiritual experience as described here. That is, Coakley’s theological method that ‘privileges contemplation’ can provide the basis for a theological method for liminality because it is birthed from liminal spiritual experience.

So what does Coakley specifically mean by contemplation? An article for Christian Century in 2011, entitled ‘Prayer as Crucible: How My Mind Has Changed,’20 describes liminal spiritual experience in language that dominates most of Coakley’s writing.21 By contemplation, she means wordless prayer, silent waiting and simple space-making or stillness. It is the practiced loss of noetic control, the refinement, reordering or transformation of desire and a reorientation of the senses. It is prayer: ceding and responding to the divine.

There is an open quality to the experience: a space, without structured meaning, in a ‘bodily practice of dispossession, humility and effacement.’22 It is a practice where one learns the paradox of humanity: that in defenselessness before God,
there is ‘power-in-vulnerability.’ There is power in the ‘hidden self-emptying [self-effacing]’ and ‘cracking open’ of the heart on the ‘rack of painful internalization of divine truth.’ It frequently involves ‘disconcerting bombardments from the realm of the unconscious,’ like being on a ‘spiritual roller coaster,’ which results in the experience of prayer that Coakley recalls St Basil once describing as ‘a boat with the decks constantly shifting.’ Yet the disturbance results in an integrative, deepening of vision such that one can declare the ancient proverb, ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’

Coakley argues that contemplation should first be understood as a practice or an ‘activity’ rather than an experience. Her concern is to avoid the philosophical misstep into unrecoverable subjectivity but its affect is the same as is intended in this thesis: to develop threshold strategies that might designated a sphere of liminal knowing in an open-space of transformation. It is the activity of contemplation that frames open-space, and even then ‘it cannot be sustained without some significant relation to a tradition, both hermeneutical and intra-personal.’ That is, the liminal spiritual practices themselves are encountered in a dialectical relationship with other thresholds.

**Mysticism as liminal spirituality**

Mysticism is a modern term referring to an ancient type of testimony about spiritual experience involving a direct, intimate and transforming engagement with a transcendent other. In their introduction to contemporary approaches to mysticism, Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill and Bradley Onishi map the complex philosophical, phenomenological and theological waters that must be negotiated in understanding the subject of mysticism, such that ‘modern scholarly discussions of

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24 Coakley, "Kenōsis and Subversion," 35.
26 Coakley, "Kenōsis and Subversion," 34.
27 Coakley, "Prayer as Crucible," 33.
28 Coakley, "Prayer as Crucible," 33.
29 Proverbs 9:10
31 Coakley, “Response to Reviewers,” 593.
mysticism are often highly nuanced, with a subtlety which is sometimes missed.\textsuperscript{32} Not only is there a variety of mystical experience testified to in the wide range of mysticisms from each religious tradition, but their interpreters also vary widely, which is an indication of their contested position in the religious social network, as well as in theological discourse.

Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi suggest six themes in the Christian mystical tradition that form its key motifs and that go some way towards defining what might be called mystical, starting with the pervasive influence of the Platonic philosophical tradition, including Origen, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and their commentators throughout history. Furthermore, there is a preference for apophatic or negative theological language, and for a symbolic deployment of scripture that is preoccupied with the themes of selfhood and interiority, hierarchy, and erotic imagery envisioning God as Divine Love/Lover/Beloved and the soul as Divine Lover/Beloved.\textsuperscript{33}

The lover/lover imagery for divine encounter is illustrated in Theresa of Avilla’s \textit{The Interior Castle}, in a description of spiritual union that the pray-er advances into as they go deeper into prayer.

\begin{quote}
I cannot find another that would better explain what I mean than the sacrament of marriage. This spiritual espousal is different in kind from marriage, for in these matters that we are dealing with there is never anything that is not spiritual. Corporal things are far distant from them, and the spiritual joys the Lord gives when compared to the delights married people must experience are a thousand leagues distant. For it is all a matter of love united with love, and the actions of love are most pure and so extremely delicate and gentle that there is no way of explaining them, but the Lord knows how to make them very clearly felt.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Such a description of intimacy was a radical challenge to the structures of church

\textsuperscript{32} Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill & Bradly, B. Onishi, \textit{Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches} (Surrey, GBR: Ashgate, 2009). 19. Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi offer four categories of readings of the mystical within the Christian tradition—perennialist accounts, contextualist positions, performative language readings and feminist readings—drawing on material as ancient as the Old Testament Song of Songs and as recent as the ‘turn to the mystical’ in postmodern philosophy.

\textsuperscript{33} Nelstrop, \textit{Christian Mysticism}, chapters 1-6.

\textsuperscript{34} Saint Teresa of Avila, \textit{The Interior Castle} (London: SPCK, 1979), 103.
authority, because the church has no role as intermediary in this marriage of the soul and God. It is direct relationship, direct knowledge, direct empowerment.

Victor Turner observes that liminal situations and roles ‘are almost everywhere attributed with magico-religious properties . . . [and often] regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events, and relationships that have not been ritually incorporated into the liminal context.’ Monks and mystics stand in a place of critique within institutionalised religion. They hold the prophetic role. Their spontaneous and/or ecstatic liminal spiritual experiences are an invitation to let socialised spirituality evolve and grow, but that requires an openness to let go of power structures already in place. In other words, Turner explicitly associates mysticism with liminality.

Sarah Coakley has offered some reflections about the social function of the mystic personality based on her adaptation of Ernst Troelsch’s observations of the mystic within a church–sect dialectic. Coakley notes how Troelsch’s mystic seems to stand above the church–sect categories, taking form in an individualistic mode rather than a communal mode of sociality. She notes that the 'plasticity to social change' in Troelsch’s model 'can be illuminatingly configured and reconfigured in a number of ways.' Therefore, there are church-mystics and sect-mystics, each of them performing a prophetic function within the structured community, not withdrawing from the community but challenging the more settled social patterns of its relationship to the world. ‘Mysticism is more illuminatingly descriptive of certain types of persons than of social collectives, and hence can be found within both of the other types.’

We have already established that in the theory of liminality as a social process, the movement from structured sociality, through a liminal moment of anti-structure,

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36 Sarah Coakley, God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity' (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Troeltsch adapted his friend Max Weber's famous sociological typology of religious social systems in relation to Christian patterns of sociality, particularly in reference to the state. 'Church' is 'a type of religious system that tends to prop up the dominant social order for the masses of a whole society.' 'Sect' is a type of religious system that prefers independence from the dominant rule and withdraws to form a contrasting society.
37 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 161.
38 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 159.
structured sociality is a process that occurs naturally in healthy social systems, not just once but whenever a renegotiation of the sociality is required. Turner and Coakley, then, seem to have identified, through different social theories, the same dynamic movement of the mystic personality and the role it plays within social structure. However, in contrast to Turner’s suggestion that mysticism moves into attempts at permanent liminality, Coakley’s emphasis on the mystic as an individual dynamic enables us to notice that within the dominant social dynamic, individuals continue on their own personal course. The mystic functions personally, in a perpetual movement of liminality, and it is her or his personal testimony of liminality that is the prophetic voice they offer.

Not all people who have spontaneous liminal spiritual experiences or practice liminal spiritual disciplines can be called mystics. However, the ‘mystic type’ (Coakley’s term) might be applied to individual moments or movements in the lives of individuals, groups and societies that are genuine expressions of liminal spirituality. These moments might function as a distinct testimony within a complex relation of testimonies, even within an individual personality. Hence, the mystic might be treated as an archetypal model for liminal spiritual experience, in the way that Coakley has argued that the mystic type functions in the social system of the church.

If this analysis is correct, it supports the proposal of this thesis that the resources for traversing the disorienting transitions of cultural liminality lie primarily in the personal liminal spiritual experience of a direct communitas with God. Theology done in the mode of the mystic has the capacity to step through the dialectical process of social change from institutionalised orthodoxy through anti-institutionalised orthodoxy, to re-formed theological orthodoxy. To do this, the theologian-as-mystic stands apart from both church and sect, relying on her or his own relationship with God in the unfolding theological conversation between themselves, God, the church and the world. They are independent but not disconnected, for the tradition holds them in dialectical relationship, but their independence allows them to critique the tradition and identify the needs of reformation.
Dark knowing

Darkness is a common metaphor employed by mystical writers to describe a particular type of theological knowledge that emerges from liminal spiritual experience of God.\textsuperscript{39} For example, Pseudo-Dionysius, discussed in the previous chapter in relation to his apophatic strategies for crossing over the limit of rationality, writes in his *Mystical Theology* of contemplation ‘where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.’\textsuperscript{40} Scholars of mysticism Denys Turner and Bernard McGinn agree that this should be carefully distinguished as an aspect of epistemology or rationality rather than spiritual experience in and of itself.\textsuperscript{41}

In addition to Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa’s image of darkness is a primary influence on the tradition of dark knowing in mystical theologies. Gregory drew an image of Moses’ experience on Mount Sinai as an archetypal spiritual experience, encountering God through light, cloud and then darkness.\textsuperscript{42} Deeper and more personal encounters with God results in deeper theological, apophatic ‘darkness’:

> For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.\textsuperscript{43}

Gregory is often contrasted with his forebear Origen, whose mysticism focused on


the illumination of the Word, and hence, for him, a progression into lightness is the more natural analogy as the soul grows in her knowledge of God. 'Whereas for Origen the soul pursues a path of increasing light—the darkness it encounters is dissolved as it progresses further—with Gregory the soul travels deeper and deeper into darkness.'

Contemporary scholars warn against a false divide between mystics of the light and mystics of the dark, emphasizing again that apophatic knowing always stands in dialectical relationship with positive knowing.

For Coakley, this tradition of dark knowing is a key metaphor for the type of rationality evoked by contemplation, which she describes as ‘a profound sense of the mind’s darkening, and of a disconcerting reorientation of the senses.’ It leads to a ‘sense of being grasped, of the Spirit’s simultaneous erasure of human idolatry and subtle reconstitution of human selfhood in God.’ Contemplation provides a necessary container for the purgation of human knowledge, including this metaphor of darkness. A generic metaphor of darkness is inadequate since it both has a breadth of meaning in different mystical writers and has been subject to the vagrancies of power and politics in the Enlightenment period.

Coakley illustrates this particular kind of darkness by reference to an experience she had, teaching meditation to prisoners in a United States prison, who almost universally had ‘dark’ skin. Upon reflection, Coakley wrote:

It was the Enlightenment that created the category of race (dividing ‘white’ from ‘black’ and subordinating the latter to the former), it was also the Enlightenment that repressed the epistemological and religious significance of contemplation in the mystical theology of premodern writers. Whereas the influence of such as Denys the Areopagite had been largely significant in the medieval and early modern Catholic thought of Western Christendom—‘dark contemplation’ being seen as supremely and personally transformative, at least for a minority monastic circle—the secularized philosophy of Kant relegated to the unavailable realm of the ‘noumenal’ that which is dark to the

45 For example, Philip Kariatlis, "Dazzling Darkness": The Mystical or Theophanic Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa," in Phronema 27, no. 2 (2012), 99-123.
46 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 19.
47 Sarah Coakley, Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 23.
mind, had shorn away reference to prayer as a profound exercise of transformation.48

We are again confronted by the falsifying binary tendencies of Enlightenment thinking: darkness and light are not pitched against each other in St John of the Cross’s writings. Rather, in mystical writing, darkness is most often a metaphor for apophatic knowledge—for knowing that is unknowing, paralleling again with Turner’s analysis of anti-structure in the liminal space. In this sense, the dark knowing of pre-Enlightenment mystical theology is the dark knowing of liminal spiritual experience.

If it is possible to establish some kind of theological knowledge based on an encounter with the divine in liminality, then it must necessarily be a provisional and partial knowledge. It is a glimpse of something beyond socially structured and systematised knowledge: ‘apophasis in itself can never be more than the verbal symbol of encounter with God.’49 It is an acknowledgement of the limit of language, of human reason and communication, and hence theological discourse must be a constant unfolding and evolution of knowledge.

Some further comments on dark knowing in the mystical tradition are required to understand the transition of his early tradition of a mystical language of darkness into medieval mysticism and the influential legacy of St John of the Cross. Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius are central to the theological vision developed by St John of the Cross.50 Andrew Louth warns that there are significant differences between St John and the earlier use of the metaphor, explaining that for the Fathers ‘it is a purified love that enters into the Divine Darkness, whereas for St John of the Cross

it is in the Dark Night that the soul experiences purifying love.' St John of the Cross's 'dark night of the soul' is an experience of testing, disorientation and, most profoundly, a loss of theological certainty. The night has a variety of meanings in the poem in which St John describes this experience, but in his commentary on the poem he outlines three particular 'dark nights,' each a stage in a person's spiritual journey, the end of which is intended to be 'that high state of perfection which we here designate as the union of the soul with God.'

The first night, though not to be taken in strict chronological order, is the night of sense, and refers to the spiritual practices a Christian might implement of her or his own accord, to reject the distractions of the sensory world, and turn her or his attention towards their soul's journey. The second night, more bitter and cumbersome than the first, is seemingly initiated by God, and is a purgation of one's knowledge and expectation of God, stripping theology of ego, of human projections, and the delusions of a sinful soul.

In writing about this, Williams says that the dark night is 'the only defense religion ever has or ever will have against the charge of cozy fantasy. . . . In the middle of all our religious constructs—if we have the honesty to look at it—is an emptiness. The efforts of the first, active night of the senses are dependent on this second night of the spirit or soul to bring them into effect, if the goal is unification with God, rather than mere human activity. A third night might then emerge, the beginnings of knowing God in the dim light of dawn, a prefiguring of the eschatological day, but still partial, mysterious, shrouded.

Each of these nights might be described as liminal in one way or another, but it is

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51 Louth acknowledges that there is difference of scholarly opinion about the relationship between St John and the Fathers on this matter, but argues that it is one of 'perspective rather than anything more fundamental.' Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, 181.
53 From his sermon 'The Dark Night,' in St John of the Cross, The Dark Night, 80-84. John's suggestion that only those advanced a fair way down a spiritual path towards God will experience the dark night of the soul has been demonstrated to be an unnecessary judgment, and the metaphor might be applied to a broad range of human spiritual experience. See, for example, Coakley's discussion of Dom John Chapman's 'democratic' adaptation of John's system. Sarah Coakley, "Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Dom John Chapman Osb (1865-1933) on the Meaning of 'Contemplation,'" in Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 40-54.
the second night of the darkness that most vividly portrays the intense experience of spiritual liminality in view here. Williams explains how deeply important this experience of limit is for theological discourse. For, ‘illumination is the running-out of language and thought, the compulsion exercised by a reality drastically and totally beyond the reach of our conceptual apparatus.’ Without some kind of crucible, theology remains entirely under the control of human minds, which makes it no theology at all.

4.3 Theology in the Crucible of Prayer

This thesis is developing a theological hermeneutic for use in contexts of cultural change. It has argued that if the process of change is understood as a necessary move through liminality, it becomes evident that there is a way of doing theology specific to liminality. The previous chapter dealt with the need to hold this way of thinking dialectically, through the construction of an open-space for ongoing theological conversation. This chapter has outlined how this conversation is an expression of relationships or connection, which means that the reconnection of spirituality and theology is essential for theological discourses in liminality. We shall now consider a contemporary example of contemplative theology to demonstrate the method that emerges from the liminal intersection of spirituality and theology.

In 2013 presented her mature theological method privileging contemplation in the first of a projected four volumes of systematic theology titled God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity. Coakley argues that the ‘simple prayer of relative silence or stillness’ has its own epistemology and deconstructive hermeneutic. She has described the ‘seismic shift’ that took place in the crucible of wordlessness as ‘a retrieval of a classic tradition sweated painfully out of the exigencies of prayer encountered primarily as darkness and disturbance.’ In fact, Coakley argues, the doctrinal and hermeneutical foundations of the Christian theological tradition were formed within a container of prayer, liturgy and community—a combination

54 Rowan Williams, Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), 96.
55 Sarah Coakley, Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self. See note 23.
of both wordless and worded practices—and are an indispensible movement within theological discourse.\textsuperscript{57}

**Théologie totale**

In *God, Sexuality and the Self*, Coakley identifies nine distinguishing features of her methodology, which she names *théologie totale*, indicating her intention to read theological discourse as holistically as possible.\textsuperscript{58} Her method has two key, co-dependent elements, to which she returns again and again. First, Coakley privileges contemplation as a practice indispensible to theological knowledge. Second, Coakley argues that every aspect of systematic knowledge requires submission to the refinement of desire. In other words, her approach brings together a particular spirituality of silence with a particular philosophical hermeneutic of desire that ‘gives new coinage’ to the tradition of Christian Platonism.\textsuperscript{59}

In chapter two, where liminality theory was outlined, it was noted that South African pastor-theologian Piet van Staden has suggested that the evolution of theological discourse could be viewed through anthropology’s three-stage process of social change, with liminality as a middle moment of confusion, creativity and even heterodoxy.\textsuperscript{60} This pattern is also discernible in Coakley’s vision of systematic theology recast through the crucible of contemplative practice. ‘Systematic theology [cannot be spoken of] as a fixed or unchanging entity in Christian tradition . . . [and] it does not falter at the necessary challenge of presenting the gospel afresh in all its ramifications—systematically unfolding the connections of the parts of the vision that is set before us.’\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} Coakley, *God, Sexuality & Self*, 6.

\textsuperscript{58} Such is the perceived importance of *God, Sexuality and the Self* to contemporary theology that the journal *Modern Theology* included a book symposium on it, with reviews from Eugene F. Rogers Jr, Kevin W. Hector, Radu Bardeianu, Mary Catherine Hilkert and Susan Abraham plus a response to these reviews from Coakley herself. See *Modern Theology* 30:4 (2014). Most authors comment on the emerging nature of this work, that it is difficult to assess as a ‘first volume’ of a systematic theology without access to the whole.

\textsuperscript{59} Coakley, *God, Sexuality & Self*, 9. The second volume of Coakley’s systematic theology is titled *The New Asceticism* and will further explore the issues relating to this thesis, but delayed publication (presently expected in May 2015) has meant that it was not available before the submission date.

\textsuperscript{60} van Staden, “Beacons, Thresholds and Webs: Theology as Creative Endeavour” in *HTS Teologiese Studies* 69, no. 1 (2013), 1.

\textsuperscript{61} Coakley, *God, Sexuality & Self*, 41. Emphasis mine.
The privileging of contemplation puts liminal spiritual experience at the centre of the process of theological discourse. There is knowledge before and after this deconstruction of noetic knowledge in contemplation: knowledge that provides a platform upon which to build and, later, knowledge that emerges after rigorous engagement with the context. Contemplation is not something that happens once at a particular foundation point in the discourse but rather is in the very nature of discourse—a constant unfolding, individually and corporately. While it is not a linear method, contemplation has a particular ‘privileged’ place from which theological discourse emerges. It is not linear because the practice of contemplation is never done away with: progression into theological maturity is a development that continually comes back to the practice of prayer, in a constant process of ‘re-birthing’ or ‘re-founding’. Hence, at times contemplation may not be first in a linear process, but it is first in a logical process, because of its indispensability. It is a ‘start’ in the sense that Gillian Rose suggests, starting in the middle.

The practice of contemplation challenges the Enlightenment privileging of empirical and noetic epistemologies. This is both a theological statement (God is wholly other) and a philosophical statement (there is a limit to human language and knowledge). It is also akin to a psychological statement about the deconstruction of the ego and not contrary to a sociological statement about socially embedded religious experience. Contemplation is all these things in connection with each other: ‘the practice of prayer provides the context in which silence in the Spirit expands the potential to respond to the realm of the Word, and reason too is stretched and changed beyond its normal, secular reach.’

As Coakley goes on to say, ‘there is a paradoxical double counterpoint here between secular reason, theology’s reason, and that reason still in via to God.’

