

Chapter Four [previously Three]

[precis, November 2009, followed by earlier text (previously Chapter 3), awaiting rewriting]

Knowledge, context and evasion in our encounter with God

To know God who approaches us in sovereignty as our ultimate context is to participate in knowledge and context of a unique kind. It involves acts of knowing and of inhabiting a context which are not only distinctive among such acts, but define the meaning of such acts. Seen in relation to knowledge and context as we commonly conceive them, these acts are paradoxical. In this Chapter we pursue such paradoxical testimony.

Knowledge and its context as commonly conceived

In our habitual ways of thinking about knowledge, we picture (a) the knowing subject as standing over against, and looking upon, (b) that which is known; and we tacitly picture (c) ourselves looking on at each. Should the question of the context of knowledge be raised, we now picture this as analogous to a location or viewpoint before us from which a knowing subject looks upon what is known (or can be known) from this viewpoint, and which is distinct from knowing subject as such. As a result, we tend to conceive 'knowledge' either as objective, universal, context-independent knowledge or as a subjective, context-dependent 'way of seeing things'. These habits of imagination amount to a certain conception of that 'from which' and 'to which' our knowing is directed, and of the relation between them.

Knowledge, context and God's self-disclosing approach in signs

Biblical writers testify to a God who reveals himself in action in particular historical contexts. As he does so, he also reveals the world in the deeper context of himself and his purposes. Thus people are led at once to see God through the events and circumstances of the created world, and to see the world through or from his purposes. This is the biblical character of sign: in our knowledge of God our ultimate context, knowledge and context are inseparable as one living divine self-disclosure. Here knowledge, context and the relation between them are paradoxical when seen in relation to knowledge and context as they are commonly conceived. We shall now acknowledge a series of such paradoxes.

God our ultimate context

When we practically embrace God in his approach as our paradigmatic, ultimate context, we embrace a context which is integral to the act of knowing itself. This defines anew and transforms for us very meaning of 'context'. Our ultimate context is personal and graciously self-revealing; invites us to respond in wholehearted self-giving; draws us into an eschatological mystery here and now in our provisional historical, cultural and personal contexts; and effects a continuing transformation and renewal of all such provisional contexts and the personal identity we realise as we inhabit them.

Knowing God

When we embrace God's self-disclosing approach, we embrace precisely the context of our knowing. This knowledge into which God draws us defines anew and transforms for us the very meaning of 'knowledge'. To know God is to be turned towards God in a radical responsiveness at once discerning and receptive. To be open to God's self-disclosure constitutes our most lively, self-giving personal act of both questioning and knowing, searching and finding, by God's grace. Radical responsiveness extends to waiting faithfully upon God when he is utterly concealed or 'absent'. These features of knowledge of God have been averred by various Christian authors.

Evading God, and God's redeeming engagement with evasion

The radical responsiveness to which God's approach summons us is personally demanding, and may be met with evasion. Such evasion constructs its own characteristic objects of apprehension and context of apprehension. These involve both self-contradiction and self-deception. Evasion takes two basic forms:

- (1) Dismissal: We may dismiss the challenge presented to our habitual contexts and personal attachments by the approach of God as our ultimate context. Here we dissociate ourselves (in self-concealed intention) from the demands of God, and entrench ourselves in reliance upon a false orientation and false integration of the world. This represents a premature expectation of fulfilment of hope.*

(2) *Disorientation: we may be overwhelmed by the challenge presented to our habitual contexts and personal attachments by the approach of God as our ultimate context, finding the loss of these unfaceable. Here we yield to spiritual captivity, driven compulsively by spectres and mirages. We despair (in self-concealed intention) of the world and of ourselves, in dis-orientation and personal dis-integration. This represents a premature expectation of the non-fulfilment of hope.*

The drama of divine engagement and human response does not come to an end when God's approach is met with rejection. Rather, God embraces the person who evades the demands of radical responsiveness to his approach, summoning them to embrace themselves - precisely in their evasion - as does God himself. God's continuing engagement with those who reject him is integral to his approach in the first place; it is the redemptive aspect of his approach in an act of unqualified self-giving. Redemption may be understood as the gracious act of God in which he (1) restores human responsiveness to, and knowledge of, himself in the place of evasion, and (2) restores himself as the ultimate context for human life in place of the self-contradictory, self-deceived contexts constructed by evasion.

(as above, enlarged, as basis for rewriting earlier full text)

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In the approach of God as our ultimate context, the meaning of 'context' is transformed. This new, paradigmatic meaning connects with such wider Christian themes as the doctrine of creation, divine self-revelation, election, vocation and 'belonging to' God.