Secular reason refers to those scientific or noetic endeavors that strive to describe and explain the world as it exists, without reference to divine being or purpose. Theological reason, on the other hand, for Coakley, is a rationality purified and expanded through ‘encounter with the divine,’ most particularly in the crucible of

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62 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 25.
63 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 89.
wordless prayer: the capacity to keep multiple, seemingly contradictory insights together, without reduction, is a capacity nurtured in a wordless encounter with the divine through the ‘practiced loss of noetic control’.64 The theologian’s task is a constant conversation between these two types of wisdom, and with the third reason emerging in via to God, especially because the reason in via is not yet known—our understanding of God and the world is constantly evolving ‘on the way.’ Coakley places this conversation in the longstanding theological discourse of nature (secular knowledge) and grace (theological knowledge based on revelation), with an emphasis on the Spirit’s disruptive influence, which ‘blows where it wills’ (John 3:8).65

Orthodoxy, in this respect, is not a static set of certainties determined at a particular point in the past as an ongoing guide the present. Rather, there are two ways (at least) of conceiving orthodoxy in Western theology.66 The first, which dominates Enlightenment-inspired theological discourse, is that orthodoxy or Christian ‘truth’ is determined by its alignment to a set of institutionally regulated doctrinal statements. The second, championed more by the monastic and spiritual traditions, is that truth is discerned, through the in via interactions between church dogma, the inner life of human persons, and community living. In this sense, orthodoxy is a horizon (goal) towards which one hopes to be constantly moving. Belief statements have integrity when they can be demonstrated in connection with orthopraxy (right acting) and orthopathy (right affection).67

Coakley views the social sciences as an essential resource in the scholarly pursuit of theological truth as it unfolds in the direction of orthodoxy. Just as prayer refines the soul, so the critical mechanisms of the social sciences expose biases of power and control in discourse. Coakley neither reduces religion to its social

64 Coakley, "Prayer as Crucible," 36.
65 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 88.
66 Coakley has the Western tradition in mind when making this point, and a comparison with the Eastern traditions might extend her point. As summed up by A. Khomiakov in the nineteenth century, capital-O Orthodox theologies discern orthodoxy through a commitment to sobornost—whereby consensus in the church is taken as a sign of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and guidance. See John Binns, An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 67.
function nor makes the opposite claim that religious truth operates in its own system outside of its social context. She does not allow secular theory to have the final say, but social science offers essential tools for theology to 'peel down through the layers of society where doctrine is received.' The discernment of orthodoxy includes analysis, comparison and integration of different socially embedded insights across time and space.

The consequence of this broad embrace of resources for theology is an expansion of the key subjects traditionally considered the terrain of systematic theology: God, Trinity, Christ, Spirit, anthropology, sin and salvation, the church, the sacraments, the end times, and so on. To limit the systematic theologian to these categories, or at the very least to show how they are traditionally conceived, will not satisfy the requirements of the contemporary context. For example, theological anthropology requires consideration of sex and gender, nature and grace, subjectivity and particularity, which of course will require engagement with other disciplines. The discipline of contemporary theology requires integrative discourses rather than the single focused reasoning that relies on the interaction between sacred texts (scripture and tradition) and logic. Not only does this expand the classic systematic loci, but it also disturbs its discursive structure such that théologie totale is, as Coakley declares, an unsystematic systematics.

**The threshold of contemplation**

Coakley is clear that the privileging of contemplation is not just an insistence upon apophatic method, rather it is the practice of contemplation itself that is crucial for 'a new "knowing in unknowing".' Furthermore, Coakley is at pains to emphasise that contemplate is more than mere experience. It is deliberate action—both ours and God’s. ‘It must involve the stuff of learned bodily enactment, sweated out painfully over months and years, in duress, in discomfort, in bewilderment, as well as in joy and dawning recognition.’

In her contribution to a collection of essays on Practicing Theology, Coakley examines the relation of beliefs to spiritual practice, with particular reference to

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‘ascetical and mystical theology.’ She argues that while a range of spiritual practices can be engaged throughout the course of a single life, and it can take a lifetime for these practices to have their intended effect, they are ‘the effect of multiple forms of faithfulness, forging the participants by degrees into ‘the image of his Son.’ When a believer is new to the faith, spiritual practices focus on creedal formulations, the taking on board of theological information that is new to the person. In this process, they distinguish what is distinctive about the Christian way of life and thinking. It is public, external and ordered and therefore fits neatly into the category of non-liminality identified throughout this thesis. However, as time goes on and theological knowing ceases to be about learning new things, the believer begins to internalise the receiving tradition as a worldview of her or his own, experiencing or interpreting the world through the lens of Christian theology.

This again fits the category of non-liminal, structured knowing, even though the knowing is now internalised as one’s own. It is still the inherited, socially mediated set of beliefs or ‘expressions’ that are played out in the inner experience of the believer’s subjective world. Coakley, however, outlines a third stage of spiritual practice that she argues has the most effect on theological knowledge—that is, the stage of purgation, where beliefs are purified and simplified in the discipline of empty waiting on God. Strictly speaking, Coakley insists, this is ‘God’s practice in humans—a more unimpeded or conscious form of that distinctive human receptivity to grace that has sustained the process all along and that is itself a divine gift.’ This is the realm of liminal spirituality and liminal dark knowing.

One way of describing the role the body plays in the holding of open-space is what meditators, mystics and psychologists have variously called paying attention. Simone Weil’s well-known definition of prayer is that of paying attention. What she has in mind here is to be open to whatever comes. The gift of attention to whatever comes is an act of devotion, an affirmation of its existence and its

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worthiness, an acceptance of connection with it without requiring a full understanding of its form.

The impact of paying attention on the human intellect has been demonstrated by Eugene Gendlin, a US philosopher and psychotherapist who has researched the living interaction between an intelligent being and its environment and has developed a theory and a therapy of the brain–body relationship in response to his observations. Gendlin argues that information about the world enters the body quite some distance from the brain in a neurological pathway through the body’s sensory systems. This sensory awareness is most definitely information entering the body and as such should be considered a process of knowing, or at least an element thereof. From this observation Gendlin has developed therapeutic techniques in partnership with psychologist Carl Rogers to access and utilise this pre-conscious and pre-ordered information. Interaction with the world stands between the self-contained reality of the inner world and the individual’s conceptualisation of the world, which in essence is a search for meaning about the individual’s place within or interaction with the reality. Bodies, therefore, with their sensory receptors, are a knowing or a bridge of knowing, in and of themselves, apart from the brain.

Gendlin has translated this observation into his psychotherapy practice with a therapeutic technique called ‘focusing.’ The therapeutic strategy of focusing directs the client’s attention to the felt senses by holding a kind of open, non-judging attention to an intuitive knowledge that is not yet in words but felt in the body. It has five movements of attention: clearing a space (that is, a physical and psychological space), identifying the felt sense, finding a linguistic ‘handle’ for the felt sense, waiting for the right handle that ‘resonates’ with the felt sense such that a noticeable shift in the sensation is perceived, asking questions of the felt sense to identify its meaning and purpose, and finally receiving this wisdom the body has provided without judgement.

76 There are several dialogue techniques that others have developed, building on Gendlin’s work. For example, Marshall Rosenberg has developed a framework that he has named Nonviolent Communication (NVC), which is taught to peace negotiators formally and informally across the
Another source of evidence regarding the effect of paying attention combines both the spiritual and the psychological. In recent years, medical scientists have been researching the effect of meditation practices, testified to in all the major spiritual and religious traditions, from the secular perspective of health. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is a meditation practice developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Numerous scholarly studies now attest to the effect of paying focused, non-judgmental, silent attention to tension held in the body. Through the physical aspects of psychological pain (mental and emotional, conscious and unconscious), the person is able to access the brain’s capacity for self-healing of old wounds, stored as tension in the muscles and sinews of the body. This is a spiritual encounter of human self to human self with no assumed or necessary reference to a transcendental other.77

It is clear that the practice of focused attention has an effect on brain function over a period of sustained practice, though there is much research still to be done to understand the complex neural mechanisms affected by mindfulness. For example, reviewing the research available to them, Britta Hözel and colleagues conclude that ‘mindfulness practice is associated with neuroplastic changes in the anterior cingulate cortex, insula, tempo-parietal junction, fronto-limbic network, and default mode network structures. The authors suggest that the mechanisms described here work synergistically, establishing a process of enhanced self-regulation.’78 These changes in brain behaviour indicate a capacity for the human person to train themselves to think differently. The ‘process of self-regulation’ reflects a person’s intentionality, motivation system, attention and emotional regulation. By reducing the neural activity in this area, a literal open-space is created for the reception of knowledge without judgment. In other words, the scientific research supports the ancient spiritual wisdoms regarding the effect of liminal spiritual practices: that by practising the relinquishing of control by the suspension of thinking, a person can actually think with greater openness to the

77 John J. Miller, Ken Fletcher, Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Three-Year Follow up and Clinical Implications of a Mindfulness Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Intervention in the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders,” *General Hospital Psychiatry* 17, no. 3 (1995), 192-200.
other.

This effect of the openness observed in mindfulness research is evident in the purgative types of Christian spiritual practice that Coakley outlines above. She cites the solitude, silence, fasting and poverty of sixteenth-century Carmelites as a quintessential example of a purgative program of spiritual practices that intend to 'empty' the believer of all human striving: ‘The contemplation of the Carmelites may be termed a practice, but strictly speaking it is done by God in the believer—from the human side, the purest act of willed ‘passivity.” The earlier practices that have guided the believer into this union with God have prepared the human soul for the encounter. They continue to hold the open-space in the hope that God will continue to practise God’s self-gift. The soul has been prepared for an encounter with radical otherness. The practice forms open-space for an encounter with God.

4.4 Refining Desire—Refining Sociality

Drawing together the crucible of prayer and the crucible of liminality highlights the common function of open-space: its resistance to diremption and unilateral control in relationships. The open-space is essentially relational, and vulnerability is a key aspect of its transformative mechanisms.

If prayer is considered through the lens of liminality theory, then Turner’s description of relationships in liminality applies: relationships take on a spontaneous and direct *communitas*, without hierarchy or prescribed models of behaviour. The relationships in a theology of conversation—between the self, the world, the church and God—undergo transformation in the crucible of prayer, and a different theology will therefore emerge from this different conversation.

If liminality is seen through the lens of Coakley’s *théologie totale*, then we see the purpose of theology in liminality as a confrontation of divine and human desires. This is Coakley’s organising principle and underlies every step of her methodology:

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80 Coakley locates sexuality and gender under the ‘broader’ category of desire that has drawn the criticism of several feminists and gender theorists. See for example, Mary Catherine Hilkert, ‘Desire, Gender, and God—Talk: Sarah Coakley’s Feminist Contemplative Theology,’ in *Modern Theology* 30:4 (2014), 575-581.
the crucible of prayer is privileged because of its purgative affect on human desire. In this way, Coakley explicitly locates herself within the tradition of theological hermeneutics that has drawn on the Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophical category of *eros*. Theological truth emerges *in via* as the tradition is purified through hermeneutical testing. The social sciences are critical tools of scholarship as they are proven mechanisms for identifying the power relations undergirding discourse. The realignment of human and divine desires is a task that takes a lifetime, a walk towards God that is ever in progress. It requires a critical engagement with all the analytical tools we have at our disposal (sacred and secular) as we work our way through the enmeshment of divine revelation and its human context, including even language itself, and as we allow aesthetic, semiotic epistemologies to refine our language and its underlying preconceptions.

In contemplation, the theologist agrees to meet God on God’s own terms—the constructs of *theology* are allowed to encounter *theos* without mediation of human knowledge. In so doing, one’s ideas about God (and self) undergo a radical transformation, which in Coakley’s language is the transformation of desire. For her, the necessary work of the liminal middle is this transformation of desire. ‘[W]hat prayer teaches, but only painfully and over time, is the ascetical task of acknowledging—and then adjudicating between—competing desires jostling within us, both good and ill. . . . God does the work in us if we allow it.’

Liminality theory focuses on a different concern, a different kind of purgation—the reformation of sociality, of the socially conceived aspects of knowledge and identity. Coakley’s *desire* and liminality theory’s *sociality* are not the same thing, but given the pervasive nature of sociality—of the essentially socialised nature of all experience—liminality theory might helpfully extend Coakley’s explanation of the refinement of desire into a corporate movement. In liminality theory, whole discourses can be taken through the purgative affects of liminality, through the mystical representatives who undergo the experience themselves at the personal level.

When talking about her own journey, Coakley describes the relationship between

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81 Coakley, “Prayer as Crucible,” 37
prayer and theological discourse: ‘What started as an adventure in personal prayer . . . ended in a program for systematic theology (and its handmaid, the philosophy of religion) which is as much implicated in the corporate and the social as it is in the personal.’

There is a kind of logical order and connection through the Spirit’s disturbance, theological proposition-making and the refinement of secular analysis.

Coakley’s journey is recognisable in Turner’s theory of the structures of experience—a process of communal, structuring experiences in the unfolding of breach | limen | redress | reintegration. The internal experience—in this instance, the liminal spiritual experience of contemplation—has a paralleled external form. Turner uses the philosopher William Dilthey’s category of ‘verstehen’ to explain how new forms of sociality emerge from lived experience. ‘Verstehen’ is a process, a hermeneutic circling, whereby the essential reciprocal interaction of the parts and the whole of the lived experience, the Erlebnis, is finally grasped.

In other words, theological discourse that is allowed to undergo the ‘experience’ of breach | limen | redress | reintegration mimics the purgative movement of the soul’s encounter with God in contemplation. The breach is the letting go of normative theology. The crisis is when a piece of normative theology ceases to be sensible. The redress is the authorised process of making sense of the inherited tradition in a new context. And the reintegration is the updating of the tradition in its present context.

Coakley’s insistence that orthodox propositional theology is always unfolding in via, as it is lived in the unfolding of life, including the life of a discourse, allows for this process of change and updating of the tradition to take place. It is an unfolding that involves engagement with the social sciences in the academy, and with everyday life in ‘field work,’ such that, in Turner’s terms, where there is a breach in the discourse as sensible meaning, that breach is allowed to arise, then allowed to be redressed and the discourse updated in response to new insights. Turner also

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82 Coakley, "Prayer as Crucible," 32.
understands the crucible of liminality as a dialectical unfolding. On the one hand, there is a ‘structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of political-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less.”’

On the other hand, there are moments or circumstances of ‘society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated communitas, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.’

Coakley’s experience of contemplation as a purgative exercise has clearly informed the development of her théologie totale, but Turner’s theory explains why some of her non-contemplative hermeneutical tools are a necessary extension of contemplative experience. On the other hand, while Turner’s theory describes a human process, Coakley’s theological method takes this human process seriously in the development of discourses about God. As introduced in the previous chapter, this might be described as ‘contemplative-communitas.’

Such contemplative communitas demands an even more radical particularity than Coakley seems to envision. For example, Coakley locates sexuality and gender under the ‘broader’ category of desire. In general, her work on gender has drawn the criticism of postmodern gender theorists for a latent essentialism. Tina Beattie, for example, argues that even in this process of contemplation, the theologian retains their particularity as a knowing subject and human person and this must include gender, rather than be subsumed by it. Hence, Beattie insists that the particularity of the pray-er and the know-er must be made even more explicit than Coakley allows, most especially in relation to gender. That is, ‘If a woman is to practice the kind of prayer described by Coakley, this entails coming to prayer as a reasoning feminist subject, even if that subjectivity is suspended in the contemplative state.’

In these twin crucibles of prayer and liminality, two further points can be made.

87 Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 76
that explain why the practice of contemplation equips the theologian for the task of negotiating cultural liminality. First, as was noted in the previous chapter, apophatic method can hold an open-space for theological discourse, by insisting on liminal thinking about God beyond form. Just as culture unfolds dialectically between structure and anti-structure, so can theological knowledge. Second, when God is considered through the lens of the *communitas* relationships of liminal spiritual experience, there are some fundamentally different ways God holds the vulnerability of open-space. Coakley says that God relates to an ‘other’ out of fullness, releasing the person who stands in vulnerable relation to God of any shortfall of freedom or love. In the crucible of prayer, vulnerability becomes a paradoxical experience of power-in-vulnerability, refusing any reduction of self or other in the process of connection.

**Power-in-vulnerability**

The paradox of liminality is the discovery of a rich source of knowledge about life, the self, the world and God in the depths of a dark environment. The seemingly empty space is not empty, just as the silence is not silent, and vulnerability is not disempowering. In *God, Sexuality and the Self*, Coakley describes it thus: ‘the silence of contemplation is of a particular, *sui generis*, form: it is not the silence of being silenced. Rather, it is the voluntary silence of attention, transformation, mysterious interconnection, and (in violent, abusive, or oppressive contexts) rightful and divinely empowered *resistance*: it is a special ‘power-in-vulnerability.’

In a seminal essay published in the 2002 collection of her early work *Powers and Submissions*, Coakley considers the criticism of some feminists that the contemplative stance colludes with patriarchal powers in theology to silence the particular perspective of women, or the vulnerable in general. Coakley argues that on the contrary, ‘wordless prayer can enable one, paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment together, precisely by creating the “space” in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself.’ She goes on to interrogate the long and complex history of interpretation of the theological term

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kenosis, inspired as it is by the hymn to Christ in Philippians 2, settling upon a definition of kenosis as ‘free self-gift.’ While kenosis is first and foremost a quality of God’s action in Christ (or perhaps Christ’s action in God), it becomes a spiritual capacity available to human persons to act with grace from the fullness of her or his being. ‘By choosing to “make space” in this way [of contemplation], one “practices” the “presence of God”—the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone “obliterates.”’

Two aspects of this kenotic action or event are crucial to the transformation of theological knowledge in prayer. The first is the necessity of vulnerability in the crucible of the open-space between persons that leaves the other free to be and act fully within her or his own power. Second is the necessary gift of self that holds the open-space. Both of these are key characteristics of Coakley’s proposal for a divine encounter where God’s desire transforms human desire.

When human constructs are allowed to fall into question, in the open-space of contemplation, theological method crosses over a threshold from a philosophy of revelation—as discussed in the last chapter—into a theology of revelation. It is not the human experience of contemplation that Coakley is primarily interested in: rather, wordless prayer ‘is the primary ascetical submission to the divine demanded by revelation, and the link to the creative source of life to which it continually returns.’ Hence, as noted above, contemplation is primarily God’s work in us.

At the proper beginning or base of theological hermeneutics is the uncontainable divine, only accessible to human consciousness through gift, self-disclosure or ‘revelation.’ When knowledge of the divine arrives in the creative chaos of liminal relationships, revelation is encountered as divine self-gift. This is not empirical knowledge about God, but rather it is mystical tradition’s knowledge of God through the communion of human and divine in contemplation. The liminal middle

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91 Coakley, “Kenôsis & Subversion,” 35.
92 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 88.
93 The theological concept of gift here should not be confused with the philosophical fascination of gift from the work of Derrida. Although there have been interesting Derridean-inspired theological reflections on gift, they represent a very different concept from that which is in view here, drawing upon classical conceptions of self-gift as kenotic excess.
is the context for the revelation of theological knowledge, for it is when the structures of human knowledge are loosened that the possibility of an encounter with the utterly unfamiliar becomes possible. If theological knowledge is to be more-than-human knowledge, it begins here in a source received as external to the self.

Coakley’s version of kenosis stands in contrast to pessimistic interpretations of Christ (and the Christian’s) ‘self-emptying,’ where the giver is left with nothing after the gift of self is given. Kierkegaard, for example, emphasises the self-sacrificial aspect of love: ‘Through self-denial a human being gains the ability to be an instrument by inwardly making himself into nothing before God.’ For Coakley, the generative nature of eros does not necessitate the loss of self, but rather evokes a sense of self-fulfilment in the move towards an other, even if it is for her or his sake. It is yet again possible to sense the limit of a binary dialectic here, where the advance of the other logically requires, for Kierkegaard, the loss of self. In contrast, Coakley argues God’s self-gift operates without loss, because of the dynamic relationship of love in the constantly relating Trinity.

In the love language of the mystics, God the Lover seduces the Beloved in this dance of dark knowing, because the Lover is in love and desires connection with the Beloved. The divine self-gift pours into the empty space of contemplation in non-competitive coexistence with the human self. In the Christian framework, it is a meeting place, between our truest selves and God, which in Eastern Orthodox theology is described as theosis. The discovery of non-competitive coexistence with divine and human selves (or self and other) sparks an evolution of new ways of being. For example, Andrew Louth describes Pseudo-Dionysius’s understanding of the love relationship between God and human persons:

[Ecstasy] is primarily an ecstasy of love, as union and divinization…. [Denys] defines both [agape and eros] as ‘of a power that unites and binds together and effects an indissoluble fusion in the beautiful and the good’ (Divine Names IV.12:709C). This divine eros is ecstatic, meaning by that that ‘those who are possessed by this love belong not to themselves, but to the objects of their longing’ (DV

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IV.12:712A. Ecstasy draws the soul out of itself and centres it on the object of its love.95

Coakley argues that contemplation is a special case of vulnerability because God is a special case of being-in-relationship. This is a crucial distinction, which Coakley insists upon on Trinitarian grounds: if the Trinity is to have complete freedom to be and to love within the divine persons, there can be no sense of coercion or lack. Through a consideration of desire, Coakley argues, we discover a different vision of the Trinity as a freely authenticating set of relationships where the erotic energy of ‘twoness . . . [is] divinely ambushed by threeness,’96 particularly initiated—from a human perspective—through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who pours divine love into our hearts, love that acts erotically to draw us into relationship with the Trinity. The Spirit ‘leads [the human person] by surprise, adventure, purgation, and conviction.’97 When the Spirit is received as the third person of the Trinity, we discover a God who is ‘a “source” of love unlike any other, giving and receiving and ecstatically deflecting, ever and always.’98

Eros is a kenotic movement in the divine threeness, produced by the excess of agape in each and in all. The implication of this conjoining of eros and agape in Trinitarian thinking is that, ‘at its most robust and daring . . . its ontological threeness always challenges and ‘ambushes’ the stuckness of established ‘twoness.’99 The encounter of divine threeness dismantles binary constructions of power and control in which there must be an ‘us and them,’ a winner and a loser. Prayer is the necessary crucible for the confrontation of sex and gender because in prayer the human person encounters a third. The third of the Trinity corresponds to the experience of liminality—an encounter with reality beyond our conception. Neither that which has been previously desired (along with everything that has previously been known about love) nor its opposite are adequate descriptions of this encounter with divine love who is both eros and agape.

Contemporary mystical theologian, Mark McIntosh writes similarly of this

96 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 58.
97 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 331.
98 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 333.
99 Coakley, God, Sexuality & Self, 330-331.
Trinitarian *eros* in the dynamic of Christian spirituality. In *Mystical Theology*, he argues that ‘it is this beckoning of the other (and the response this beckoning elicits in us) that draws us from provisional existence into real life.’

This is not an indifferent *agape*, but is God’s love for God’s self that is revealed in the Trinitarian relations of the three persons. In other words, ‘the Holy Spirit is the ecstatic divine love who arouses that reciprocal desire by which creation goes out of itself in hunger for the divine Source who speaks this Word.’

A conversation between Coakley and Gillian Rose is instructive at this point, for both deliberately attempt to become conscious of power through the creation of an open-space. For Coakley, power-in-vulnerability is discovered in contemplation. In chapter three, it was noted how Rose translates the broken middle of dialectical discourse into life relationships as ‘love in the submission of power.’ Love and vulnerability—the acknowledgement of power in relationship—go together. The former is impossible without the latter, because if love is coerced, it ceases to be love. The open-space of love is full of power, as Rose observes:

> In personal life, people have absolute power over each other, whereas in professional life, beyond the terms of the contract, people have authority, the power to make one another comply in ways which may be perceived as legitimate or illegitimate. . . . There is no democracy in any love relation: only mercy. To be at someone’s mercy is dialectical damage: they may be merciful and they may be merciless. Yet each party, woman, man, the child in each, and their child, is absolute power as well as absolute vulnerability. You may be less powerful than the whole world, but you are always more powerful than yourself.

For both Coakley and Rose, love is only possible as self-gift (in the sense of a giving of the self). For Rose, the socio-political philosopher, this is primarily a logical act of ruthless rationality—undeniably a courageous one—a commitment to self-gift as the only reasonable response that takes reality on its own terms. For Coakley, the theologian, this is primarily the grace of God, the free gift of God’s self overflowing into the human person, who is thereby filled with her or his own

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101 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 164.
capacity for self-gift.

Rowan Williams has already made this connection between the self-gift of Rose’s broken middle and the self-gift of contemplation in Coakley, which draws the considerations of open-space in chapters three and four of this thesis together. The freedom of communitas, the freedom of open-space dialectics, and the freedom of prayer mimic the free gift of self that God demonstrates within God’s own being. Not only is this a pathway to unhindered thinking; it is also the only way to deconstruct the hidden systems of power and control that plague organised humanity: “Thinking what is difficult, thinking in dispossession, insists on an ontology of some sort, capable of holding together the reality of difference and the imperative of work (i.e. reconciliation).”103 Williams adds, ‘the most fundamental reality that is (in some sense) thinkable requires to be spoken of in terms of dispossession or, to use the overtly theological word, kenosis.’104

There are significant differences, both philosophically and theologically, between human self-gift and divine self-gift. In describing the divine mystery that is beyond words, apophatic theology is an attempt to acknowledge that God is an ontic reality beyond humanity: we can transgress the boundary of human capacity for knowledge only because God is beyond humanity. In contrast, in Rose’s broken middle we are confronted with the metaphysical limitations of human knowledge: our grasp of the truth is always partial. The former is mystery; the latter is partiality. The divine self-gift, then, comes from mystery; the human self-gift comes from embodied limit, which leads to the question of limit in theological method, and the particular strategies of apophatic theology.

When the gift of power-in-vulnerability is received through the encounter with God in silence, a new way of relating is discovered, one that endures anxiety, resists control, and develops patience, a way of relating in which ‘perfect love casts out all fear’ (1 John). If love cannot be love without vulnerability, then it is God’s special capacity for vulnerability that is key to Coakley’s transformation of desire. She expresses this in terms of God’s self-gift, continuous and generative within

God’s very being, in the Trinitarian relations of kenotic love. In relation to
liminality theory, it can be described as contemplative-\textit{communitas}.

Desire, self-gift, vulnerability, relationship—every one of these themes in Coakley’s
crucible of prayer suggests that contemplation is an encounter of love. Desire is
\textit{eros}, a drive towards love. Self-gift is a movement towards an other for her or his
sake, for their good. Vulnerability is a requirement of the freedom with which love
must be given. This is a connection that deals with anxiety and competition in
sociality, suggesting, as Coakley insists, that encountering God-who-is-love in the
\textit{communitas} of contemplation transforms the pray-er’s capacity for love such that
they are able to enter into relationships free from coercion. This becomes a central
question in the final chapter, where the phenomenon of love is considered in terms
of the relation between the self-gift of God and human love for God and neighbour-
as-self.

If self-gift is the critical ingredient in the refinement of desire, that is, in the
crucible of vulnerability love gains a freedom of movement in its relations, then
Coakley’s exclusive emphasis on \textit{eros} might be an unnecessary reduction in the
conception of love for theological hermeneutics. What this comparison with Rose's
broken middle makes evident, is that it is the freedom complicit in Coakley’s
framework that enables a different way to love, but why limit that to the Platonic
conception of \textit{eros}? In the movement of divine \textit{eros} that Coakley describes, it is the
liberation from universal form that offers a freedom of relating, a constant renewal
of connection in the triune self-gifting of love.

In this way the mystical tradition has already brought eros into union with agape.
But cannot this be applied further to all forms (and even anti-forms) of love so that
theology is not reduced to any single expression of love? For example, feminist
theologian Tina Beattie concludes that the challenge for feminism in the
refinement of theology through contemplation is ‘to make the female body the site
of a prayerful, graced way of knowing and being in the world, without yet knowing
the extent of the difference that might be revealed in this process of coming to
know’\textsuperscript{105} That is, to love through the vulnerability of prayer is to remain radically

\textsuperscript{105} Tina Beattie, \textit{New Catholic Feminism}, 86.
open to a disturbance of all embodied expressions, far beyond the rationality of desire. In the following chapter we argue that Coakley’s priority of contemplation leads to an open-space dialectic broader than the one she imagines in the refinement of desire.

4.5 Summary
This chapter has explored the intersection of theology and spirituality in the unique context of liminality. Spiritual experience is a primary resource for theology in transitional contexts, because its epistemological anti-structure is similar to that of cultural liminality. Moreover, theological knowledge is transformed in liminal spiritual experience by a new, direct engagement with God. That is, the liminal knowing discussed in the previous chapter is the conversational voice of real theological relationships in an open-space encounter with self, God, the church and the world.

Describing this apophatic encounter in structured (non-liminal) terms is impossible, but it is no less influential on the psyche and the intellect and therefore needs space to be able to be known on its own epistemological terms. This open-space can be created by the practice of prayer itself, coupled with the open-space dialectic of conversation outlined in the previous chapter, which results in an apophatic method of theology that can be utilised in contexts of transitional theological knowing. In contexts of liminality, there are no inherited propositions of God that substitute for personal knowing of God, so if God is not encountered afresh in the open-space of communitas, God will not be felt to be known at all. Hence, contemplative prayer or liminal spiritual experiences of God are an indispensible resource for theological conversations that take place from within the sphere of liminality.

In the crucible of liminality, the human aspects of theological knowledge are refined. In the crucible of prayer, a direct engagement with God-beyond-sociality occurs. The two open-spaces work together to contribute to the unfolding of theological knowledge in via. Theological discourse is helpfully subjected to a critical engagement with social and cultural phenomena, utilising the critical tools of the social sciences to bring them into theological discourse. So, also, a critical engagement with human desire, utilising the critical capacity of contemplation,
furthers the task of theology to make meaningful sense of God beyond the limitations of human grasping. In the words of Sarah Coakley, ‘contemplation engenders courage to give voice, but in a changed, prophetic key.’\footnote{Coakley, \textit{God, Sexuality & Self}, 85.}
Chapter 5

A Theological Hermeneutic of Love in Liminality

How gently and lovingly thou awakenest in my bosom,
Where thou dwellest secretly and alone!
And in thy sweet breathing, full of blessing and glory,
How delicately thou inspirest my love!1

5.1 Introduction

When Jesus was asked about the Jewish tradition of law, and ‘what must I do to be saved,’ he responded with 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself.'2 Jesus later said, 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'3 In the introductory chapter, it was argued that commanding love in contexts of cultural change is problematic because the normative standards of behavior are in flux, and there is no clear set of rules to be applied. The purpose of this thesis is to consider how love continues to be a guide for theology when the law or rules of love cease to fulfill their function as conduits for love. Having carefully considered the dynamics of contexts of change, through the frame of liminality theory, it is possible to turn directly to this question: in what way is love the key to Christian theology in contexts of change?

Saint Augustine’s theological hermeneutic laid out in On Christian Doctrine has been chosen to articulate the problem under examination, since he is undeniably

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2 Matthew 22:34–40
3 John 13:34
one of most influential thinkers in Western theological hermeneutics and also in Western theologies of love.⁴ For Augustine, the command of double-love—of God and of neighbour-as-self—is the key to Christian theology. Hence, the question of this chapter is: can Saint Augustine’s hermeneutic of the double-love command be translated into a theological hermeneutic of love that can function in contexts of liminality? It shall be argued that the theological hermeneutic in On Christian Doctrine is primarily an a priori hermeneutic of experience, due to the twin emphases on inner revelation and on language construction. His theory on ‘signs’ and ‘things’ promotes a separation of divine love and human love experiences. Signs are instrumental and things are absolute, hence the signs of love might change while the thing of love, which is very closely tied to God, does not.

Following this assessment of the signs of love, Rowan Williams shows how the difficulty of speech has an important apophatic function and that the failure of love language invites a liminal re-formation of signs through an open-space dialectic and an apophatic theology of conversation. This can be demonstrated in two ways. First, Williams’s explanation of the function of ‘extreme language’ is demonstrated in St John of the Cross’s mystical love poetry, which breaks the rules of language in order to bring representation to love that can never be reduced to any single sign. Second, we will consider a reordering of the twentieth-century agape-eros debate whereby the variety of words for love can function as thresholds for an open-space enquiry of the thing of love that is beyond words.

The open-space dialectic developed in this thesis, which insists on a particular type of threshold positioning of dialectical poles, has a capacity to re-form Augustine’s lust–love spectrum while retaining his sense of movement towards God. Words for and experiences of love—which in Augustine’s framework are signs referring to a thing of love beyond themselves—can be arranged around a spherical, three-dimensional open-space, forming the frame for a different kind of knowing through each (and every) one of them. Rearranging the signs of love in this way removes a logical imperative to pitch human and divine loves against each other, which will ultimately require the rejection of human loves if divine love is the desired end. This then opens the way for a reconsideration of divine and human

⁴ Jeanrond, A Theology of Love (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 46.
eros mingling together in the open-space of love in liminality.

Finally, Augustine's theology of desire shall be reconsidered through Sarah Coakley's lens of contemplation, revealing how the liminal experience of the Trinity in prayer refuses any simple arrangement of divine and human loves. In the crucible of prayer, 'threeness ambushes twoness' in the transformation of desire, the seduction of God's kenotic love from abundance. In the intimacy of prayer, the theologian becomes a Beloved-Lover, caught in God’s own constantly renewing movement of life-giving connection. Gregory of Nyssa's homilies on the Song of Songs demonstrate the new identity this experience confers on the theologian. The implications of this are discussed in terms of a reorientation of love as a form of spiritual practice, which is the foundation of a theology done with integrity, a theology of conversation in liminality.

5.2 Augustine’s Hermeneutic of Love

Augustine’s treatise on interpreting scripture, On Christian Doctrine (De Doctrina Christiana), is sometimes described as 'the first Christian essay in hermeneutics' and it contains the phrase that has directed this research:

Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.

Augustine’s double-love hermeneutic assumes several building blocks of a type of knowledge with structured, non-liminal sociality: the scriptures are the designated authority, defining the content and the limits of the discourse, containing all that is required for knowledge of God, while the Christian church is the designated tribal group to whom the scriptures belong and to whom they are taught. Also, for Augustine, the neo-Platonic tradition provides a set of philosophical tools useful for framing those investigations of scripture where the meaning is obtuse. These

7 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, I.40.86.
‘authorities,’ in Augustine’s hermeneutics—scripture, the church, reason\textsuperscript{8}—bear different weights and carry out different functions in the process, but each of them performs a function that ‘holds’ the theological investigation in place.

The difficulty of the double-love command as a hermeneutic for theology in the context of liminality lies in the translation of a ‘command’ in an open-space where normative sociality has been eroded. Can these structured supports for theological investigation hold the discourse in a way that allows for the open-space of liminality and open a way of applying the double-love command unmediated by structured sociality? This is a question that can now be stated as a question of dialectical limit: can propositional statements (commands) from scripture, tradition, reason or even experience be constructed as a set of threshold limits to serve the creation of a liminal open-space enquiry? Can this knowledge be ‘suspended’ in order to enter a prayerful open-space encounter with God beyond form?

Augustine’s double-love is the love ‘commanded’ in scripture; it therefore has a history, a context and a form. It is recorded as a teaching from Jesus of Nazareth, birthed in the Jewish constructs of love and religion, entrusted to a group of Jesus’ disciples for recording and transmission, and then appropriated by a new community that emerged out of the witness of Jesus’ death and resurrection to form a new structure of community with its own standardised forms of teaching. The ‘command’ implies there is already a form of love that can be followed. There is an assumed set of actions, or at the very least a set of principles, to which the faithful can align and test themselves and their actions. Such-and-such is loving; such-and-such is not.

Augustine is not naïve about the mutability of these constructed supports for theological discourse but at all costs endeavors to retain immutability exclusively as a characteristic of God. The scriptures themselves only have authority in so much as they result in true revelation from God that takes place in the inward parts of a human person as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the philosophical tools

\textsuperscript{8} In my language here, I deliberately invoke the categories of theological authority devised in modern discussion of sources, especially the Wesleyian ‘quadrilateral’ of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.
for reason are necessary because the meaning of scripture is not always clear. The scriptures are connected to the church both in their authorisation as sacred texts and in their interpretation, especially through the councils of the church, but also in the preaching of the scriptures in the dispersed congregations of the church, which is the primary focus of *On Christian Doctrine*. Augustine’s proposed supports for theological interpretation are dynamic and interactive, but do they act as thresholds for liminal knowing?

A brief examination of Augustine’s distinctive theological hermeneutic in *On Christian Doctrine* might lead us to view it as an amorous or, at least, a charitable methodology, rather than a philosophical task. When reading the treatise through the lens of liminality, we notice an emphasis on the pre-existing attitude or stance that is necessary for both the structured and unstructured modes of interpretation that scripture requires: a life of love, humility, holiness and relationships. ‘Seven steps’ for reading are introduced; six out of the seven are about the heart or the broader life context of the person, revealing that, for Augustine, philosophical resources form only a part of his whole hermeneutical vision.

**Re-examining On Christian Doctrine**

*On Christian Doctrine* is a ‘how to read the bible’ manual, written for any who have ‘the will and the wit to learn.’ One recent commentator has described it as an account of ‘biblical interpretation and preaching … [organised] around love.’ The work reads as a consistent whole, despite the first three books being written early in Augustine’s bishopric, prior to 300 CE, and the fourth book just prior to his death in 340. In the opening lines of Book 1, Augustine states that there are two stages to his task in writing the work, just as ‘[t]here are two things on which all interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to

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9 As has been previously argued in this thesis in relation to apophatic methods, it is important to distinguish between Augustine in his originating context, separate to the obvious parallels with late twentieth century semiotics and hermeneutical theories. For a critique of the differences between Augustine and postmodern semiotics see Frances Young, “Augustine’s Hermeneutics and Postmodern Criticism,” in *Interpretation* 58, no. 1 42-55 (Jan 2004).

10 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, preface.

For a recent summary article on *De Doctrina Christiana* see Rebecca Harden Weaver, “Reading the Signs: Guidance for the Pilgrim Community,” in *Interpretation*, 58 no. 1, 38-41 (Jan 2004).

learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt.\textsuperscript{12} Books 1–3 deal with the first of these and Book 4 the second.\textsuperscript{13} When we read the four books together, we understand its message directed towards Christian readers and teachers of Christian scripture. In other words, this is a book for the Christian community in a catholic sense: they are the context, the audience and the intended beneficiaries of the work.