In its paradigmatic meaning, with reference to God, 'context' involves more than can be comprehended by cartesian thinking.

- It engages *us in our own context, as our own deeper context*
- It is constituted by *God acting personally and practically towards us in gracious self-revelation*
- It evokes our wholly self-giving response to God
- It is a matter of responsible, obedient participation in God's purposes
- It breaks through and overcomes that which resists God
- It is a mystery beyond our fathoming in which we participate now in our provisional historical, cultural and personal contexts
- It is eschatological, directing us to deeper participation in God and effecting a continuing transformation and renewal of all such provisional contexts and the aspects of our personal identity associated with them

Knowing God

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to know God is *to direct our attention and intention wholly towards God*

- knowing God is a matter of radical responsiveness at once *receptive and discerning*
- the paradox of grace: responsiveness to God is *our most lively, self-giving act, enlivened by God*
- knowing God is a *personal, first-hand affair*
- *searching for* and *knowing* God are indivisible
- knowing God extends to living faithfully alike in the *presence and absence* of God
- to know God is indivisibly *to have faith in God*
- to know God is indivisibly *to know in communion with God*
- to know God is indivisibly *to know oneself known by God*
- *talk of God* is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace
- *the logic of talk of God* is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace

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[N.B. see end of text for outline of the content of this chapter and following chapter as envisaged March '06]

As Christians we declare faith in God - God whose approach in Jesus Christ in an act of immeasurable self-giving and self-disclosing love has been the starting-point of this book. Yet those of us who are Christians in contemporary Western culture routinely betray God by the account we give to others of our faith in God.

How do we betray God here? We do so by the way we interpret our faith to ourselves and to others. To be sure, our personal knowledge itself of God may be real; God may have aroused us to faithful worship and service; yet we may betray him *in the way we describe* these. To put it another way, as Christians we may have first-hand knowledge of God and yet betray God when we tell others, second-hand, what such knowledge is like. Again, putting it in terms of our words, as Christians we may address God faithfully and yet betray God by the account we give to others of this address: our (second-order) language about our (first-order) language may be unfaithful to God.

One occasion of such betrayal arises when as Christians we turn from God to *our knowledge of God* and *the context we inhabit when we know* God. The vital consideration here is this: God's approach has brought, in itself, a new practical understanding of what it is to know and what it is to inhabit a context, embodied in our response to God. If we are to be faithful to God, we must be faithful to this new understanding whenever we give account, to others or ourselves, of our knowledge of God and of the context we here inhabit. If not, we shall betray God. Misinterpreting ourselves, we shall betray our faith - and thereby subvert it. In practice today in Western culture we routinely fall into such betrayal.

At what point do we betray God here? Can we not refer in conversation to knowing God through Jesus and refer to the context in which we have come to such knowledge without having to go into the distinctive character of the 'knowledge' and 'context' involved here? After all, we can't talk about everything at once! At what point do we begin betraying God?

The vital consideration here is that knowledge of God does not leave the world we know unchanged. Knowledge of God transforms our understanding of the world and everything in it. Amongst other things, it transforms our understanding of *knowledge* itself and of the *context* of knowledge itself, as these arise in relation generally to the world. Our new understanding - in relation to God - of 'knowledge' and 'context' presents itself practically, and demands that we recognise itself, as the paradigm for understanding knowledge and context in general. Our act of knowing God and of inhabiting him as our ultimate context are uniquely lively, rich and deep acts by reference to which all knowledge and every context is to be understood. As such they are normative: where particular acts of knowing and of inhabiting contexts differ in character from what they involve in relation to knowing God, the former may be at once described and appraised by reference to the latter. By contrast, our knowledge of God as our ultimate context cannot be described or appraised by reference to other knowledge or contexts in general.

The issue is therefore, whether we are open to understanding all knowledge and every context in this new light from God. Do we see this as the way to understand knowledge and context, and do

we point to this for other people? If so - if we yield our world of knowledge and its contexts to such transformation - we shall be faithful to God. If, however, we reject the imperative of this transformation, then we cannot speak of knowledge and its context in relation to knowing God without betraying God.

Yet this is exactly what we do so often as Christians in contemporary Western culture. Largely unawares, *we uphold a theoretical framework for understanding knowledge and context which God challenges through the more lively, deeper, knowledge and context into which he draws us*. Instead of allowing knowledge of God to function as the paradigm for all knowledge, we allow certain habitual assumptions about knowledge to determine the paradigm for all knowledge including knowledge of God. In this process, not only do we misrepresent our knowledge of God; we betray God, because it is God who gives distinctive character to this knowledge and puts all knowledge and every context we inhabit in a new light.