In Book 1 Augustine explores 'things.' Things can be 'used' or 'enjoyed,' but Augustine urges the Christian to use things to enjoy God, and enjoy God alone, for enjoying things of the created order as an end in themselves—be they self, another human, an aspect of nature or a human-made thing—is always idolatry.\textsuperscript{14} ‘To enjoy something is to hold fast to it in love for its own sake. To use something is to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of obtaining what you love.’\textsuperscript{15} This includes self-love and love-of-neighbour, for ‘when you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying God rather than that human being.’\textsuperscript{16} The ‘thing’ of scripture—that is, its meaning and message—is that which Jesus says is the fulfillment of the law: to love God and neighbour-as-self. Hence, ‘anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.’\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, holiness is a subset of love: ‘[t]he person who lives a just and holy life is one who is a sound judge of these things. He is also a person who has ordered his love.’\textsuperscript{18}

Book 2 continues with an explanation of ‘signs’ (signum): words are signs that point to ‘things.’\textsuperscript{19} There is a three-fold categorization of signs here in book 2 that was not immediately evident in the discussion of book 1. Some objects are

\textsuperscript{12} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, I.1.1.
\textsuperscript{13} I agree with R.P.H. Green that the four books should be read as a unified whole, despite the delayed completion of the final book. However, uncertainty about the unity of \textit{On Christian Doctrine} has resulted in some disagreement among scholars as to the polemical context, the overall purpose and consequently the unified message of the work. See R.P.H. Green, "Introduction," in \textit{Augustine: De Doctrina Christiana}, ed. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), xi.
\textsuperscript{15} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, I.4.8.
\textsuperscript{16} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, I.37.79.
\textsuperscript{17} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, I.40.86.
\textsuperscript{18} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana} I. 28.59.
\textsuperscript{19} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, II.1.1.
distinctly things *and* some distinctly signs, but in addition there are some things that become signs in their usage, ‘involving the subject of whom signs signify.’ Scripture fits into the category of a (multifaceted) sign, and not just by virtue of it being language; more importantly, it is to be understood theologically as a means to an end—namely the love of God and neighbour-as-self, as established in Book 1. Some words are clear or ‘natural’ signs with a direct relationship to the thing; smoke, for example, is a sign of fire. Other words are ‘given’ a meaning by human beings who desire to communicate something of a ‘thing’ that has no material representation but might be made known by utilising one of the five senses. Language falls into this second category, for words are always pointing to their ‘thing’, their meaning constructed through social processes. Language, therefore, as a human construct, is always susceptible to the effects of sin, as described in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Scripture is situated within this context of language—it is a set of signs that, by the grace of God, points to divine things. Because of this, the very first task of interpretation is ‘to be moved by the fear of God towards learning his will.’

The ‘fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,’ as Proverbs says, and Augustine outlines seven steps in total to move from one to the other. After the *fear of God* must come *holiness*; then basic *knowledge* of the content of scripture (which is the double-love command); then *righteousness*, which is a ‘turning towards the eternal Trinity in love’; then the execution of *compassion*, which is *love of neighbour*; then the *purification* of the eye of one’s heart, so that the person has a single-minded devotion to God and a properly ordered love of all other things (including people); this results finally in the sought after attainment of *wisdom*.

The rest of Books 2 and 3 explore strategies for the third stage of this process, the development of knowledge. When a text of scripture is difficult to understand,

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20 Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *de Doctrina*,” 139.
21 This shall be discussed later in this chapter in relation to love, human and divine.
22 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.2.2.
23 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.2.3
24 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.5.8.
25 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.9.16
26 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II.9.16-20.
because of either unknown or ambiguous signs (that is, the meaning of the words don’t make immediate sense), it should be categorised as either a problem of understanding the literal meaning of the text or as a problem of interpreting the figurative meaning of the text. Common sense says that if the text is nonsense when taken literally, then it must be figurative. Often, what is required to uncover the truth of these texts is more ‘human learning’ rather than ‘divine learning’—that is, knowledge of things instituted by humans, designed to describe things of the created world. Therefore, as long as human knowledge is not ‘superstitious’—that is, as long as it doesn’t concern ‘the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God’—it may be confidently employed in the interpretation of scripture. Augustine goes on to cite examples from literature, mathematics, history, medicine, astronomy, philosophy and rhetoric, though he ends with a reminder to always heed the advice of St Paul, remembering that ‘knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.’

In Book 3, Augustine continues to outline strategies for interpreting ambiguous passages in scripture. In this book he tackles more complex difficulties relating to the construction of meaning: socially constructed moral codes that may prove to be culturally specific, and the Old Testament as a figurative sign system that points to the truth revealed in Christ’s teachings of the New Testament. He argues that we must take care not to become enslaved to the sign, as the ancient Israelites did. The rule of faith (regula fidei) should always be read in conjunction with the rule of love (regula dilectio): ‘Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbour, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbour,’ so that ‘when the tyranny of lust has been overthrown love rules with laws that are utterly just: to love God on his account, to love oneself and one’s neighbour on God’s account.’ To conclude the practical (and yet theological) guidelines for interpreting scripture laid out in Books 2 and 3, Augustine elaborates on seven rules ‘for opening up the secrets of the divine scriptures’ first offered by ‘a certain

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27 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana II.30.74
28 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana II.62.148.
29 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana II.13.29.
30 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana III.14.34.
31 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana III.23.54.
Tyconius. They cover Christ and the church, the mixed divine-human nature of Christ, ‘the promises and the law’ (or the ’spirit and the letter’), the location of parts within the whole message of scripture, chronology, the citation of previous scriptures, and finally the devil and his influence: ‘All these rules, with the single exception of the one entitled “On promises and law”, state that one thing is to be understood by another, [which] is to be embraced.’

Book 4 is about preaching as the presentation of scripture to a learning community. He starts with a qualification: learning the rules of rhetoric and the skills of eloquence have limitations, for they improve the communication of both truth and falsehood; hence they are no substitute for holiness and knowledge of the scripture itself. In fact, eloquence might be learnt from a study of some of scripture’s greats, and Augustine outlines a few. However, the aim of the orator, to ‘be listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience,’ is always prefaced by prayer and holiness, and is at the strict service of presenting the truth of scripture, for it is the Holy Spirit that quickens faith, hope and love in the listeners’ hearts.

In sum, in On Christian Doctrine Augustine argues that the process of God’s revelation is made complete when we start and end with love. The interpreter of scripture, and by extension the theologian, cannot make a proper start in interpreting and applying revelation without the love of God in her or his heart, poured in by the gift of the Holy Spirit. They cannot hope to communicate effectively the thing of love, without simultaneous actions that make the signs of love’s language effective. The intended result of teaching is to produce more love—in faith, hope and action—in other people. As Williams paraphrases, ‘scripture arouses in us an appropriate love and delight when read properly, the delight fitting to a vehicle that is carrying us forward efficiently.’

The a priori experience of love

In the preface to On Christian Doctrine, Augustine confronts three possible

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32 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, III.42.92.
33 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, III.56.133.
34 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, IV.32.87.
35 Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina," 141-42.
objectors to this work, the third being the ones he is most concerned about: those who believe that knowledge of God should be experienced as a discernment solely within the confines of an individual person’s heart, without the mediation of scripture or any other human person. However, for Augustine, the human construction of language is not incidental to the attainment of wisdom, for God’s self-revelation consistently includes human beings in the process, most profoundly in the man-God person of Jesus Christ. Christian community becomes a necessary context and container for interpreting scripture, because a human experience of love is required if the word is to obtain its intended cosmological connection. We cannot accurately talk about love without the corresponding body language, intonation and formative life experiences. The enacted activity of love, therefore, is central to speech about love, or speech that aims for a loving quality to it. The word-sign requires the action-sign in order to communicate the thing—love. Word, action and Being-who-is-love become an integrated whole in the process of God’s self-revelation, in a circular, continuous-present motion of love.

However, the reader of On Christian Doctrine misses Augustine’s point if the scriptures are used purely for the purpose of clearly presenting its message. The purpose of the scriptures is to invoke love—love of God and love of neighbour-as-self. For love sums up the law, and Christ came to fulfill the law: and Christ came to fulfill the law:

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing (since there is no need for a commandment to love oneself).

In Augustine’s terminology, love is the thing to which the sign of scripture points, which means that the scriptures should be used to enjoy love. Or, as Augustinian

Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, I.37.79.

Love and wisdom come together in this way. Peter King writes, ‘Augustine’s Theory of Illumination explains what it is for us to come to know an a priori truth, namely to become aware of the reasons why it is and must be so.’ Knowledge of love and of God follow the same epistemological pathway. See Peter King, “Augustine on Knowledge,” in The Cambridge Companion to Augustine, ed David Vincent Meconi & Eleanore Stump, 142-165 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 151.

Romans 13:10.

Matthew 5:17.

Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, I.40.84.
schenor Rebecca Weaver has said, ‘Augustine located the fruitful study of divine truth within a community of persons united by charity, a divine gift.’ However, as shall be elaborated upon shortly, love itself shall be enjoyed only in so much as it is also love of God.

Augustine’s emphasis on holiness in On Christian Doctrine is further evidence that love is an aspect of lived experience in his hermeneutic, rather than a law or a philosophical construct. For example, in Book 2, Augustine identifies seven steps for reading the scriptures. It was noted earlier that six out of seven are to do with holiness of life, love and faithfulness. In other words, the scriptures are to be read in the context of a theological relationship with God, self, world and church. Furthermore, the third of these steps, the development of knowledge, is knowledge about this love relationship with God:

and what he [the student of scripture] will find in them is quite simply that he must love God for himself, and his neighbour for God’s sake, and that he must love God with his whole heart, his whole soul, and his whole mind, and his neighbour as himself—in other words, that his love of neighbour, like his own self-love, should be totally related to God.42

The majority of On Christian Doctrine is devoted to the practice of teaching this knowledge, so perhaps it is understandable that one could miss Augustine’s emphasis on living theology as contemplative, inner wisdom.43 The reader of On Christian Doctrine should not be misled by the amount of attention given to the philosophical and practical tools helpful for learning about the love of God and neighbour-as-self. The purpose of the book—as an instruction manual for preachers and teachers of scripture—explains its preoccupation with this step on knowledge. However, Augustine’s broader intention should not be lost, for the teacher ‘should be in no doubt that any ability he has and however much he has

41 Weaver, “Reading the Signs,” 40.
42 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, II.10.18.
43 This emphasis on outward expressions of an internal experience in On Christian Doctrine should stand in relation to the self-reflective testimony of The Confessions to balance a purely ‘inward’ hermeneutic. An a priori philosophical framework too easily misses the active dimensions of love’s expressions and relationships which is fundamentally social rather than individualistic. This would prevent a kind of proto-Cartesian reading of Augustine’s love hermeneutic such as Charles Taylor has proposed. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 140–142.
derives more from his devotion to prayer than his dedication to oratory; and so, by praying for himself and for those he is about to address, he must become a man of prayer before becoming a man of words.44

Theologian James A. Andrews has brought Augustine’s fourth-century hermeneutic into conversation with contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. In the book based on his PhD research, Hermeneutics and the Church, Andrews argues that an inability to keep philosophy and theology together in open dialogue, in the modern era, has reduced Augustine’s hermeneutical resources to empirical-like techniques for reading, independent from the content or subject matter of the discourse.45 On the one hand, theology in the liberal tradition has developed a strong reliance on philosophical hermeneutics in response to a pessimistic view on the subjective captivity of texts. On the other hand, theology in a literalist mode relies on the sublimation of philosophical frameworks to prioritise the literal interpretation of scripture. The habit of typologising hermeneutics into the two categories of ‘general’ and ‘specific’ obscures this reliance on philosophy as a filter for reading the text of scripture, before the pages of the bible are even opened. Traditionally, hermeneutical strategies have been organised into a dichotomy of special categories—general and local hermeneutics. General hermeneutics refers to an overall theory about how to approach a text. Local refers to strategies for honing in on the text and interpreting it in detail. By categorising hermeneutical approaches by their temporal mode—that is, by the time–space order in which they are invoked—we get a clearer translation of Augustine’s hermeneutic, at least as it is articulated in On Christian Doctrine.

When a framework for interpretation is established and embraced prior to approaching the text, this might best be described as an ‘a priori’ hermeneutic, regardless of whether it is general or local. On the other hand, there are also strategies that arise in the midst of interaction with the text, particularly as difficulties arise, and hermeneutical strategies are called upon to start a conversation on interpretation. This is an ‘a posteriori’ hermeneutic and, again, it might be general or local. In this recategorisation, Andrews concludes:

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44 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, IV.32.87.
A temporal model is more accurate for describing the situation in theological hermeneutics because the argument actually concerns how theory relates to practice; both groups want to interpret the Bible. That is, both want a local hermeneutics in the end; the debate really concerns just how the theologians envision their theory to relate to the act of interpretation.\textsuperscript{46}

Within this categorisation, Augustine's hermeneutic is an \textit{a posteriori} approach to philosophical hermeneutics, as opposed to some contemporary examples in the work of scholars, like Werner Jeanrond, who employ an \textit{a priori} philosophical hermeneutic, revealing a significant difference between the hermeneutics of love proposed in \textit{On Christian Doctrine} and the hermeneutics of love proposed by Jeanrond.\textsuperscript{47} Andrews argues that Jeanrond's hermeneutic is primarily a metaphor for a particular type of knowing—that is, it is \textit{a priori} a philosophical approach to texts in order to manage twentieth-century concerns about the subjectivity complicit in reading. Jeanrond 'steps back from the texts [of the bible] and develops a theory of text- and reading-genres with the aid of philosophical hermeneutics, upon which he builds a theological hermeneutics, which he subsequently applies to the texts.'\textsuperscript{48} In contrast, Andrews argues that Augustine draws upon philosophical resources \textit{a posteriori} in his hermeneutics, as he has need of them. 'He embeds philosophical ideas into his theology, making philosophy a field to be plucked, not a master to serve.'\textsuperscript{49}

The emphasis here on the life experience of love and holiness that is the message of the scriptures and the reason for their being taught supports Andrew's proposal for philosophy as an \textit{a posteriori} set of resources for Augustine. It is also reminiscent of the discussion on limit in philosophy from chapter three, contrasting a pessimistic view of limit in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, which results in a defensive approach to the text, and a Platonic crossing over the threshold of the text into a connected world of knowledge beyond the sign.

Philosophy was in itself a differently conceived task in Augustine's world from that

\textsuperscript{46} Andrews, \textit{Hermeneutics & the Church}, 77.
\textsuperscript{47} Andrews, \textit{Hermeneutics & the Church}, 82-87.
\textsuperscript{48} Andrews, \textit{Hermeneutics & the Church}, 86.
\textsuperscript{49} Andrews, \textit{Hermeneutics & the Church}, 112.
of late modern Western scholarship. If there is a severance between rational intelligence and personal experience and moral action, it is imposed on Augustinian thought in later periods. Augustine thought of philosophy as ‘the wisdom of life.’\textsuperscript{50} That is, the moral actions of daily living, the practical outworking of ideas and values, is as much a part of the Greco-Roman discipline of philosophy as are thinking and talking. This in itself would be a fruitful recovery in Augustinian philosophical hermeneutics, to combat what Andrew Louth has described as the compartmentalising impulse in theology following the onset of scholasticism: ‘A consciousness of division, a yawning gulf, that penetrates into our very heart and mind, a failure, an inability to relate: much of this is characteristic of modern culture and society.’\textsuperscript{51}

A close examination of love in \textit{On Christian Doctrine} reveals that further to Andrews’s observation of the \textit{a posteriori} philosophy in Augustine’s hermeneutic, there is still an \textit{a priori} movement. Augustine’s love is birthed in a personal, inward experience of love, making love an \textit{a priori of experience} in his theological hermeneutic. Augustine’s love comes prior to thinking in two respects: first, love is linked to the reception of the Holy Spirit, whereupon ‘Christ the inner teacher’ instructs the believer about divine love. Second, in the construction of language, human loves are an essential part of the sensibility required for the human person to understand Christ when he teaches about divine love. Therefore, when Augustine discusses the construction of the meaning of love in language—that is, in the interpretation of scripture and the development of theological knowledge—careful attention must be paid to the connection between originary experiences of love, which inform the construction of meaningful sense, and the necessary return, through the language of love, to the experience of the thing of love itself.

\textbf{The ‘thing’ and ‘signs’ of love}

The double-love command stands at the heart of Augustinian theology with a vision of the human person moving deeper and deeper into an integrated state of love with God. The gift of love is logically equated with the gift of the Holy Spirit


and is thereby the essential gift of salvation. In On the Trinity we read, ‘Holy scripture proclaims that God is charity. Charity is of God, and its effect in us is that we dwell in God and he in us. This we know, because he has given us of his Spirit. It follows that the Spirit himself is the God who is charity.’\(^{52}\) Love is a thing of God. It is an aspect or element of God’s personhood and continuous relating among God’s triune self, and only secondarily, as all created things have their being in God, is love an aspect of human origin. Furthermore, love always involves a kind of movement towards an object of desire, the movement of eros, but not for its own sake. In his eighth homily on the first letter to John, Augustine says, ‘all love, my dear brothers, implies necessarily an element of goodwill towards those who are loved.’\(^{53}\) Through the influence of the Holy Spirit, these loves are more and more expressed as a desire for God, as all other loves are brought into line to be loved for the way they lead to the love of God. This movement of desire is fundamental to Augustine’s conception of both love and hermeneutics.

Love is complicated by the human process of language construction and the human experiences of love that establish a framework of ‘signs’ that point to the ‘thing’ of love, which is ultimately only truly known in this gift of divine love. But the construction of the signs is integral to the recognition of divine love and also the consequent response to it: we express devotion to God-who-is-love by our treatment of the signs of God’s love. God-who-is-love is immutable; the signs of God’s love are not. These concepts of sign (signum) and thing (res) are key terms in On Christian Doctrine, establishing a fundamental theory of language through which God chooses to disclose God’s self. Couple Augustine’s theory of language with his philosophy of desire and the result is a distinct hermeneutic of love.

Augustine’s philosophy of desire assesses our relationship with things by reference to a spectrum of what, in the English language, has tended to be translated as ‘lust’ at one end and ‘love’ at the other end of an oppositional, binary dialectic. On the one hand, ‘lust’ (cupidas) ‘uses’ (uti) things for the utilitarian ‘enjoyment’ (frui) they bring to the lover. That is, those fragments of love that we


desire for our own comfort and wellbeing direct our attention to the perfection of love, which is God. At the other end, ‘love’ (caritas) enjoys things for their own sake, as an end in themselves. Since, for Augustine, God is the only thing that deserves to be enjoyed for its own sake, all other things are signs pointing us to God.

Love (caritas) is properly understood as directed towards God. When love is directed towards the self or, rather, towards the sign of love for its own enjoyment, Augustine uses a different term, most commonly translated into English as lust (cupidas):

By love I mean the impulse of one’s mind to enjoy God on his own account and to enjoy oneself and one’s neighbour on account of God; and by lust I mean the impulse of one’s mind to enjoy oneself and one’s neighbour and any corporeal thing not on account of God.54

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt, whose mid-twentieth-century doctorate on Love and Saint Augustine has become a standard critique of Augustine’s conception of love, argues that the Latin words amor, dilectio and caritas are Augustine’s preferred Latin translations of eros, storge and agape in the Greek New Testament, even though he tends to use them rather flexibly: ‘Augustine generally, but not consistently, uses amor to designate desire and craving (that is, for love in its largest, least specific sense); dilectio to designate the love of self and neighbor; and caritas to designate the love of God and the “highest good.”’ 55

Theologian Oliver O’Donovan, noting this flexibility of Latin usage, points out that though Augustine expresses some ambivalence with his choice of words for love, particularly in his homiletical writings, he nevertheless keeps the rhythm of the dialectic identified in On Christian Doctrine. The use of dilectio, which might be translated as ‘delight,’ and amor, as ‘passion,’ retains the movement of a dance that swings sometimes heavenward and sometimes earthward. Caritas is properly ordered love for the Christian who loves God and neighbour-as-self; cupidas is disordered and distorted love come to an abrupt end in the self:

54 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, III.16.37.
Thus we do well to speak of ‘aspects’ of love rather than of ‘kinds’ and to remember as we differentiate them that we have to do not only with subjectivity but with the complex order of reality that is love’s object. *Subjectively*, love-of-neighbour is one thing with love-of-God, for in either case the ontological ground of love is the Holy Spirit shed abroad in our hearts.\(^{56}\)

Love is a thing, which can only be known through a sign, as indeed all things can only be known. If a speaker (or writer) is to say (or write) something meaningful about love—either love of God or love of neighbour-as-self—then the sign of the word ‘love’ must correlate with a thing ‘love’ such that an effective link is made between the sign and its thing. Christian revelation is passed on through words, just as all human connectivity is communicated through words; therefore, language is raw data for the theologian—material that must be mined for divine self-communication. But language, in turn, is dependent upon human interaction: words are taught from infancy in the context of one person directing the association between a sound and a thing. When it comes to written words, a teacher has directed the child to associate the sight of certain shapes (letters) with meaning. As an adult, words are given nuance through ongoing exposure to the lived experience of those things and their relationship with the word that refers to them. So there is an intricate, interactive relationship between words and the things that they aim to communicate. The word ‘love’ and the *experience* of love are inseparable, or in Augustine’s parlance, the sign of love and the thing of love are inseparable if we are to know what love is.

In *The Teacher (De Magistro)*, Augustine presses this further, as he explains to his son how the human process of teaching unfolds. First, language is learnt through human interaction in childhood, then by exposure to scripture, usually over some time, which enters the body through the corporeal senses and begins to influence the spiritual senses of the inner person. Here, though, in the human heart, is where the ‘inner teacher’—that is, Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit—must take over from the human teacher, if the knowledge of God, latent in every human person within the confines of her or his mind, is to be regenerated and redeemed into a living knowledge of God in the present. ‘The utmost value I can attribute to

words is this. They bid us look for things. He alone teaches me anything who sets before my eyes, or one of my other bodily senses, or my mind, the things which I desire to know. From words we can learn only words."\(^{57}\) So human and divine knowledge work together, and so too must human love and divine love.

This is an essential aspect of God’s relationship with God’s creation: that even in God’s self-revelation God does not divorce God’s self from humanity. The incarnation of Jesus Christ as God-Man is not a unique action of God but rather the pinnacle of God’s normal and natural relating. The pervasiveness of human sin becomes a problem because of revelation’s co-dependency with human-constructed language; at some point there must be a gift of God’s self that cannot be corrupted by the distortion of human selfishness.\(^{58}\) It is a move by God to draw close to God’s creation:

By directing our attention to the particular set of signs we call scripture [Augustine] explains how the interweaving of fluid language and open desire is the locus of transforming grace. Cross and resurrection, to which all scriptural signs lead us, free us once for all from the threat of an idolatry of signs. They are both inescapable and provisional. God has ‘placed himself in the order of signs’ (de la Taille’s famous phrase), and so brought to light the nature of all signs in respect of his own nature as uniquely res. Caritas is the goal that lies in and beyond the skill of ‘continuing with’ the shifts of discourse; since, for the Christian, language is no more capable of being a ’neutral,’ closed, self-reflexive pattern of play than is human being itself.\(^{59}\)

The implications of the connection between the signs and thing of love is not just this negative redemption of human love. Theological ethicist Miroslav Volf states the positive, that if all signs have a pathway to divine love, then all human loves can be affirmed by Christians.

Ordinary love between ordinary human beings is a visible manifestation of the invisible God! God, whom no one can see, can in fact be seen—if we know how and where to look. . . For Christians, all manifestations of the One God in the


\(^{58}\) Augustine, “The Teacher,” 36 (xi).

ordinariness of neighborly love are strictly speaking but echoes of God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{60}

However, the connection between human loves and divine love—the signs of love and the thing of love—needs further consideration in the context of liminality, because the lines of knowing between love's signs and thing, are by no means simple or straight-forward.

Susanne Ticciati has proposed that in relation to twentieth century semiotics, Augustine’s proposal in \textit{On Christian Doctrine} translates into a contemporary theory of human beings as ‘signs of God.’\textsuperscript{61} God cannot be a sign in Godself,\textsuperscript{62} but human beings—as creatures of God—can be seen as signs of their creator, having been made in the image of God. Given that Augustine distinguishes between different categories of signs in relation to their subjects, Williams proposed an overlap between \textit{res/signum} and \textit{uti/frui}— to use is to treat as a sign. Hence, for Augustine, it is appropriate to ‘use’ human beings as a means of enjoying God.\textsuperscript{63} ‘Enjoyment, after all, consists in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake, while use consists in referring what has come your way to what your love aims at obtaining, provided, that is, it deserves to be loved.’\textsuperscript{64} In this way, to love human beings, is to enjoy God. However, Ticciati argues this only holds true if there is an apophatic movement in the process of understanding. That is, human beings are signs of God when they are read apophatically, to discern the thing to which the signs point.\textsuperscript{65} The sign of God (human being) holds a lens through which to perceive God. Iconography describes this well—knowledge of God is encountered through the image, but the image itself is not God.

In the same as human beings can be apophatic signs of God, human loves can be


\textsuperscript{62} Weaver, “Reading the signs,” 31.

\textsuperscript{63} In the same way, Christ is the ultimate sign of human being, for ‘the incarnation manifests the essential quality of the world itself as a ‘sign’ or trace of its maker.’ Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s \textit{De Doctrina}.” 141.

\textsuperscript{64} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, I.A.A.

\textsuperscript{65} Ticciati, “The Human Being as Sign in Augustine’s \textit{De Doctrina Christiana},” 22.
seen as apophatic signs of divine love. Love is both a thing and a sign. In relation to themselves and to human experiences of love they are res, but in relation to God, they are signum. The shift from the former to the latter comes as a consequence of the ordering of desire and the presence of perspective. To use (uti) human love is to treat it as an end in and of itself. To enjoy (frui) human love in what Augustine calls 'rightly ordered desire' is to take an apophatic step into viewing the human experience of love in relation to all loves.

**Agape and Eros – a false dichotomy**

A major theme has emerged in the last century of philosophical reflection on love, articulated through the ancient Greek terms agape and eros. This is not a debate about linguistics, rather, agape and eros function as avatars for different aspects or dynamics of love with complex philosophical histories. Agape is the primary Greek term used in the New Testament scriptures. Eros is primarily associated with Plato, specifically from Diotima’s speech in the Symposium. Between the two, there is a wrestling with the movement of love, the universal and particular nature of love, and the connection between love's divine and human forms.

There are two parts of the agape—eros philosophical tradition that are contested in contemporary discussions. First is a range of renewed workings of eros as a foundational epistemological category. Originally conceived in Greek philosophy as an aspect of the connection between that which is partially known and that which exists in pure form, eros is a category of passionate devotion and attention, or ‘desire’, and was used by Plato to describe the intellect task. There is a long tradition of Christian adaptation of eros as a descriptor of the soul’s knowledge of God, foundationally through Saint Augustine and the early mystical tradition of the Greek Fathers.

The adaptation of eros in feminist discourse is illustrative of its philosophical

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66 Andrew McGowan makes the same argument here in relation to ecology. Andrew McGowan, “To use and to enjoy: Augustine and ecology,” in *St Mark’s Review* 212, no. 2, 89-100 (May 2010).
applications. Wendy Farley’s *Eros for the Other, Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* broadens the horizon somewhat through a feminist critique of analytic sources.\(^{70}\) Freud’s adaptation of *eros* has preoccupied psychoanalytic theories and is also a noteworthy influence on feminist perspectives. Luce Irigaray, for example, argues for sexed dialogue in order to maintain the epistemological function of *eros*.\(^{71}\) In theology, Sarah Coakley aims to recover an ancient theological vision of *eros* that entered into Christian discourse through early church fathers like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and Origen as part of the necessary deconstruction of sex and gender in conceptions of the Trinity.\(^{72}\)

This leads to the second aspect of the philosophical debate focused around the Greek words. When brought into the realm of theology, it has been couched as a debate about dialectics. Are *agape* and *eros* incompatible opposites? Is one divine and perfect while the other is human and tainted, or is there a possible integration and intermingling? A response to this question must grapple the question of personhood, which itself has preoccupied Western philosophers in the twentieth century: what is the human person, and what is the relationship between self and other? In turn this relates to the theological question of a human person’s moral capacity for good and what is meant by ‘sin’; hence, a stance in the *agape–eros* relationship has been inextricably linked to a different theological dialectic— that of grace and nature.

In 1932, Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren published the definitive argument for *agape* as divine love being diametrically opposed to *eros* as human love in his book *Agape and Eros*. His argument has dominated the philosophical debate within the discipline of theology since then, as theologians grapple with the like question of divine verses human loves.\(^{73}\) Nygren applies a binary dialectic to *agape* and *eros*, divine and human love, such that he argues ‘Christian love’ relies exclusively on the

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\(^{72}\) "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium, Diotima’s Speech," *Hypatia* 3, no. 3 (1989).


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A deep pessimism about human nature is translated into an exclusivist conception of love:

In relation to God and his neighbour, the Christian can be likened to a tube, which by faith is open upwards, and by love downwards. All that a Christian possesses he has received from God, from the Divine love; and that he possesses he passes on in love to his neighbour. He has nothing of his own to give. He is merely the tube, the channel, through which God’s love flows.74

In the latter part of the twentieth century, a growing number of scholars questioned both the accuracy of Nygren’s typology and the misconstrual of the Greek notions invoked to create a rigid binary opposition between *agape* and *eros.*75 Through different pathways, the Protestant Paul Tillich76 and Roman Catholics Pope Benedict XV77 and Jean-Luc Marion all attempt to redress the binary and reconceive *agape* and *eros* as some kind of unity of love. As Marion says:

In the first place: every concept of love is weakened and compromised as soon as one allows oneself to distinguish competing divergent, or indeed irreconcilable, meanings—for example, by opposing from the outset, as if it were unquestionable evidence, love and charity (*eros* and *agape*), supposedly possessive desire and supposedly gratuitous benevolence, rational love (of the moral law) and irrational passion.78

It shall now be examined how Marion’s desire for a non-reductive conception of love can be satisfied by a liminal re-formation of Augustine’s dialectic, so that both *agape* and *eros*, plus the infinite number of descriptions of human loves, might not be seen to be in necessary competition, but that the very plurality of conceptions of love has a significant theological purpose.

### 5.3 Love in the Crucible of Liminality

In Book 3 of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine addresses the failure of signs in

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75 For a summary of this debate, see Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 735.
76 For Tillich, the unity is based in the ‘urge toward the reunion of the separated.’ See Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, 45.
relation to God’s revelation. He warns that all human constructs of theology, though necessary, remain subject to change and to the limitations of human knowing (including the distorting effects of sin).

A person enslaved by a sign is one who worships some thing which is meaningful but remains unaware of its meaning. But the person who attends to or worships a useful sign, one divinely instituted, and does realize its force and significance, does not worship a thing which is only apparent and transitory but rather the thing to which all such things are related. Such a person is spiritual and free.79

Even the signs of scripture have a tendency to separate from the thing to which they point, and therefore must be routinely examined by the measuring stick of love. Nowhere is this more important for Augustine than in the double-love command, which is intended as a summation of the law,80 but the law can cease to be an effective sign for love. This scenario is dealt with explicitly in The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love:

For faith obtains through prayer that which the law commands. For without the gift of God, that is, without the Holy Spirit, through whom love is shed abroad in our hearts, the law can command, but it cannot assist; and, moreover, it makes a man a transgressor, for he can no longer excuse himself on the plea of ignorance. Now carnal lust reigns where there is not the love of God.81

The context of liminality has been described as an open-space free of structured sociality, including social aspects of knowing, being, relating and, therefore, loving. The ‘law’ of love falls away in liminality, which ensures that it maintains its purpose and place as a sign. Within the open-space sphere, however, the thing of love must find expression without its signs, or at least its previously prescribed signs. Love in communitas—the style of direct and spontaneous relating complicit in the context of liminality—demands that love be experienced afresh, birthed in the context of new connections.

Taking the lead from Augustine, then, we understand that even though our

80 Romans 13:8
theological hermeneutics might have radically different epistemologies from era to era and from region to region in the course of Christian theological history, we must always come back to this question: what does it mean to love God and neighbour? If a theological method does not consistently produce loving reflections and actions, it cannot claim to be a theology that illuminates the message of scripture, or God’s self-revelation in the broader sense. If the refining and transforming movement in the human process of sociality is to function as it should—as an updating of the tradition such that context and kerygma remain in step—then theological discourse must embrace an open-space where what has been formed is allowed to unfurl into anti-form, in order that it might be reformed. In contexts of liminality, the method for thinking theologically must also move into liminality. A crisis in theology, then—be it a crisis in its dogma, its sources or its application to life—is an opportunity for updating the tradition in the natural process of its unfolding in human history. But love poses a further problem for theological hermeneutics in liminality: for our thinking about love is also in liminality.

This indicates two movements of love’s thing and love’s signs in liminality. First, the reordering of love’s signs is an essential task in Christian theology. As argued in chapter three, the difficulty of thinking in liminality is an opportunity for the refinement of the social aspects of human knowledge; so then, contexts of liminality are an opportunity to re-examine the signs of love, and this shall be the next task, utilising the open-space dialectic constructed in chapter three to demonstrates how the signs of love can usefully ‘fail.’

Second, it can be expected that the signs of love shall be re-formed as the thing of love is experienced afresh in the context of communitas relationships in liminality. Most particularly, the theological relationship between the human person and God in liminality can be seen as an exchange of love in the crucible of prayer. Hence, the special power-in-vulnerability that transforms desire and sociality, as discussed in

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82 Sarah Stewart-Kroeker’s argues that the importance of the pilgrimage motif in On Christian Doctrine, that is, the eschatological unfolding of the life of faith, is the refinement of idolatry and instrumentalisation, for the purpose of eschatological caritas. Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, “Resisting Idolatry and Instrumentalisation in Loving the Neighbour: The Significance of the Pilgrimage Motif for Augustine’s Uses-Fruitio Distinction,” in Studies in Christian Ethics, 27, no. 2, 202-221 (May 2014).
chapter four, takes us deeper into Augustine’s understanding of the transforming nature of encountering love without form, through the sign of silence.

**Letting ‘love’ fail**

The refinement of love’s *signs* can be undertaken using the complex dialectical method articulated in chapter two, which embraces the distinct unstructured epistemology of liminal knowing. The signs of love include the entire vocabulary of words for love (in all the world’s languages)—notably, from this thesis, *eros, agape, cupidas, caritas*, charity, desire, lust, passion, and so on. In her monograph comparing the semiotic framework of Augustine, the Modistae and Dante, Elena Lombardi argues that the key to understand Augustine’s syntax of desire is to understand that ‘love and language on earth share a crucial feature: they are fundamentally transitive.’83 Stories about love also represent different *signs* of love, which means that the experiences of love themselves are also signs. Each sign, though displaying a family resemblance with all other aspects of love, has its own unique flavour, arising from the particular connection or set of connections that has given rise to it.

Each of these signs may be treated as a *threshold* into liminal knowing about the *thing* of love, that which is beyond it. For example, the word ‘*eros*’ points to a particular movement in the thing of love, a movement towards that which is loved, a drawing out of oneself or a gifting of oneself for the sake of another. But not all loves share that passionate movement into action. The love that might arise in connection with a beautiful piece of art, for example, does not necessarily result in a desire to own it. Sometimes it is enough to stand in awe-filled wonder.

*A threshold*, as described in chapter three, is a doorway through which the ‘many’ may be investigated through the ‘one.’ Instead of a finite thing being an ‘end’, it is treated as a ‘middle’, a conduit through which immaterial or metaphysical realities might be considered. It is the question itself that frames an open-space for this chapter’s discourse: the question is treated as a ‘given,’ not because it is an absolute, but because it is that category of finite thing that Plato describes as a *threshold* which might give rise to understanding something of the infinite.

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Therefore, in developing a full phenomenology of love, no single **threshold**, no single **sign** will offer a full testimony of love’s absolute **thing**. Hence the more signs that can act as **thresholds**, the more knowledge of love can be held in the open-space, and this complexity addresses the potential diremptions that rob love of its fullness. It has already been argued that this translation of knowledge beyond limit is conveyed better by a spatial illustration than by a linear one, because it further avoids the reduction of a dialectical conversation to a simple binary. These **thresholds** are best arranged around a three-dimensional sphere, which can express the constant and continuous dynamism of a love event.

The metaphor of an open-shape for liminality in chapter two can provide a shape for a different dialect of desire. If human loves are signs which point to divine love—in apophatic relationship—then the dialect of love is like a labyrinth with many entry points around its outer most pathway. Having stepped into the labyrinth, the journey continues inward, towards the centre, towards what might be conceived of as the starting point or the source. In the spiritual practice of the labyrinth, the journey inwards is a theological investigation into the deeper layers of meaning. The trajectory between caritas and **cupiditas** spirals inwards, rather than upwards in linear projection towards a removed goal or future.

This correction of Augustine’s dialectic of loves around a sphere rather than along a single continuum addresses a core problem in Augustine’s love identified by Arendt. She demonstrates a weakness in Augustine’s conception of love due to the schematic, linear spectrum of love that is either turned towards God or away from God. The consequence of this eschatological drive away from self towards God is that love ceases to gain a foothold in the present, being reduced, Arendt argues, to a category of hope—the promise of love perfected in a future heaven: ‘Love is derivative—derived from hope.’

Because love is truly only found in God, the love of neighbour-as-self must resist all sentimentality and desire, which potentially drains human love of its power to work for the good of humanity or the ecosystems of the world, which Arendt understandably sees as a ‘degradation of

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84 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 42.
Furthermore, Williams argues that if ‘faith’ is seen as an apophatic movement, love is not absent when faith takes the place of sensed love, but rather love is present without the mediation of form. As the gift of divine love—in the liminal open-space of non-worded encounters with God—begins to affect the knowledge of what love is, human love and the life that love then affects are transformed in the present by a glimpse of the future ‘when we see ourselves as acting out the self-imparting love of God by consciously yielding ourselves to be known and loved by God.’

If love is more than one binary dialectic, if it is the whole plethora of signs that point to human experiences of connection—with other human beings, with the natural world, even with inanimate objects—then Arendt’s rightful concern about the reduction of love to a future hope is avoided. The signs of love form more than a linear axis. A binary recasting of *eros–agape* or human–divine loves gives insufficient scope to Augustine’s hermeneutic of love, not just because there are more than two words for love in play in Augustine’s theology, but also because there are more than two experiences of love in play.

Does the rearrangement of the dialectic around a sphere neglect the superior place Augustine gives to divine love? Not at all, for God is still the centre of things, in the centre of the open-space, in apophatic darkness. This is the centre of love John of the Cross speaks of in his poem *The Living Flame of Love*:

> Oh, living flame of love  
> That tenderly woundest my soul in its deepest centre,  
> Since thou art no longer oppressive, perfect me now if it be thy will,  
> Break the web of this sweet encounter.

God is encountered in the middle of the darkest night, in the inmost parts of the human person, in the place of sense beyond touch, taste, sight, sound and smell, in

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85 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 43. *The Enchiridion* demonstrates Arendt’s concern, where Augustine says, ‘we love God now by faith, then we shall love Him through sight. Now we love even our neighbor by faith; for we who are ourselves mortal know not the hearts of mortal men.’ Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, CXXI.


87 John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, 18 (stanza 1).
the place of the spiritual knowing beyond signs.

The arrangement of love in an open-space dialectic has already been introduced in chapter two, in relation to Gillian Rose’s broken middle. In her biography *Love’s Work*, she suggests that this broken middle is where the work of love is carried out both in real human lives and in reasoned reflection on them, describing the open-space required for love to be known and activated:

*L’amour se revele en se retirer.* If the Lover retires too far, the light of love is extinguished and the Beloved dies; if the Lover approaches too near the Beloved, she is effaced by the love and ceases to have an independent existence. The Lovers must leave a distance, a boundary, for love: then they approach and retire so that love may suspire. This may be heard as the economics of Eros; but it may also be taken as the infinite passion of faith: *Dieu se revele en se retirer.* Love and philosophy may seem to have had the most to say, but friendship and faith have been framing and encroaching by night and by day.

In any love relationship, Rose intimates, different aspects of love are required at different times, because the vulnerability required to hold open the space for love requires work. Sometimes this vulnerability is held easily and joyfully, with passion. Sometimes this vulnerability is held through a decision of faith, a choice to trust a person’s worthiness of love, or trust that the benefits gained will outweigh the potential costs of heartbreak. Sometimes the relationship is held more by the virtue of one lover even despite the untrustworthiness of another. What is clear is that there is never just one aspect to the love relation, and at least a third relation arises freely from the space devoted for love’s flourishing—that is, not a person but a relationship. Nowhere is this more explicit than in sexual love relations:

Kiss, caress and penetration are the relation of the relation, body and soul in touch, two times two adds up: three times three is the equation. The three I harbour within me—body, soul and paraclete—press against the same triplicity in you.