In order to rise to this challenge, which God lays upon us, we must begin by attending faithfully to God himself in his approach in Christ Jesus. We must then describe this approach in terms which highlight the terms of this challenge by enabling us reflect carefully on the distinctive character of 'knowledge' and 'context' as these are embodied in our encounter with God. The previous chapters of this book have been written with this purpose in mind. In Chapter One I explored the words and actions of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection as those through which God brings knowledge of himself as our ultimate context; in Chapter Two I explored the wider biblical witness to God's engagement and self-revelation in the same terms, as the scriptures point forward to, or back to, God's immeasurable self-giving and self-disclosure in Jesus of Nazareth.

These previous chapters have prepared the ground for us now to explore further, the distinctive character of knowledge and context in our knowledge of God whom we inhabit therein as our ultimate context. In the present chapter we shall reflect upon our knowledge of God and upon God our context, exploring the distinctive character of each in relation to the God who approaches us in Jesus Christ and in relation to each other. In the next chapter we shall explore how this transforms our understanding of knowledge *as such*, and of the context of knowledge *as such* - the 'knowing' to which we rise and the 'contexts' we inhabit in our knowledge in general of the world. As we do so, we shall need to identify and critique the theoretical framework which prompts us to resist such transformation. We shall also need to reckon with the demands which knowing God presents to us, and the issue of evasion connected with this.

Could this exercise be described as providing an account of distinctive character of knowledge and context in relation to God and of the theoretical framework for knowledge and context which this replaces as a paradigm? The trouble is that any such account relies itself upon one or the other framework. To think that the former can be described 'from outside' is precisely to interpret it by reference to the framework it challenges. And this is to misrepresent and betray it. Already this has been an issue when presenting or reading the two opening chapters: our account of the distinctive character of knowledge and context in relation to God is inescapably vulnerable to interpretation by reference to the framework it challenges; and this will remain the case however much I explicate it and expose what it challenges as closed within a truer framework. Concerned with this, I have sought to challenge such misinterpretation; and in what follows we shall need to persist in this effort. We seek a conversion in which everything is seen in a new light. This is not just a change of viewpoint, but involves repentance as this light reveals previous falsehoods and distortions.

[One way of talking about this issue is to say that there is no strictly second-hand knowledge of God, no second order language *about* God [note on George Steiner's book *Real Presences*] Or to put it another way, to talk of ourselves, and our knowledge of God, and the context of such knowledge,

is not to cease attending to God as we talk; it is to remain in first-order language. And equally, to talk now about the distinctive character of such knowledge and context is to attend to God.]

What is this framework? It connotes a certain habitual ways of picturing the knowing human subject which is dominant in Western culture. I shall refer to these as 'cartesian habits of imagination'. Although these do not necessarily reflect the meaning and intention of Descartes' writing on knowledge when these are understood in their original setting, they concern a way of picturing things which has commonly been associated with Descartes and which are widespread and are taken for granted to the point of being almost invisible to us all. It must also be granted that these habits of imagination have a long history before Descartes. They have to do with the domination of theoretical thought (classical Greece), or conceptual, or categorical thinking.

Vitaly, the cartesian habits of imagination I shall describe are not just an established practice among intellectuals; they infect the secondary culture of today, and increasingly primary culture insofar as people look to experts and leaders for guidance. And they are embedded in social structures and their meaning as plausibility structures. And most serious is their relation to human evasion: they describe and normalise it while rendering invisible truer responses, and also become a tool legitimising these and their vested interests.

The habitual assumptions about knowledge to which I have referred above, which misrepresent our paradigmatic knowledge of God and therefore all knowledge, are widespread in Western culture. They are also held largely unawares. They are assumptions closely bound up with habits of mind and imagination which philosophers call Cartesianism. They may be seen as attributing paradigmatic status to theoretical thought - albeit involving a certain misrepresentation of such thought. So habitual are they that when we characterise them below, we seem to mouth tautologies; and when we challenge them with another paradigm, we seem to speak paradoxes. So deep-rooted are they that even those aroused to critique Cartesianism often retain them in hidden ways. It is likely that these assumptions are present even now for the reader of this text, and that their influence has been a live issue for the reader's understanding of and judgement upon what has been written in the preceding chapters.

In actual fact, in these preceding chapters I have often been concerned intentionally to check misinterpretation in the light of these habitual assumptions, but I have not made this intention explicit. In what follows I shall pursue explicitly this concern. Firstly I shall describe the Cartesian way of thinking about knowledge and its context. Then I shall turn to the act of knowing God who approaches as our deepest context. I shall describe the distinctive character of context in relation to God's approach, and then the distinctive character of knowing in relation to this. Finally I shall discuss the character of evasion of God.