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89 Rose, *Love’s Work*, 133-34. Liminality theorist Arpád Szakolckai describes love in much the same way: ‘It is not the “I” that loves the “you”; rather it is the “it”, the love itself that emerges in the “in-between” of two human beings, forming and transforming both, by creating a single unit that cannot be separated without a tragedy; a kind of death.’ Arpád Szakolckai, “Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events,” in *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1, 141-172 (2009), 158.
What I want in my overcharged imagination inside your body, taken up into mine, with attack and with abandon, succumbs so readily and with more joy than prudency and climax.90

The sexually erotic nature of Rose’s illustration of the third is intended as an illustration of the operations of philosophical eros and the erratic but generative flow of desire. The tantalising mix of eros with sexuality shall be explored below in Coakley’s theology of desire, in post-Freudian consciousness. What the imagery in this quote makes explicit is the generative power of the love relation to create a third, something born but independent of the two that is birthed in this open-space of love. A hermeneutic of love must be able to make sense of the messiness of mixed desire. This will require us to work with a mess of love language, working with different words for love at different times. In order to accommodate the apophatic movement required in language for this thing to which a range of signs point, love language must be allowed to fall into liminality.

To summarise, what is proposed here is a re-arrangement of Augustine’s love into a sphere of open-space dialectics, with movement towards God-who-is-love in the centre, as opposed to a binary opposition of divine and human loves, where if God is good, human loves must necessarily be pressed into being ‘bad.’ To approach human loves as threshold limits or signs for love, which can be traversed into a greater, though liminal, experience of knowing love, is to truly love all things in the movement towards God.

‘Extreme’ love language

There is a second way in which the signs of love are reordered through the refining process of liminal knowing, which is exemplified by Williams in a theory of language he presented in 2013 in the Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology at the University of Edinburgh.91 It undoubtedly reflects decades of thinking about language and, as already noted, includes engagement with On Christian Doctrine. However, in the Gifford Lectures, Williams pushes the subjectivity of language further than Augustine, to incorporate the ends of words and beyond words.

90 Rose, Love’s Work, 63.
91 Published as Rowan Williams, The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
Augustine's treatise acknowledges that the task of interpreting the signs of scripture is not always straightforward. Williams explains that such difficulty was a sign of authenticity for extracting meaning from texts in the intellectual culture of Augustine's time, which explains somewhat his claim that having to work hard at reading scripture increases our love for God. As Williams notes, 'obscurity in the words of revelation is one of the things that anchors us in our temporal condition.'

Subjectivity can also be a tool for critical reflection if we allow words to be questioned by our experience of the world.

For Williams, difficulty in language has a more significant use, the moments of limit in language becoming for us a representation of meaning beyond its signs. He coins the phrase 'extreme language,' where the rules of grammar and so on are broken in an effort to point towards that which refuses to be contained in the ordinary modes of language. 'Extreme or apparently excessive speech is not an aberration in our speaking. Given that it is (as we have already noted) difficulty that drives the sense of a reality to which we are painfully accountable, it is not surprising that making things more difficult is so common, so “normal.”'

This is not just a problem of language, but as Williams has noted in regards to On Christian Doctrine, Augustine's theory of language is closely tied to his theory of the human person:

The distinction between frui and uti (book I, iii) is superimposed on the res-signum distinction, and will pervade the whole of De Doctrina Christiana; it is the means whereby Augustine links what he has to say about language and what he has to say about beings who 'mean' and about the fundamentally desirous nature of those beings—a link which is undoubtedly the most original and interesting feature of the treatise.

The desire here is reminiscent of the desire for knowledge that arises in the context of aporia—of the limit of human knowing through straightforward signs that effortlessly make the link between words. It is the crisis of intelligence that instigates a new investigation and, in relation to God, takes us beyond a potentially

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92 Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's De Doctrina," 142.
93 Williams, The Edge of Words, 130-131.
94 Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana," 139.
idolatrous dependence on the sign to God, who cannot be contained in any sign:

To be human is to desire, to be drawn and molded by extra-rational, even extra-mental, attractive forces. Augustine's greatest legacy to Christian spirituality is the affirmation that the life of grace can include not only moral struggle and spiritual darkness, but also an awareness of the radically conditioned character of human behavior—marked as we are in ways unknown to us by childhood experience, historical and social structures, and many more facts of which Augustine himself could not have been consciously aware, but to which our own age is especially sensitive.95

The supreme way that language fails, in theological discourse at least, is silence. Silence is not 'pure absence' but is the gap that occurs in a specific in-between. 'We cannot imagine an “unframed” or pure silence: we can only imagine the silence in which we are not hearing anything, not hearing what we might expect to hear—that is, it will have to do with what has shaped our expectations, our history and fantasy and so forth.'96

What is the impact of these apophatic movements on the construction of language's meaning? It is an essential element in the right placement of sign and thing, essential in the language of revelation, to avoid idolatry of the sign, to avoid mistaking it for the thing itself. In the silence, or in the deployment of language 'pushed out of shape,'97 our present reading of the sign is allowed to fall into question, into—in fact—liminality. In the silence we must seek again the thing without its given form, seek again truth that is real but has great difficulty being represented by the signs of language.

Williams notes:

a language which indefinitely postpones fulfilment or enjoyment is appropriate to the Christian discipline of spiritual homelessness, to the character of the believing life as pilgrimage. Yet scripture is equally, as we have noted, an effective vehicle for the journey home, and its purpose is to perfect that unqualified and self-forgetting caritas which

95 Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana," 139.
97 Williams, The Edge of Words, 157.
human beings are made for.\textsuperscript{98}

Remembering that homelessness, or rather the journey towards home, is a key motif of the Christian life in Augustine’s \textit{Confessions}, this point is significant for Williams’s reading of Augustine’s theological hermeneutic: ‘To be at home is not to vanish into an impersonal cosmic unity, but to rediscover the eternal, patient, faithful love of our Creator, who made us to enjoy him, so that “our hearts are restless till they come to rest in you” (I.1).’\textsuperscript{99}

The subtle machinations of Augustine’s theory of language have revealed that the language of love arises first from an experience of love in the inward parts, or soul, of a human person. The experience of human love is integral to the person’s capacity to understand divine love when God’s love is encountered in the human soul as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Williams’s suggestions about the role of extreme language and silence in the construction of words that can convey meaningful sense explains why love is so often written about poetically and refuses to deal neatly in the series of signs (called words) that we might assign to it: the very breakdown of the rules of language are the best representation of love.

This way of speaking about God in love language that breaks the rules is the garden of the mystical love tradition, which draws heavily on analogies of human love for imagery that seeks to communicate something intimate and time-bound, yet seemingly infinite and universal in its relationship with God. Poetry and first-person testimony rich with symbolic imagery are the primary modes of language for these Beloved-Lovers who seek to express an encounter of divine love. St John of the Cross’s poem \textit{Living Flame of Love} is perhaps the most well-known example of love mysticism in the Christian tradition. It was written to give witness to an experience of the divine while in prison, and later was given an extensive commentary by St John of the Cross, to attach each element of the experience to established Christian doctrines:

\begin{quote}
Oh, sweet burn! Oh delectable wound!
Oh soft hand! Oh delicate touch
That savours of eternal life and pays every debt!
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{98} Williams, \textit{The Edge of Words}, 150.
\textsuperscript{99} Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's \textit{De Doctrina}," 142.
In slaying, thou hast changed death into life.

Oh, lamps of fire,
In whose splendours the deep caverns of sense which were
dark and blind
With strange brightness
Give heat and light together to their Beloved!\(^{100}\)

Love is experienced as a wound, at times acutely painful, and yet as the shock of
the intrusion into the inner life subsides, love is discovered to be a gentle embrace,
of self and other in perfect balance. St John of the Cross embraces the Lover and
Beloved categories of the Song of Songs to describe his own experience of being
loved by God, unafraid of erotic and even erratic language to express its intensity
and his complete devotion to it.

As discussed in the previous chapter, apophatic speech is best held in dialectical
relationship with its cataphatic frames in theology, and St John of the Cross
demonstrates this in his writing an exposition of his poetry. The preface to Living
Flame of Love indicates a certain reluctance to explain mysteries that are
necessarily discerned inwardly but nevertheless submits the wisdom to the
authority of the church: ‘relying upon Divine scripture, and making clear that all
which is said herein is as far removed from all that there is to say as is a picture
from a living person, I shall make bold to say that which I know.’\(^{101}\) The treatise
begins with a recitation of a mystical experience of God’s love in the words of his
poem, then proceeds with St John of the Cross giving its theological interpretation
line by line. Hence, we know that the living flame of love ‘is the Spirit of its
Spouse—that is, the Holy Spirit.’\(^{102}\)

In his book Mystical Theology, Mark McIntosh argues that all mystical speech
should itself be understood as an event because the reporting of the experience
has a different purpose from the experience itself. St John of the Cross’s poetry is
intended to point us towards a divine who eludes description. The apophatic
refusal is not to do with language—with the incapacity of the mystic to describe
her or his experience—but rather a disciplined choice of the mystic to use

\(^{100}\) John of the Cross, Living Flame of Love, 18 (stanzas ii & iii).
\(^{101}\) John of the Cross, Living Flame of Love, 1 (prologue).
\(^{102}\) John of the Cross, Living Flame of Love, 3 (I).
apophatic language to describe the ineffable divine. Consequently, the reader is invited into her or his own contemplation of the ineffable, as opposed to the particular spiritual experience of the mystic. As proposed in chapter three, the telling of the experience is a methodology for communicating something incommunicable, which returns to the concept of revelation in testimony, as for Ricoeur:

My experience cannot directly become your experience . . . Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you . . . Something passes from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived.103

If Augustine's cupiditas and caritas are arranged around the sphere, it encourages us to treat each expression of love as a sign, through which we might know something more - the mysterious thing of love which is an inconceivably complex phenomena. Note in this image of the spherical labyrinth that there are several places at which one might cross over the threshold. There need be no judgment between the different human loves arranged around the boundary of the sphere, but rather each one is an invitation to move inwards. In this way, the emphasis is on particularity rather than universality.104 As signs they are not expected to be in competition with each other, nor do they substitute for a comprehensive articulation of the whole of what love is, in other words, the violence of an oppositional binary dialectic is avoided. If a threshold experience can legitimately be described as loving, that is if we can make sense of the phenomenon by that word, then there will be an aspect of that phenomenon which can be utilised as a pathway into loving God.105

103 Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fortworth: Texas University Press, 1976), 16.

104 “In the first place: every concept of love is weakened and compromised as soon as one allows oneself to distinguish competing divergent, or indeed irreconcilable, meanings . . . A serious concept of love distinguishes itself by its unity, or rather by its power to keep together significations that nonerotic thought cuts apart, stretches, and tears according to the measure of its prejudices.” Marion, Erotic Phenomenon, 4-5.

105 “Ordinary love between ordinary human beings is a visible manifestation of the invisible God! God, whom no one can see, can in fact be seen—if we know how and where to look. . . . For
Furthermore, by retaining Augustine's emphasis on human loves as signs and things in the dialectic of love, we can avoid a severe binary between human and divine loves that judges the human loves to be thresholds to turn away from, in the journey towards divine love. Again, a binary opposition is avoided. Any aspect of love can be both human and divine, depending on the lovers desire to move over the threshold of the experience to engage with something more. When a human love is a threshold through which we encounter divine love in liminality, we affirm each sign of love be messy ethical phenomenon, judged not by its value for human enjoyment but rather by its capacity to turn the lover towards God. Hence, even when the whole of love is a conceptual work in progress, or the re-formation of theological understandings of love ethics are yet an unfinished project, we can continue to love in the particular. And guide each one toward a right ordering of love in worship of God.

5.4 Love in the Crucible of Prayer

In chapter five it was argued that the practice of contemplative prayer is essential to the task of theology in contexts of liminality. It has been shown that love itself has a kind of liminal quality, because the signs of love can so easily rupture from the thing to which they point, requiring the open-space of liminality to re-form the signs. Furthermore, love is not a simple concept that can be summed up by any word sign, but is better expressed in the extreme language of poetry and in silence. Having dealt with these complications of representing love in language, we now turn to an examination of how knowledge of divine love affects the implementation of the double-love command as a key to theology. Augustine insisted that divine love is both the source and purpose of all loves. What happens when human love encounters divine love in the communitas relationship of liminal spiritual experience?

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106 This is illustrated by a critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar who adopts an erotic hermeneutic in his thee-drama and affirms the necessity of the human forms in the process of recognising the divine form of love in Christ. However he concludes that upon encountering the pure form of love in Christ, we immediately revise our experience of human loves and find them wanting. He rebounds from the threshold experience as Karl Jaspers rebounds from the limit of logic.
Transformation of desire

Sarah Coakley has translated aspects of Augustine’s rightly ordered love into a theology of desire, which now needs closer attention. The first question must be: is desire a sign or a thing of love? The complexity of defining love in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, outlined in chapter one, can now be addressed. Eros is best understood as a word-sign, whose meaning waxes and wanes and requires careful explanation to negotiate the sexual associations with the term, particularly after the influence of Freud. It tells us something about the thing of love, but not everything about love, and the word itself will reflect the range of passionate expressions of sexuality that differ between cultures. However, Coakley’s intention is to treat desire as a thing, which is Augustine’s movement of love towards the connection. Rightly ordered desire, for those who claim to worship the Christian God, leads towards God as the ultimate Lover; disordered desire leads away from God to idolatrous loves and lovers.

First, let us consider the sign of eros in theological discourse. Jeanrond has argued that in contrast to the contemporary love debates, sex and marriage are a separate consideration for Augustine, and his love is much more concerned with the spiritual relationship between God and the human person:

Nothing of what is so important in our own contemporary reflections upon love—i.e. embodiment, gender, human subject, relational choice, the desire for and acknowledgement of otherness—has any great significance for Augustine. The emerging subject is of no ultimate concern to him, in spite of him having spent hundreds of pages in his Confessions on precisely that: the journey of his own troubled and restless self towards understanding how to reach beatitude, everlasting happiness. Longings, bodies, images of the self, all of these are subjected to change in time, hence they are not eternal.107

Coakley insists that eros must be understood in pre-Freudian terms as a particular movement of the intellect rather than the libido. Eros should not be reduced to sexual desire and cannot be separated from spiritual desire or, therefore, from desire for God. She redresses Augustine’s negative experience of sexuality with Gregory of Nyssa’s more positive assessment, drawing upon his image of the

107 Jeanrond, A Theology of Love, 54.
stream of sexuality running into the river of spirituality.  

Coakley also challenges the popular reading of Freud’s *eros* that results in an overly sexualised reading of *eros*, arguing that this has more to do with a cultural crisis of sexuality than Freud’s understanding of *eros* in his mature writing. Coakley argues that Freud must be turned on his head: spirituality—that is, the part of the human person that relates to God—is more basic to human personhood than sexuality. Hence she uses the term ‘desire’ in an attempt to integrate the particular desires associated with human sexuality, but refers to a greater movement within the human person that orders our choices and behaviour:

> Desire is more fundamental than sex. It is more fundamental, ultimately, because desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness 'in the image'. But in God, 'desire' of course signifies no lack—as it manifestly does in humans. Rather, it connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God’s own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.

The diremption of ‘lust’ and ‘love’ tends to over-emphasise Augustine’s negative view of sex: lust is read with its sexual overtones to the exclusion of all other disordered desires. Theoretically, however, in Augustine’s dialectic, sexual desire can be either ordered (loving) and/or disordered (lustful). The gift of God’s love in a human person redeems desire distorted by sin, and transforms it into desire for God. Lust is not a different ‘thing’ from love; it is disordered love with distorted desire. As the believer is seduced by the love of God, in the context of contemplation, over a lifetime of soulful relating to the God-who-is-love, her or his capacity to love becomes likened to the capacity of God’s love: to love in perfect freedom, for the other without diminishment of self. As Pope Benedict XVI says,

> ‘Love is indeed “ecstasy”, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.’

As noted in chapter one, Anders Nygren provided a fundamental basis for

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theological love debates in the twentieth century by proposing a simple association between *eros*, human loves, imperfect love and selfish love. *Agape*, on the other hand, is associated with divine love, perfection and unconditional selflessness. He therefore asserts that ‘Christian’ love is *agape* and must resist *eros* as incompatible with the God who loves us while we are still enemies in sin:¹¹¹

> [Agape] is the centre of Christianity, the Christian fundamental motif *par excellence*, the answer to both the religious and the ethical question. Agape comes to us as a quite new creation of Christianity. It sets its mark on everything in Christianity. Without it nothing that is Christian would be Christian. Agape is Christianity’s own original basic conception.¹¹²

As has already been outlined, remapping Augustine’s ordering of desire around a sphere of open-space removes the logical necessity of a binary opposition between *agape* and *eros*. These are not two qualities of different *things*; they are the same quality with different intension, and most actual expressions and experiences of desire are located somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. In this case, desire refers to the extent to which a person is willing to love beyond the threshold. Will a person’s desire stop at the limit situation, which is an object of love—a person, a place, a handbag—or will they cross over the threshold and expose her or his senses to spiritual knowing of a deeper love?

**Encountering divine love**

Through a consideration of *desire*, Coakley argues, we discover a different vision of the Trinity as a freely authenticating set of relationships where the erotic energy of ‘twness . . . [is] divinely ambushed by threeness.’¹¹³ This is particularly initiated—from a human perspective—through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who pours divine love in our hearts, love that acts erotically to draw us into relationship with the Trinity. The Spirit ‘leads [the human person] by surprise, adventure, purgation, and conviction.’¹¹⁴ When the Spirit is received as third person of the Trinity, we discover a God who is ‘a “source” of love unlike any other, giving and receiving and

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¹¹¹ Romans 5:10.
¹¹⁴ Coakley, *God, Sexuality & Self*, 331
ecstatically deflecting, ever and always.'

For Coakley, there can be no binary opposition between *agape* and *eros* because the nature of God as a continuous interaction of three persons is described most accurately as the energetic movement towards the other in affirmation of this treasured connection. This is Plato’s *eros*. But it is also *agape* in its sense of abundance or fullness. *Eros* is a kenotic movement in the divine threeness, produced by the excess of *agape* in each and in all.

The encounter of divine threeness ‘ambushes’ human plays of power and control in binary dialectics. Prayer is the necessary crucible for the confrontation of sex and gender because in prayer the human person encounters a ‘third’—a quality of personhood, a place of connection or an objectified value. The third of the Trinity corresponds to the experience of liminality—an encounter with reality beyond our conception. Neither that which has been previously desired (along with everything that has been previously known about love) nor its opposite are adequate descriptions of this encounter with divine love, who is both *eros* and *agape*.

In an essay on the spiritual practice of solitude, the twentieth-century contemplative Thomas Merton describes his experience of silence as an encounter with his truest, most pure being, and the discovery there of love:

> And what is the person? Precisely, he is one in the unity which is love. He is undivided in himself because he is open to all. He is open to all because the one love that is the source of all, the form of all, and the end of all is one in him and in all. He is truly alone who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one.