Knowledge and its context: the cartesian picture

[Picturing knowledge: Cartesian habits of imagination]

A fundamental feature of Cartesianism is its *dualistic* worldview. Sometimes the focus of this dualism is taken to be between mind and body. However, the dualism I am concerned with as capturing most fully our imaginations is the fundamental split it posits between the knowing subject and the world.

In the Cartesian picture, the knowing subject is pictured as standing apart from that which is known. Knowledge is about reaching across the gap between the two. The thinking subject forms subjective ideas and knowledge is about a true correspondence between these subjective ideas and objective

reality. Because the knowing subject is pictured as standing in a particular location or context, the achievement of such correspondence is seen as a matter of eliminating that within subjective ideas which belongs specifically to this location, leaving only that which belongs to the location (so to speak) of that which is known. One way of picturing this achievement is to think of the location or context of the knowing subject as offering a limited perspective or viewpoint upon what is known, and to think of true correspondence with the real as achieved by breaking free of the limitations of perspective.

A problem with this Cartesian picture is that it fails to incorporate the picturing subject. And when the attempt is made to incorporate this subject, self-referential inconsistency arises. For when we adopt the Cartesian picture of the knowing subject and of what it known, we tacitly place ourselves apart from both, looking on at one and then the other. From what viewpoint do we imagine to do so? On the one hand we claim to know, apart from the knowing subject we picture, that which is there to be known by them, and to know it free of the limitations of perspective which arise for the knowing subject we picture. In terms of the picture itself, we claim for ourselves a view which is in one sense from 'nowhere' and in another sense from 'everywhere'. On the other hand we claim to know the location or context of the knowing subject we picture. And we claim to do so apart from that subject, and apart from the limitations of perspective inherent in trying to look upon one's own location.

Once these tacit claims are acknowledged, they pose a contradiction which cannot be resolved in terms of the picture itself. Either we dismiss them, holding to a naïve objectivist position, or else we grant our own subjectivity and context, and are left only with diverse subjective ideas or perspectives. Indeed the perspectival model, which seems to offer middle way, breaks down because there is no way left of integrating or judging between viewpoints so as to achieve progress towards knowledge.

The Cartesian picture distorts knowledge of God and its context. It sees knowledge of God as a matter of correspondence, demanding conformity in belief, which can be formulated without context. It sees the question put by the doubting subject. It can see evasion only as the refusal of ideas.

Especially the Cartesian picture polarises the church because knowledge of God is contextual. The transcendent, inculturated Gospel get split between fundamentalism and contextual reductionism; theology, between theology 'from above' and 'from below'.

In order to address this, we shall first testify to the character of knowledge of God and its context, which are different from how Cartesianism pictures them. We shall look first at how context is given paradigmatically in the approach of God as our ultimate context. An initial indication of both knowledge and context in God is given by considering faith.

Knowledge, context, and God's approach as sign

In Chapter One we have picked up the vital and topical question how the Gospel of Jesus Christ engages human culture. We began by affirming the dual truth that the Gospel comes to us at once *transcendent* beyond human culture and *inculturated* within it. We noted this truth eludes our understanding, however, given our usual way of picturing Gospel and culture. In this picture, culture and Gospel are placed side by side, with culture (on the one side) as the context or vantage-

point from which we see the Gospel (on the other side). It is an habitual picture which reflects Western, Cartesian ways of imagining the knowing subject, what is known, and the relation between them. Now this picture generates two contradictory ways of understanding the relation between Gospel and culture. One of these starts 'from God' - 'from above' - and the other starts 'from culture' - 'from below'. The threat of polarisation now arises between those who, adopting the former starting-point, pursue a 'objectivist-fundamentalist' approach and those who, adopting the latter starting-point, pursue a 'non-realist liberal' approach. The former seek uncompromisingly to uphold the transcendence of the Gospel, the latter uncompromisingly to uphold its contextual character. In reality, however, their shared Cartesian presuppositions cause each alike to fail: each falls short of their intended affirmation by distorting what they would affirm, while at the same time denying the proper intentions of the other.

Hope of resolving this dilemma arises when, returning to the New Testament itself, we discover in the Gospels a portrayal of how the Gospel engages human context which challenges our familiar Cartesian assumptions. In Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, we recognise God himself - God in his sovereign action towards the world - revealed as our ultimate, deepest context. All our habitual assumptions and attachments, cultural and personal - all that constitutes our familiar context of understanding - are engaged in paradox by, and are to be seen within, this deeper context. As contexts, they all become *provisional* for us as signs which find a deeper meaning in God. In Chapter One we have traced this encounter through various aspects of Jesus' ministry and of the wider witness of the New Testament.

As we explore further this portrayal of how the Gospel engages human context and culture, fundamental implications will emerge for our Western habits of thought about knowledge in general and about its context. We shall begin in the present chapter by exploring how the disclosure of God as our deepest context transforms our understanding of 'context' itself. We shall examine firstly, features of the emergent context disclosed to us in God's approach (2.1). We shall then consider at greater length a feature of this ultimate context which presents a special challenge to our familiar ways of thinking about context, namely the integral place of responsiveness to, rather than rejection of, the action of God towards us as our ultimate context (2.2). We shall see that when we are resistant to God our provisional context become constituted in one way or another as an idol; and we shall examine the twin faces of such idolatry.

Having allowed the Gospel to transform our understanding of context, finding in God's action towards us our deepest context, we shall be ready (in Chapter Three) to review in this light the history of God's action in calling people and acting through those whom he calls. This story centres upon Jesus Christ. Firstly we shall review the biblical story which finds its fulfilment in him; then we shall reflect upon Jesus himself, and especially upon him in his death and resurrection; lastly we shall review the basic features of the Church and its calling as these flow from Jesus Christ.

We shall then expand our reflections (in Chapter Four) into an account of knowledge in general and of its context. In so doing, we shall reveal the extent of the challenge posed to familiar, Western ways of thinking about knowledge and its context by the truth that our deepest context lies in the mystery of God's reign approaching us through Jesus Christ. This will complete Part One and prepare the way for our discussion, in Part Two, of the Gospel's engagement with Western culture in particular.

Our ultimate context

A transformed understanding of context

The coming of God's kingdom, proclaimed and embodied in the words and actions of Jesus, could not be embraced by his listeners within the personal and cultural framework of their lives. In its appearance as the ultimate context of life it presented a paradoxical challenge to every such framework - paradoxical because any such framework or context of understanding represents self-evident truth for those who inhabit it. These frameworks were broken open by the approach of the kingdom insofar as people responded by giving themselves up to the kingdom and looking to it as the source and context of new life.

Although we shall continue to discuss the breaking in of God's kingdom in these terms - as something which summons us through the words and actions of Jesus, and breaks open our own context of understanding - we should be clear that this sovereign initiative of God was first a summons to Jesus himself, and his own context of understanding. It is also an initiative of God which summons other people, in turn, through our own words and actions as Christians.

Now it is important that, as we think about these things, we do not slip back into Cartesian habits of thought. These would prompt us to assume that in our present account we have achieved a description of encounter with Jesus' proclamation from a vantage-point apart from this encounter and apart from the paradoxical challenge which this encounter presents to his listeners' framework of understanding. In reality, the proclamation of God encounters and embraces us even as we entertain this description, and as it does so it presents a paradoxical challenge to our own framework of understanding.

This applies in particular to the description itself of God's kingdom as the emergent ultimate context of human life. This description itself presents us with a paradox. The expression 'ultimate context' engages our habitual understanding of context and enlarges it in a logically odd way in the act of disclosing God. In other words, among all that we offer up for transformation to God as our deepest context is included our understanding of 'context' itself. We must allow the very meaning or 'deep grammar' of 'context' to be transformed by the discovery of God as our deepest context.

What are the features of this emergent, ultimate context which beckons us in God's sovereign approach? Let us consider some of its key features. As we do so, we shall not rely only upon the words and actions of Jesus in a direct way but upon the whole Christian understanding of Jesus, God and humanity explicated in the New Testament and Church tradition. We shall bring this rich understanding of the Gospel into paradoxical conjunction with our familiar ways of thinking of context, and question how this transforms and enlarges what we mean by context. Let us acknowledge that in order to effect this conjunction adequately we would need to treat the doctrine of Jesus, God and humanity systematically and in detail with this question in mind. While we shall not attempt this, I want to suggest that the following brief outline can be so developed, and I invite the reader to entertain and explore this possibility.

It should be emphasised that these features cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Also, importantly, each presents in its own way a paradoxical challenge to our habitual way of thinking about context. We shall advert to these paradoxes as we proceed.

(1) The sovereign action of God in Jesus Christ reveals itself as the ultimate context of all human life including our own, and including our own life at this moment of reflection. It engages us *in* our own context, as essentially *our own deeper context* in which we are involved.

This immediately presents itself to us as paradoxical because we usually think of any habitual context of our own as precisely not that which we look *at* but that which we look *from*. We can only look at an habitual context *from outside of* such habitual indwelling. However, we cannot step 'outside' in the case of our ultimate context. Rather God in his sovereign action towards us calls us

to the kind of deep attention and demanding personal engagement in which we come *from within* to grasp a new framework of understanding in the first place. Radically new understanding arises for us as a new subject arises for us in a new and enlarged context of understanding. In this way we must understand God coming to us as at once that which we attend *to* and which we attend *from*.