In the practice of retreat from the world, a paradoxical communion emerges. The retreatant discovers an intense connection with all people, all things, having sacrificed temporary company with some people, some things. The communion is experienced as a unification of the individual—all parts of themselves, often known only as separate entities, morphing into one unity, one person, just as there is one universe and, for Merton, one God. It is not that the individual, the universe

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and God lose their distinctiveness in this oneness, but rather that they fit together in non-competitive consciousness, an integrated unit of wholeness.\textsuperscript{117}

This experience of love in solitude transforms Merton’s understanding of theological discourse. Without love, he says, mimicking 1 Corinthians 13, , theology is nothing:

In fact, the object of faith is One—God, Love. And though the revealed doctrines about Him are true, yet what they tell us of Him is not fully adequate as long as we grasp them only separately, incoherently, without living unity in Love. They must converge upon Love as the spokes of a wheel converge upon a central hub.\textsuperscript{118}

Doctrines about God do not make sense unless they are seen—or perhaps better, experienced—through the window of love. The single Word of God, which is Love, is confused by many words, rendering the One Word incomprehensible. The single Word is, says Merton, a paradoxical non-Word, heard most succinctly in silence:

Christianity is a religion of the Word. The Word is Love. But we sometimes forget that the Word emerges first of all from silence. When there is no silence, then the One Word which God speaks is not truly heard as Love. Then only ‘words’ are heard. ‘Words’ are not love, for they are many and Love is One. Where there are many words, we lose consciousness of the fact that there is really only One Word. The One Word which God speaks is Himself. Speaking, He manifests Himself as infinite Love. His speaking and His hearing are One. So silent is His speech that, to our way of thinking, His speech is no-speech, His hearing is no-hearing. Yet in his silence, in the abyss of His one Love, all words are spoken and all words are heard. Only in this silence of Infinite Love do they have coherence and meaning. Yet we draw them out of silence in order to separate them from one another, to make them distinct, to give them a unique sound by which we can discern them. This is necessary. Yet in all these many sounds and concepts there remains the hidden, secret power of one silence, one love, which is the power of God.\textsuperscript{119}

For Merton, the non-discursive spiritual practices of silence and solitude make the incomprehensible Word discernible, not through discourse, but through a felt

\textsuperscript{117} This experience of the unification of his identity in silence is the basis of Merton’s affinity with Heidegger’s existentialism and Tillich’s God as the ground of all being.

\textsuperscript{118} Merton, "Love and Solitude," 19-20.

\textsuperscript{119} Merton, "Love and Solitude," 19.
sense of being. Silence is the better speech for God, where silence allows the universe to speak, for ‘No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not been said better by the wind in the pine trees.’\textsuperscript{120} The wind in the trees is heard as a whisper, felt as a brush against the skin, tasted and smelt in the fresh, oxygenated air on the tongue and nostrils, and its actions can be seen as it plays with the more delicate branches and needle-like leaves of the pine trees on the monastic estate where Merton lived. God is sensed in this speech rather than articulated. God is known without being contained in language.

The falling away of words is necessary for this sense to be recovered, but once known by the individual, a return to words gains a new capacity: a capacity to have the words inhabited by the love now known consciously. This movement away from words in order to encounter the Word is an essential refining process in theological sense-making because the nature of God is not particularly suited to that form of communication. In the silence a reordering is achieved through the letting go of constructed categories and the return to sense.

Entering into silence and solitude leaves behind socially mediated forms of connection with others and socially supported notions of theology. Exiting the silence marks a return to community to share the insights gleaned in the spiritual practice. For, as Merton emphasises, solitude is not an enforced isolation from community but rather a different way of relating to community. The retreatant is motivated by a call to serve in her or his solitude and silence, believing that somehow the effects of her or his peaceful spirit are felt in the one Spirit that breathes life into all things. Merton, for example, could not have written what he did without the experience of years of silence in a Trappist monastery. Indeed, he wrote a biography at the beginning of his entry into the monastery, the popular \textit{Seven Storey Mountain} and at the end of his writing career distanced himself from it, saying that it no longer represented how he would write about God and the spiritual life. The man who began this journey is dead, just as the man who finished \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain} when this journal began was also dead, and what is more the man who was the central figure in \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain} was

\textsuperscript{120} Merton, "Love and Solitude," 15.
dead over and over.'\textsuperscript{121} The experience of silence and solitude transformed what he knew about himself, God, life, the world and the church.

When love is given communicable form in this context, it takes on some unique characteristics—unitive, intuitive, expansive, universal and yet personal, non-competitive, generative of itself and overflowing out of self towards other (both human and other-than-human entities). In a separate essay on ‘love and need,’ Merton describes love as ‘a certain way of being alive, . . . an intensification of life, a completeness, a fullness, a wholeness of life.’\textsuperscript{122} Arguing against a psychological understanding of ‘falling in love’ as motivated by need, lack and hunger, Merton argues that such a conception of love is too prone to capture by the consumer market and keeps a person immature in her or his humanity. ‘Love is not a deal, it is a sacrifice. It is not marketing, it is a form of worship.’\textsuperscript{123} Instead, love should be seen as a life force, a power that unleashes the best of humanity:

In reality, love is a positive force, a transcendent spiritual power. It is, in fact, the deepest creative power in human nature. Rooted in the biological riches of our inheritance, love flowers spiritually as freedom and as a creature response to life in a perfect encounter with another person. It is a living appreciation of life as value and gift. It responds to the full richness, the variety, the fecundity of living experience itself: it ‘knows’ the inner mystery of life. It enjoys life as an inexhaustible fortune. Love estimates this fortune in a way that knowledge could never do. Love has its own wisdom, its own science, its own way of exploring the inner depths of life in the mystery of the loved person. Love knows, understands, and meets the demands of life insofar as it responds with warmth, abandon, and surrender.\textsuperscript{124}

The experience of love beyond words is that it is not a thing that exists independent from the material existence of life, primarily the material existence of an embodied life: love is contained in the very fabric of being. Saint Augustine famously quipped, ‘love, and do what you will.’\textsuperscript{125} If a person’s intentions are

\textsuperscript{122} Merton, "Love and Solitude," 15.
\textsuperscript{124} Merton, "Love and Need," 34.
\textsuperscript{125} Jeanrond, \textit{A Theology of Love}, 22. (VII.8).
oriented towards love, which for Augustine is specifically the love of God, then a person’s actions shall naturally fall out as loving. Augustine assumes love has a consistent quality if it flows from the source of God—who is love—into the lives of people who love God. The human forms will order themselves according to the absolute form.

This change in dialectical shape counteracts certain interpretations of Augustine, such as the example of Nygren just outlined, which conclude that there is a binary opposition between human and divine loves. If the human loves are threshold experiences through which divine love is encountered, they become signs of divine love rather than sin. But Augustine himself is obtuse in this regard. In *The Enchiridion* he writes, ‘now carnal lust reigns where there is not the love of God,’ but this is not because they are mutually exclusive. It is because the human love has not acted as a threshold into divine love. Divine love, the gift of the Holy Spirit,

‘embraces both the love of God and the love of our neighbor . . . . Wherefore, all God’s commandments, one of which is, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and all those precepts which are not commandments but special counsels, one of which is, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” are rightly carried out only when the motive principle of action is the love of God, and the love of our neighbor in God.’

Is it not possible in these terms, that the sinfulness of ‘touching a woman’ is dependent not upon the sexual act itself, but on whether or not it is an expression of love. This seems to have been Augustine’s struggle in *The Confessions*, that pleasure provoked by the physical senses—sex, food and drink, even music— took on a life of its own apart from his love for God. But it is through the struggle, the difficulty, that lust is transformed into love. ‘When I have adhered to you with the whole of myself . . . my entire life will be full of you.’

**5.5 Summary**

The concern of this thesis is to explore the requirements of a theological method

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126 Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, CXVII.
127 Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, CXXI.
for contexts of change, which has been conceived through the lens of liminality theory. If love is the guide to Christian theology, what is it to continue to love through the refining movement of anti-structure and anti-form? A return to Saint Augustine has revealed that the open-space of liminality is an opportunity for the necessary work of putting love into words and speaking meaningfully about God. The disorienting confusion about the normative forms of love, its relationships and its institutions that arise in contexts of cultural change present the theologian with the opportunity to reassess the signs of love, lest they make an idolatrous mistake of worshipping the creation rather the Creator, the sign rather than the thing of love.

For Augustine, love is a matter of desire for and orientation towards a particular person, object or idea that moves us and draws our attention towards it. It is properly understood in the heritage of Plato’s erotic desire and draws attention to the movement or energy provoked by connection. Augustine plots human desire along an eschatological continuum that has tended to result in an overstated binary and a mutually exclusive opposition of human and divine loves. At one end stands sinful desire or lust—love that is ultimately directed towards the self’s own fulfillment. The movement is towards the self or a utilitarian enjoyment of the thing or person desired. At the other end, the telos of life, love is redeemed desire, where all things are loved as an aspect of loving God, loved for the way they point us to the love of God, which is, ultimately, to love as God loves.

The open-space dialectics proposed in this thesis rearrange Augustine’s linear ordering of the signs of love in to a spherical, three-dimensional shape. This allows for more than two signs of love to be considered together in an infinite variety of love’s words, testimonies and experiences. To move towards God in an open-space dialectic is to move towards the dark centre of the open-space, into a connection with God-who-is-love beyond any sign or any human construct. In an open-space dialectic, the signs of love act as thresholds for an open-space encounter with infinite, liminal love. This only affirms the usefulness of each sign; it resists the binary opposition between signs and rearranges the relationship between human and divine loves. A contemplative crossing of limit-meanings function as a thresholds into a different kind of spiritual knowing, into an expansive, unitive experience of love where human and divine mingle in intimate, mutually enriching,
continuous-present desire.
Chapter 6

Towards a Theological Hermeneutic for Contexts of Change

Bring me into the house of wine,
Set love in order upon me.
Strengthen me with perfumes,
Encompass me with apples, for I have been wounded by love.\(^1\)

6.1 Opening

The theologian who seeks nothing more than to speak humble words of meaningful sense about God must be ever mindful of St Paul’s warning: ‘if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’\(^2\) Love lies at the foundation of our lives and yet it defies our comprehension and our control, and at times moves in mysterious ways. Love is the foundation for Christian theology and yet, love is not only an amorphous experience that waxes and wanes across a lifetime, it is a transitive concept with a variety of linguistic permutations and interpretable meanings. Theological discourse tends to treat love as something stable, determinable, construct-able, at least within the confines of Christian scripture and church tradition: love is commanded, institutionalised in the ancient laws, proclaimed as the supreme act of God in Jesus’ death and resurrection. But the life of love witnesses to a different phenomenon.

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\(^2\) 1 Corinthians 13:1.
It may seem that this thesis has taken an unnecessarily circuitous route to respond to the question posed in the introductory chapter: how does love work as the key to Christian theology in contexts of cultural change? But this is the foundational rethinking that must be done to understand the nature of transitional environments and the distinct ways of thinking, believing and behaving relating to these contexts. It has been necessary to re-examine the building blocks of theological hermeneutics because the mechanisms of knowing are themselves subject to change. Human beings are essentially and always social, located within a network of relationships and any kind of personal transformation interacts with the person’s context. Theological knowledge is not only social but is also inextricably personal, dealing as it does with the most intimate connections between the self, the world, church and God. Hence, by carefully reviewing the apparatus of theological hermeneutics for the context in liminality, this thesis has considered how theology deals with human constructs in its discourse and how that relates to theology as knowledge and love.

Liminality theory provides a way of honestly addressing the social processes of cultural change at the same time as providing a framework for identifying the personal processes that form, re-form and transform individual and group identities. In liminality, the theologian must think what is difficult, through a threshold of what has come to the end of its meaningful sense, into a realm of dark knowing. Contexts of liminality have a unique anti-structure or open-space, providing a crucible for the refinement of structured aspects of knowing. By creating an open-space for dialogue through a dialectical conversation, thinking is allowed to be difficult and, importantly for contexts of change, constantly evolving.

There are three key insights that have arisen from this engagement with liminality theory. First, the anti-structure movement of liminality—that herein has been referred to by the metaphor of open-space—is basic to the unfolding of social life and meaning. Not only does this indicate that cultural liminality is not something theologians need be afraid of; it also directs attention to the transformative resources of personal liminality, which transform the sociality of theological discourse through a direct re-engagement with God.

True liminality is transitional; however, it is possible for liminality to last for an
extended period of time in post-ritualised contexts, such as the macro epochal transition of late modernity and the global liminality of capitalist culture. In fact, the process of social change within an open-space can be seen at a macro and a micro level, public and personal, cultural and spiritual. It can be traversed as a positive experience, such as a wedding ceremony might be for a family, or meditation might be for an individual. It might be experienced as an unwelcome disorientation, such as in the aftermath of a natural disaster, or the unexpected breakdown of a marriage. In this thesis it has been suggested that the personal experiences of liminality have the capacity to train individuals for the larger-scale work of institutional, cultural and epochal liminality.

A second directive from liminality theory for the task of theology in contexts of change is that the theological hermeneutics require a threshold strategy for creating a boundary around transformational open-space. The boundary of this open-space is crucial to its capacity to be a safe space for transformation. In ritual examples, a master of ceremonies persona took on this role, determining the extent of the suspension from social order and managing the physical environment in which it took place. The etymological origin of the word ‘liminality’ is based on the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold: a boundary between two fields, a doorway between two rooms, a passage from one state of sociality to another. The thresholds of open-space are essential for the role they play in ‘holding’ the liminal sphere in place, but they are also a critical bridge between non-liminal and liminal types of experience.

A number of threshold strategies for theological hermeneutics have been discussed in this thesis. A complex dialectical conversation that maps dialectical poles around the boundary of the open-space sphere creates a space for ongoing conversation that resists reduction to any singular, simple description of reality, and this allows for complication and complex phenomena to be reconsidered and for theological exposition of them to be updated and re-formed. The practice of contemplation—as a practice—holds the open-space in a different way, through the invocation of the body as a container for a different type of knowing. Augustine’s theory of language distinguishes between *signs* and *things*, which directs the use of sign-words as thresholds into a world of meaning beyond themselves. The limit of language thereby invites us to enter into the open-space of
liminal knowing beyond itself.

The thresholds and open-space stand in dialectical relationship to one another, such that theology unfolds in a constant in via towards orthodox belief and faith. However, it has been argued in this thesis that the shape of this dialectic is critical in perceiving the liminal movement through anti-structured sociality and the particular refining element of apophatic methods of knowing in theology. Liminality is best conceived in spatial terms as a three dimensional sphere, with the thresholds of limit forming a border around an open-space of liminal thinking. It is a shape and a movement that reflects the metaphor of the spiritual journey as an inward spiraling path to the heart or the soul. It resists a singular linear projection out of anti-structure towards some predetermined eschaton. Instead, the open-space investigation is held purposeful by a dialectical relationship with its boundaries.

A third important observation about theology in contexts of change is that in the open-space of liminality, theological relationships take on liminal form, which might be termed contemplative-communitas—direct, egalitarian intimacy birthed from the context of open-space rather than structured social obligation or role. If communitas describes all the theological relationships of God, then it also describes a particular encounter with God-beyond-sociality, which has traditionally been spoken of in theology through apophatic methodologies. Rowan Williams's description of theology as conversation provides a framework for perceiving the dialectical movement that apophatic methods fundamentally assume: that each conversation in theology—with the self, the world, the church and God—is representative of a relationship. In liminality, these relationships function in a direct and immediate manner, including the apophatic encounter with God that reveals God to be beyond human, noetic imagination.

A common description of this open-space encounter with God is that of darkness or dark knowing. Mystical speech is appropriate for liminality because it emphasises the direct relating that is characteristic of contemplative communitas. In liminal theology, love is an experience, not a construct or a proposition or a command. Love is an experience of connection. Theologically it is a connection with God, self, church, world and, at times, the mystical, universal other.
This alignment of liminality theory with a theological tradition of mystical speech suggests that there is an alignment of hermeneutical processes in the different levels of liminality theory that can be applied to theological discourse. Liminality theorists propose that there is an underlying structure to the unfolding of sociality in culture, in relationships, in the development of knowledge and therefore in discourse. On the basis of this observation, it has been shown in this thesis that theologians can draw upon the individual and intentional invocations of liminal spirituality—the practice of contemplation—as a key resource for negotiating the hermeneutical disorientation of large scale liminality in mass epochal cultural change. The practice of contemplation provides a kind of theological laboratory for contexts of change. What is learnt personally in the heuristic mode of liminality—holding the open space, negotiating thresholds, contemplative *communitas*—can be tested out culturally, as hermeneutical processes for the unfolding of theological discourse in relationship to both tradition and context. The crucible of prayer becomes a crucible for theological method.

A theological hermeneutic for contexts of change will love from the inside out, transformed by fresh and personal connections with the full, irreducible phenomenology of love, human and divine. In the open-space of liminality, the relationships of theological conversation have an opportunity for reappraisal, reassessment and revision of previously normative identity, activity, roles and responsibilities. The open-spaces require a holding strategy for the unique intimacy of knowledge therein,—to frame the anti-structured lack of form within. The borders of open-space are *thresholds* of structure at their limit. These three essential qualities of a theological hermeneutic for liminality—open-space, *thresholds* and contemplative *communitas*—shall draw this thesis’s investigation to its close. These tools not only make a theological hermeneutic of love in liminality possible; they are themselves modes of love, for to hold open-space for theological knowing is to negotiate the vulnerability required for the flourishing of the self in relation to an-other. This thesis shall now conclude with a descriptive summary of these three key elements of a theological method that might be called a hermeneutic of love in liminality.
6.2 Open-space

Since liminality is a notoriously slippery state of reality and in this project has applied to different layers of sociality, a key metaphor has been employed to hold together varieties of liminal experience. Liminality is an expanse of open, unstructured space best conceived as a three-dimensional sphere. In ritual, in relation to which liminality theory was originally conceived, this open-space could be a circle of people, a town centre or a wilderness environment such as a desert or a mountain. We have argued that this open-space of liminality can be applied to metaphysical spheres as well as physical ones. An unstructured, open dialogue group, for example, can be an open-space for conversation. The inner life of the human person, traditionally referred to as a ‘soul,’ can be described as an inner open-space, where felt sense, subconscious thoughts and self-transcendence can occur.

The open-space of liminality as a place of personal transformation is a common image in spiritual wisdoms. It is evident in Jesus’ insistence on being ‘born from above’ of water and Spirit: 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Knowledge of God is, in physical terms, somewhat indeterminable and certainly uncontrollable, though not entirely unpredictable or sensible. What is required to discern the wind is an acknowledgement of its qualities beyond what can be seen and heard; what is required to discern theological knowledge in liminality is an acceptance of a different kind of epistemology, a quality usually associated with faith. As Morris says in his commentary, ‘the familiar wind has its mysteries.’

Faith must incorporate what the writer of Hebrews describes as ‘unseen.’ The passage most frequently cited in this regard is the narrative encounter between Moses and God through the agency of a bush that did not burn, in Exodus chapter three. There are several aspects to the story that evoke liminal experience: Moses is ‘on the run’; the people’s faith in God’s covenant with Abraham has undergone

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3 John 3:8.
5 Hebrews 11:1–3.
severe testing through years of slavery in Egypt; God is encountered in an unexpected way, in the quintessential liminal zone of the desert, where ‘God’s response to [Moses’] fear(fullness) is not to explain it away as illusory, but to replace it with another, more powerful belief: trust in his presence’; God’s name is declared as the untranslatable ‘I am’; Scholars refer to this name for God as the tetragram, or the tetragrammaton, because of its four consonants.

Another, different kind of apophatic strategy in scripture is seen in the use of the apocalyptic literary form. Scholars suggest that the apocalyptic form often arises during times of political unrest for biblical peoples, where the realities of everyday life are addressed through symbolic storytelling that might have several layers of meaning and in which the actual time-space contexts for application are blurred. When the unfolding of ‘God’s plan’ is not clear, apocalyptic imagery enables the faithful to question theological themes. For example, in Matthew’s gospel, the writer records a question asked of Jesus about the temple and the coming of the Kingdom of God about which Jesus was prophesying in his ministry and teaching. Jesus invokes apocalyptic (symbolic) language about ‘signs of the end of the age’ that allows for several historical realities: ‘Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.’ What is certain is that God’s plan will continue to unfold; how that happens and when is left to speculation—just as in liminality: ‘Jesus speaks of some happenings that could be terrifying, but because God is in them and God is working out his loving purposes they are an encouragement to his people, not a reason for them to be afraid.’