And so it remains. That is to say, God in his sovereign action towards us never becomes for us a merely habitual object of knowledge *to* which we may casually attend, nor a merely habitual context *from* which we may attend unreflectively. God always engages our present understanding, provisional context of understanding with the demands of understanding within a deeper context.

Accordingly to know God as our ultimate context *is not simply to abandon one context for another*. That which most deeply and unremittingly constituted our context before remains constitutive for our context now, although in a transformed manner which is relative to God. Looking from our provisional context, we look more deeply from our ultimate context in God; looking at the world, we see through it towards God. In this way in what we attend from and to we are more deeply enfolded in God. In this our provisional contexts, as they are now seen to be, become signs pointing from and to God.

Such knowledge is essentially *first-hand* knowledge. The possibility arises of our having second-hand knowledge of something when this 'something' is conceivable for us within a familiar framework of meaning. 'Seeing for ourselves' then becomes a matter merely of confirmation and not of new understanding. However God comes to us precisely as one who cannot be conceived within our present context, but who requires that we allow him to break open this context. To know God in this way is to find ourselves encountered personally by him, and brought by him to personal knowledge of himself. In a corresponding sense there is no such possibility as learning 'about' God, or knowing 'about' him; our learning and knowing come as we are addressed by, and respond personally to, God himself.

(2) Our ultimate context lies in the sovereign approach of God who *acts personally towards us*. It lies in a loving initiative which always reaches towards us, embracing and transforming us and our familiar contexts.

This presents itself to us as paradoxical to us, of course, because we usually think of context as the backdrop against which personal action takes place. God's initiative towards us, however, is itself a living context within which every such backdrop is itself to be located.

Similarly there is a paradoxical challenge to our understanding of what constitutes a 'larger' context. We usually think of movement into a larger context as involving the progressive abandonment of particular engagements and personal commitments. Here, however, we find that the enlargement of context arises precisely as we are drawn into the deeper personal action of God in which we ourselves are personally enlarged. Our ultimate context represents the ultimate enlargement of personhood. Accordingly if God comes to us as our deepest context, breaking open every provisional context, he also comes to us as our deepest encounter with a person, breaking open to new depths of meaning every provisional grasp we have of persons.

(3) Our ultimate context lies in *the life of God the Trinity, turned towards the world, in which we participate through Jesus Christ*. This is our deepest participation in life. Such participation is seen first in Jesus Christ and then in his followers. It denotes personal relationship with God, which is at once personal knowledge *of* God, and personal participation in God's practical knowledge of his world which is knowledge *with* or *from* God. Both these aspects of personal participation are reflected in the biblical image of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, for typically a son both lived in relationship with his father and was apprenticed to his father's business. This image of sonship was

then applied in New Testament writings to Christian believers in turn, through Jesus; they were described as 'younger brothers' (c.f.) or as sons adopted through Christ. Christian believers were also described as participating in the life of Jesus himself. This depicted by St John the Evangelist in terms of 'dwelling in' the Son, and by St Paul in terms of living 'in Christ' and of being members of the 'Body of Christ'. In both authors' writings this personal participation is linked closely to the working of the Holy Spirit, with connotations ranging from resting in the shalom of God on the one hand to 'driven' activity on the other. It is portrayed variously in terms of the life of the son in contrast to the slave, the adult heir in contrast to the minor, and of Spirit in contrast to law. It is understood as nothing less than participation in the very life of Christ himself: 'I am the vine; you are the branches' (John 15.5); 'You are the body of Christ' (1 Corinthians 12.27).

Once again we meet a paradoxical challenge to how we usually think of context. Cartesian habits encourage us to think of freedom as constrained by our framework of understanding. Here, however, freedom is found precisely in unqualified participation in the context of God.

(4) Our participation in the sovereign initiative of God, which is our participation our ultimate context, is a matter of our *free, believing response to God's call*. As such it is essentially *a matter of our personal responsibility, in an act of obedience*.

Usually we think of our freedom as constrained by the requirement of obedience to another. Here, however, we meet a paradoxical challenge to the habit of setting freedom over against obedience, initiative over against response, and creativity over against receptivity. Participation in God's mission is not at the expense of our freedom, but rather fulfils it. Our response to God is at once our most unqualified act of submission and our fullest, most self-giving act of freedom. This is the paradox of grace.

Our believing response to God as our ultimate context is also a supreme act of taking responsibility for the way things are. The integral place of response here is probed when we ask: 'Is God our ultimate context whether or not we know him to be so? Or does God become our ultimate context only in the act of our knowing him to be so?' The answer to this question is paradoxical: former may be answered affirmatively, but paradoxically with the intention that those who hear this while not knowing God will precisely in this act of hearing find their familiar context opened up to their deeper context in God, *and so come to know him as such*. The latter may be answered affirmatively, but paradoxically with the intention that those who hear this while not knowing God will come to know *him precisely as being our ultimate context whether or not we know him to be so* - that is, know him as faithfully upholding us despite our ignorance or rejection of God.

(5) God's loving initiative towards humankind demands our fullest personal response; but as it does so it meets with perverse resistance. We experience it precisely as demanding, and in the face of these demands we are tempted by strategies of evasion. When we yield to this temptation we deny our ultimate context in God. However *in so doing we effectively posit our ultimate context elsewhere than in God*. This represents an account of how we *form idols* and how we are *formed as idolatrous*. Any idolatrous 'ultimate context' which we come to posit in this way acquires its own odd character; it reflects in itself the self-evasion and self-contradiction involved in its construction and maintenance.

We should note, however, that such evasion always remains the subject of engagement by God; in Christ the saving action of God breaks through such evasion, embracing us in forgiveness and freeing us for renewed openness towards our deepest context in God. *As our deepest context, God breaks through that which resists free participation in his life*.

(6) Our deepest context in God always *remains a mystery deep beyond our fathoming*. As we are drawn into participation in the life and mission of God we discover ourselves 'out of our depth', dependent always upon being enlarged, upheld and led by God in his freedom. The life of God is always infinitely greater than our own; our knowledge is always an imperfect reflection of God's knowledge of us and of the world; our love is always a fleeting shadow of God's love for us and for the world he would have us know and love in him. Paradoxically, in God our context does not proscribe our knowledge and action but rather holds us open to endless further enlargement.

(7) Closely related to this, our present limited participation in the life and knowledge and love of directs us towards endlessly deeper participation in these mysteries. Thus our knowing God does not simply come to replace our searching for God; rather our seeking for and finding God deepen together in endless mutual enhancement. Again, our loving enjoyment of God does not simply come to replace our longing desire for God; rather our desiring and our delight deepen together in endless mutual enlargement. Each points forward to and anticipates a future end. Participation in our deepest context in God has an *eschatological* character: as a present reality it points forward to our full personal participation in the final Resurrection and New Creation.

When we know God as our ultimate context, then, our habitual ways of thinking about *context* are transformed. The context which addresses us in God impresses upon us, in itself, a paradigmatic new meaning for 'context'. We have listed some ways in which this new meaning enlarges in contradictory ways the meaning which 'context' habitually has for us. This habitual meaning, and the familiar contexts to which it refers, are now to be understood by reference to this new, paradigmatic meaning disclosed in God's self-disclosure.

Knowledge of God

[include: as has been widely testified or noted, knowledge of God has distinctive characteristics. Alister McGrath writes: 'As John Calvin pointed out,.. to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God... The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard argued that to know the truth is to be known by the truth.. "Truth is something which affects our inner being, as we become involved in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness."']

[include an acknowledgement that the kind of knowing involved in encounter with God is practical knowledge, akin to that of which Aristotle wrote as *phronesis*. refer in footnote to Bernstein and to Vanhoozer, in *To Stake a Claim*, p. 131.]

In the same way, when we know God our habitual ways of thinking about *knowledge* are challenged and transformed as we reflect upon this knowing. Knowing God bestows, in itself, a paradigmatic new meaning for 'knowledge'. It enlarges, in ways involving paradox, what 'knowledge' means for us. In what follows we shall consider some of these. We shall acknowledge that knowing God involves things which are commonly distinguished from, and yet here are constitutive of, knowledge - things such as searching, desire, trust and obedience. All of these are integral to the act of knowing in which we give ourselves wholly, by God's grace, to participate in God's own life in which he knows and acts towards us and our world. In the course of this God discloses himself, and in so doing shows us ourselves and the world in a radical new light.

We may picture the relation between knowledge of God and other knowledge as follows. Our knowledge is of many kinds. Knowing God represents the deepest, widest, richest activity in which we ever engage as persons. As such it provides the setting within which we can understand all our other kinds of knowledge. It is therefore continuous with other kinds of knowledge; but it is also

distinctive. One way of framing this distinctiveness is as follows. In the case of other kinds of knowledge, we draw various contrasts between the knowledge we have in mind and other things in the world. On some occasions, for example, we find ourselves drawing a contrast between *desiring* particular knowledge and *having* it, or between *having* particular knowledge *and using it to certain ends*. Now when we draw any such contrast, we do so within a wider imaginative world which, in this act, we inhabit as a matter of tacit knowledge whether or not we acknowledge this; the things we contrast belong alike in this wider world. It is different, however, with respect to knowing God; for this denotes precisely the act of knowing precisely the widest world we can inhabit. In this case, things which we might normally contrast with knowledge are paradoxically incorporated within it.