The experience of liminality can equally apply to an individual encountering moments of unformed reality or meaning, just as whole cultures can undergo the social process of change with a liminal movement of anti-structure. Because these experiences have a common experience of open-space, albeit at radically different

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7 Exodus 3:12, 14.
10 Matthew 24:29.
levels of social consciousness, they have the capacity to interact with each other. This is the theoretical possibility raised in liminality theory, through Victor Turner’s speculation about the structures of all experience, which was tested in relation to the liminal spiritual experience of the contemplative spiritual tradition.

Sarah Coakley’s systematic theology, which privileges the practice of contemplation in its theological method, has provided a case study in which to test the proposal for the privileging of a particular type of spiritual experience in a theological hermeneutic for contexts of change. It has enabled us to re-form the notion of orthodoxy as something that happens in theo-via in theological discourse, as a goal towards which the theologian moves, rather than a proposition of unaltering meaning. In this way, creedal formulas and statements of orthodoxy can be treated as thresholds in liminal discourse; not as a negation, but as a search for their meaning beyond culturally specific formulations.

In this matching of contemplative practice with contexts of cultural change, it has been argued that the crucible of prayer unites with a twin crucible of liminality. The former refines desire; the latter refines sociality. Coakley’s method already acknowledges the importance of incorporating the social sciences as a critique different from the refinement of desire in prayer, but similar in its intended outcome. Reading Coakley with liminality theory in this way suggests an explanation for the mechanism of how one affects the other. Both require an open-space for transformation.

In the open-space of liminality, what has been known about God through an inherited tradition is lost or left behind. Whether this is received through family socialisation, regular engagement in worship, reading the scriptures or teaching from the history of interpretation of the gospel (tradition), all of this knowledge is thrown into question in the experience of liminality. Such questioning is unsettling, disturbing, disorienting, but so it should be, for that is the normal progression of human experience. Turner recognises this in his liminal theory of social drama, but it has always been testified to in spiritual writing.

In the traditions of apophatic method in Christian theology, it is St John of the Cross’s medieval dark night that best matches the experience of liminality, given
John’s emphasis on the human experience of darkness in this night, rather than the
divine darkness of direct theological knowledge, which is more in view in the early
monastic writers. St John of the Cross’s apophaticism describes how the darkness
of God is revealed and received in the midst of the darkness of human liminality.
Language about this experience is necessarily poetic and yet able to be exegeted in
reference to the tradition of theological discourse within which the individual
takes up her or his place in socialised community, inevitably after the liminal
experience has come to a close and the insights of liminal theological knowledge
assert themselves on a transformed understanding of what—for a time—made no
sense.

Love in open-space is defies language and refuses a reduction to any single form—
it is Augustine’s thing to which the word/signs of love all point. Love in open-space
is unitive, expansive, and even though its objective reality can never be separated
from the connections that give rise to it, love is experienced as an objective reality
in and of itself. It has an inexhaustible number of aspects and expressions. Love in
the open-space is the sum of all its parts, the whole multitude of particular loves
bound together in unity.

6.3 Thresholds
One of the most important insights gleaned from the use of liminality theory as a
conversation partner with theological hermeneutics is the important distinction
between the post-Kantian limit of late modern philosophical hermeneutics and the
Platonic conception of limit as a threshold at the moment of aporia, the end of
logical reason. The contemplative apophatic movement rejects the roadblock
approach to limit of post-Kantian philosophy, instead treating the limit of human
knowing as a threshold to be crossed over into a different kind of knowing. The
open-space is theologically full and erudite, though it will not easily succumb to the
rules of language and reason. By conceiving limits in this way, it is possible to re-
conceive a Hegelian dialectic, focusing on the broken knowledge in-between or
beyond the threshold of limits, to a realm where thinking is difficult.

In liminal theology, the investigation into personal spiritual experience must be
‘held’ by a strategy that frames the theological conversation such that, in
philosophical terms, the ‘unlimited’ nature of the liminal space maintains a
connection with its ‘limit.’ This delimiting of the open-space makes a discourse ‘manageable’ in terms of scope, but more importantly, it links the open-space of the theological investigation with its threshold and therefore with the aporia or crisis that has brought the discourse to the threshold of its limit. For liminality is essentially about transforming or re-forming what is already formed. It is about letting our theologies fail, in faith that a truer knowledge of God lies beyond the constructs of our own formation.

Crossing this threshold requires a bridge between two very different types of experience and epistemology, and a different set of hermeneutical tools are required on either side of the threshold. For the open-space of liminality, where form is relinquished, the threshold provides the key resource for its hermeneutic, mimicking the dialectical unfolding of experience from old form, through anti-form, to new form. In discourse this dialectic is far from a binary unfolding, dictated by the concrete demands of time. Rather, the number of dialectical poles are dictated by the number of limits in play. These limits might be deliberately or spontaneously invoked, through discipline or through the accidental (but inevitable) crises of everyday life. If invoked effectively, these dialectical poles form a shape rather than a line, an open-space where conversation can unfold in between that which has been known, and that which is not yet known.

Apophatic discourse and dialectical open-space both require a holding mechanism for the creation of the open-space where theological knowledge can begin. There is no generic mystical experience, for there is no generic human experience: it is always located in a context and that context is what is being traversed and transformed in liminal spiritual experience. This means that an apophatic movement in Christian tradition is a movement through a particular aspect of Christian theology. In contemplative prayer, this is often done through the careful choice of a mantra or symbol used to focus the pray-er’s apophatic attention. Similarly, the Dionysian model of the divine names uses a biblical reference point—a name of God drawn from Scripture—for its apophatic contemplation of God beyond the name. A narrative form of discourse might also emerge in this way, with an opening statement from the tradition, followed by a description and analysis of its negations, resulting not only in a complication of the opening statement but also a kind of poetic translation of it into non-literal or non-concrete
forms.

In scripture, this is perhaps best represented by Song of Songs and the erotic imagery of the Lover and Beloved. The history of exegesis of this book highlights the potential breadth of interpretation, such that the medieval Jewish commentator Saadia said it is like a book for which the key has been lost. The bride and bridegroom could refer to an actual couple—potentially a royal couple, which might suggest an allusion to civic life—or an archetypal couple, which might be viewed as a model for either romantic love, sex or marriage. Alternatively, it might be a metaphor—for wisdom, for the soul’s relationship with God (or the body, or the mind), for God and the people of God, and so on. In any interpretation, the beautiful words about these lovers cannot be mistaken for anything other than thresholds into a reality beyond the page. If it is the testimony of a real couple, the song speaks of the intensity of the passion between them. If it is allegory, the poetry points to a different kind of experience. As threshold communication, it necessarily invites an awareness of something beyond the limit of language, no matter how beautiful. The poetry invites a suspension of logical thinking in order to enter into another world of passion, deep feeling and transformative connection.

Williams has suggested that the nature of some of Jesus’ more incomprehensible parables was to elicit a certain ‘shock’ at their claims about God, the very nature of which results in a search beyond the words and symbols of the story to the teaching behind them. For example, the embarrassment of having to preach on the parable of the Unjust Steward and the Unjust Judge should force us to question the purpose of our embarrassment: what must be left behind in our assumptions about God? Extreme language functions, therefore, as a threshold into liminal open-space, where what has been assumed about God can be re-examined and re-formed.

Theological discourse has a variety of dialectical poles available for this purpose. In the early church, theology was most commonly associated with liturgy—a form of

\[ \text{12 J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," Bibliotheca Sacra 154 (1997): 23.} \]

\[ \text{13 Rowan Williams, The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), ch. 5.} \]
words and actions chosen for the praise of God and the edification of the people. The entry into a space of worship marks an epistemology of praise rather than creedal formulation, polemical argument or those other forms of empirical epistemology preferred in Enlightenment rationality. The formal beginning and end of worship define a clear in-between, where a different kind of theological exploration, with a different use of language (‘We are the body of Christ’), can happen, relying heavily on symbolic forms to evoke the unspeakable. Theological knowledge in this context is personal, affectual, and social or relational.

For example, in the letter to the Romans, Paul insists that the law instructs as to right and wrong, but it is not enough to know it; it must be obeyed and it is theoretically possible to obey it without ever even hearing it, if the law is ‘written on the heart.’\(^\text{14}\) Paul argues that the primary purpose of the law is not theological knowledge as such, but anthropological knowledge: the law illuminates the pervasiveness of human sin, in order that ‘sin might be shown to be sin’ and ‘reckoned with.’\(^\text{15}\) Hence, a different kind of theological knowledge is required once the law has done its job, and this is found in the person of Jesus. The Word of God is first and foremost a person, and knowledge of God is first and foremost a lived experience and response to that person, which returns the law to its proper use: ‘love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.’\(^\text{16}\)

Coakley’s proposal for a hermeneutic that prioritises contemplation demonstrates how spiritual practice can also act as dialectical poles for theological discourse, in an important respect different from liturgy. Liminal spiritual experience can be spontaneous or intentional, the latter often being the remedy for the former. It is intentional liminal spiritual practices that are in mind here, as potential functional equivalents to the master of ceremonies who holds the open-space for liminality. A spiritual practice has a limit: its beginning and end are marked by an embodied intention, however subtle. A liminal spiritual practice has an intention of ‘letting go’ in some form or another, and hence there is a ‘taking up’ at the end of the practice.

\(^\text{14}\) Romans 2:15.
\(^\text{15}\) Romans 7:13 and 5:13.
\(^\text{16}\) Romans 13:8.
Another source of dialectical poles for holding an open-space for theological discourse is from within the discourse itself. Any tenet of formal theology might stand as a threshold concept when its meaning has reached its limit or crisis. This is akin to the more usual understanding of ‘dialectical theology,’ where two or more supposedly competing dogmas are compared and contrasted in the search for right understanding. As explored in chapter three, however, liminal experience occupies the complex middle, betwixt and between dogmatic certainties, which means that dialectical conversation must always be open-ended and forced beyond the limit of what can be expressed in language. Dialectical methodology therefore cannot stand alone as a strategy for liminal theology; it must have added to it an expression of its limit, its humility and its human-ness.

Thresholds for love are as numerous as the loves themselves. Theologically speaking, every experience of love, every word for love, every non-word for love, is a threshold through which the fountain of all love can be encountered. This was Augustine’s point about signs, but it is also Coakley’s point about desire. All loves draw us in towards the centre of desire. Love is a life-force born of connection: the stirring of the soul cannot be separated from the actions that flow from its vulnerability. To act for the good of the other without connection is not love; it is obligation; it has no freedom. But I can love all things in connection to God, which is the practice of love as a Christian. I love because God loves.

The aporia of love that concerns us in contexts of change is in fact a crisis of the signs of love, not of the thing of love itself. A complex dialectical approach to discourse enables this conversation between God and human person to speak on its own terms, in the relational dynamics unique to liminality. It has been demonstrated not only that Augustine’s hermeneutic of the double-love command has the flexibility to bend into liminality, but that his sign theory of language requires it. To focus on a sign instead of the thing to which it points is to fall into idolatry. Any reduction of the expansive, complex phenomenon of love to a singular, narrow definition of love substitutes the thing of love for its sign, which is, says Augustine, idolatrous, because at its source, love cannot be divorced from God-who-is-love.

The open-space of love requires the testimony of the whole scriptures to evoke the
fullness of the movement that runs through the thread of all its wisdom. Its diverse descriptions of love, its words and its images, create a collage. Love is the shema, the Law, but also the person of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the passion between a man and a woman, and the devotion of fathers to sons, and so on. Biblical exegesis of any single passage cannot sum up love, but instead the passages must be held together in a network of theological interpretation. There are an infinite number of ways that love will present itself through the text of scripture, and each one is a threshold entry into the open-space of inconceivable fullness of love, with God at its dark centre. Complexity, plurality and perplexity are invitations to move deeper into the unitive experience of love rebirthed from the creative connections of liminal open-space.

6.4 Contemplative-Communitas

The theologian can use contemplative prayer as a threshold to hold an open-space sphere of knowing through which liminal knowledge might arise. The physicality of liminal spiritual practices like meditation and mindfulness enable the theologian to pay attention to the relationships of theological conversation through an immediacy of the senses—that is, in contemplative-communitas relating. The practice of contemplation leads the theologian into a different mode of relationships, marked by openness, creativity, ingenuity and, above all, freedom. It makes possible a different kind of response to vulnerability, which in turn enables the theologian to maintain the open-space of constantly unfolding, difficult, theological conversations. God’s unique capacity to relate out of fullness, out of perfect love, introduces the possibility of responding to change without anxiety-driven coercion, which would close down the open-space. This has an obvious impact on the experiences of love in liminality.

Furthermore, Coakley demonstrates that contemplation equips the theologian to do the theological work of liminality, because in the open-space encounter with God, the human being is transformed by God’s special capacity to hold open-space vulnerably. There is a paradoxical empowerment in the relinquishing of power in prayer because God always responds to vulnerability out of a fullness of love. The generative desire of Trinitarian relations transforms the self-gifting nature of love, so that loving freely never results in lack or loss of self. Love is given for the good
of the Beloved, but with a paradoxical reward for the Lover. It is not that there is no risk taken by God, but rather that within God's self, the risk of vulnerability is perfectly met with love, resulting in a constant generation of more love, flowing out from God's being into others beyond God's self.

This is the erotic movement of love that the mystical tradition speaks of in terms of the Divine Lover and Beloved soul, rediscovering itself in the immediacy of connection without stable sociality. The inner dynamism of love as an irresistible response to connection becomes primary as the prescribed rules of love in its externally moderated form fall away. Love will always have a tendency to tip into liminality, because its irreducible complexity can only be expressed in multiple particularities—that is, in this relationship or that relationship—and this particular experience needs to be held in tension with the universal phenomena of love, those qualities that all loves share.

Sarah Coakley's description of the refinement of desire through divine encounter in the crucible of prayer shows how the dynamism of continuous, kenotic movement in the Trinity seduces the soul into a likened movement of free love: the making of open-space for vulnerable, personal connection. Love gains momentum in the inner workings of the human person as the transformation of desire converts binary attraction to generative attraction, from self-focus to God-focus, from love of all things for their own sake to the love of all things in relationship to God, their source.

In the scriptures, contemplative-communitas is demonstrated by Jesus' claims to intimacy with God. Take, for example, the discourse in John chapters 13 and 14, which includes the giving of a 'new' commandment by Jesus to his disciples to 'love as I have loved you.' The love between Christ and his disciples is a primary sign of the love between Christ and his Father, as he declares, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me; . . . [and] I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.' This intimacy between persons is promised to the disciples, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will 'abide' with them. The love

\[17\text{ John 13:34.}\
\[18\text{ John 14:10.}\
\[19\text{ John 14:16.}\

dictated by the shema and summed up by the law assumes these relationships, but Jesus now makes them explicit. God is known 'in' a human person—in an abiding indwelling of love.

Both pronouncements combine a "vertical," one-way relationship (that is, from a Lord or King to subordinates) with a "horizontal," two-way relationship (that is, a mutual relationship among peers). Jesus takes the initiative to love (and show his love for) his disciples. Nothing is said of their loving him first, or even in return, and they are not allowed to reciprocate by washing his feet. Instead, they extend his love to "each other," whether specifically by washing each other's feet (vv. 14-15), or more generally in the daily conduct of their lives (vv. 34-35). Such a structure, with its "vertical" and "horizontal" axis, can be seen not only here but in several other New Testament passages, whether the subject matter is mutual love (see 15:12, 1 John 3:16; 4:11, Eph 5:2), forgiveness (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), or acceptance (Rom 15:7).20

St Paul continues this theme of intimacy in relation to love and knowledge in the letter to the Ephesians. In a prayer for his readers, Paul asks that 'Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.'21 Knowledge of God is located first in the personal encounter with Christ, in the inmost parts of a human person, the open-space of soul that contemplative prayer seeks to hold. 'It is then the whole person viewed from one aspect, the aspect on which the Spirit may act. It is what people are 'deep down' within themselves (Houlden), yet it is not a purely psychological term for it involves the whole person.'22 This is knowledge that transforms human lives by virtue of relationship, because to know that we are loved beyond measure is to be connected to the source of all love: 'To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'23

Returning to the hermeneutic of love proposed by Saint Augustine, with the challenges of liminality in mind, it has become evident that the multi-dimensionality of love need not be a problem but, rather, might be embraced as an

21 Ephesians 3:16.
23 Ephesians 3:18.
opportunity for a right ordering of love, just as the open-space of liminality is the refining process of sociality. Furthermore, knowledge of God’s love is given as a gift in the Holy Spirit, again in the inner open-space of the human person (the soul). Once the experience of human love is ‘refined’ by the experience of divine love, the reverse also becomes true: the human person expresses love for God, through rightly ordered love of neighbour-as-self, which Augustine outlines through his theory of ‘desire.’

In an examination of On Christian Doctrine, it has been noted that Augustine’s double-love hermeneutic is established a priori through an experience of love, rather than the philosophical strategies that On Christian Doctrine is renowned for. Love is primarily known in the inner open-space of a human person, which means that love will tend to take up a liminal position in discourse, in the same way that spirituality does, as noted in the previous chapter. Augustine understands this inner experience first to be the location of language acquisition—the word/sign of love does not make any meaningful reference to the thing of love unless it is experienced, felt and established in personal memory.

To paraphrase Gregory of Nyssa, the mystery of God’s love encountered in the open-space of the soul is energised and motivated, such that contemplative-communitas cannot help but overflow into other love relationships. Commenting on the verses from the Song of Songs quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Gregory says, ‘O how the soul—rightly likened to a mare—runs the divine race as with frequent, urgent leaps she stretches out toward that which lies ahead (cf. Phil 3:14) and is not turned back. How much she has already attained! May she thirst even more.’ Love in contemplative-communitas is generative and generous. It overflows from its abundance to desire more and express more. Therefore God commands that love of all others, as an expression of love for God’s self, is born of God’s own love, continuously aroused and performed as Lover of all.

6.5 Closing
This thesis does not answer every question about love in liminality, for in this context of transition, questions offer more guidance than answers. Instead it seeks
to dwell in the open-space of liminality where there are no firm answers, for the duration of this transformative moment in social process, in dialectical relationship with non-liminal forms of theological knowing. Answers come after liminality, or at the very least they come from the end stages, as the mind emerges from the sensory disorientation of the dark night. This thesis has sought to construct a method for theology that can dwell on the threshold of knowing long enough to delineate the limitations of human knowing and discern the difference between human imagination and divine self-revelation.

Theological method must stand open to critique, lest the theologian rely on the hermeneutics to speak truth about God rather than seeking knowledge of God beyond hermeneutics. To trust in human constructions of theology is hermeneutic idolatry. To insist on a reapplication of historical doctrine without contextual update is a denial of life lived in the Spirit, in a constant, vibrant relationship to God, whose love disturbs and disrupts our self-satisfying existence. The demands of cultural change in contexts for theology move hermeneutics into the limelight as the particular applications of universal Christian truths requires the purgative, transformational open-space of liminal unknowing. This has always been the intent of apophatic methodologies, which therefore place contemplative theology as a primary resource for theologians in context of change.

What this thesis suggests is that cultural change is not something to be feared. ‘Perfect love casts out fear’25 because love finds a way to make open-space. Divine love transforms vulnerability into paradoxical empowerment. Love teaches us that if we give of ourselves freely, we shall freely receive. The encounter with divine love in liminality—love without social constructs, love without mediation, love without rules—teaches us that the source of love is a continuous-present desire for and from connection, which needs nothing so long as that connection remains intact. It is the task of the theologian in liminality to make room for this open-space encounter with God by making an open-space in all discourse through a theology of conversation that refuses to reduce complication and insists on the relational connectedness of all life and love. Further, it is the essential task of the theologian to hold an open-space of theological enquiry within themselves and their own

25 1 John 4:18.
knowing. Knowledge of God emerges from a life lived and prayed in relationship with the inherited traditions of knowledge about God over a lifetime. It is in the crucible of prayer that the crucible of liminality will make sense. And in the crucible of liminality that the crucible of prayer will fulfil its purpose.
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