As we testify to the knowledge God awakens in us, we find ourselves challenging the cartesian picture of knowledge. This, we have seen, imposes upon all knowledge a picture which only really works for certain limited kinds of knowledge for certain limited purposes. To testify faithfully to the kind of knowledge God gives us of himself is to break decisively with these cartesian habits of imagination. Should we fail to offer such testimony, then however real may be our knowledge of God, we shall betray this precisely by how we describe it *as* knowledge.

Thus, just as our testimony to God calls us to testify to God *as our ultimate context*, so it calls us to testify to our *knowing* God. And just as our testimony *to God* involves speaking in paradox, so too does our testimony *to knowing God*.

[I need to clarify what is meant here by 'testimony' and the relation to this of paradox. Our testimony to God is obviously not, on the one hand, a detached account of God viewed 'from outside' by one who has no first-hand knowledge of God. But on the other hand, neither is it a statement of 'private, subjective' experience (even though testimony is not uncommonly understood in this way today as an act of self-expression: 'this is what *I* hold to be true'). To testify to the things of God is to point to God and ask 'Do you see what I mean? Is it not as I say? Is this not the truth?' We might describe testimony to God as 'radically indicative': it is indicative in the strict sense of *pointing to* something that others may look with us and see and judge for themselves. The paradoxical character of our testimony reflects precisely this: it preserves what we say from being interpreted routinely by reference to preconceived ideas without the effort of looking personally with the actor/speaker. It urges full personal attention to look and see and make sense of what is said.] [\[use this as a preface to the previous section on 'ultimate context', saying that the same applied to testimony to *ultimate context* as to testimony to *God*; here I could say the same briefly of testimony to *knowing God*\]](#)

The same testimonial character informs my conversations, in what follows, with other theologians. Knowledge of God has been the subject of much reflection among theologians and in what follows I shall draw on some of this reflection. Accordingly, my intention in quoting others is not to much to present information from an authoritative source, as to draw upon corporate reflection and debate among those who have been drawn into knowledge of God and testify to the nature of this 'knowing God'. With this purpose I shall enter into conversation briefly with G. K. Chesterton, Martin Buber, Henri de Lubac, Gabriel Marcel and Ian Ramsey among others, in addition of course to biblical witnesses.

Already in these introductory comments I have anticipated themes which I shall discuss at greater length below. Let me now list some characteristics of knowledge of God which, as we reflect upon this, mark it out as distinctive when compared with other knowledge. I shall begin by noting how knowledge of God stands in paradoxical relation to a series of oppositions which come to mind often when we set about contrasting knowledge with other things. These paradoxical features of knowledge of God are indivisible, so that the meaning of any one of them is to be understood only

by reference to those listed before and after it. These features possess no logical order among themselves. Having listed them, I shall explore them in more detail.

- ◆ to know God is *to direct our attention and intention wholly towards God*
- ◆ knowing God is *knowing the unknowable*: the mystery of God
- ◆ knowing God is a matter of radical responsiveness at once *receptive* and *discerning*
- ◆ the paradox of grace: responsiveness to God is *our most lively, self-giving act, enlivened by God*
- ◆ knowing God is a *personal, first-hand affair*
- ◆ *searching for* and *knowing* God are indivisible
- ◆ knowing God extends to living faithfully alike in the *presence* and *absence* of God
- ◆ to know God is indivisibly *to have faith in God*
- ◆ to know God is indivisibly *to know in communion with God*
- ◆ to know God is indivisibly *to know oneself known by God*

The above characteristics refer to distinctions commonly drawn in relation to knowledge and point, in paradoxical terms, to what it means to know God, and draw others into such knowledge. These characteristics give a distinctive nature to the language in which we speak of God, and to the logic of such language. We shall give this some consideration. This exploration will seem more abstract but it is of vital importance for uncovering the extent of the challenge which knowledge of God presents to cartesian habits of imagination. Briefly:

- ◆ *talk of God* is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace
- ◆ *the logic of talk of God* is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace

Let us now consider each of these in turn. There will, through logical necessity, be overlap between our accounts of them.

To know God is to direct our attention and intention wholly towards God

Knowledge is in many cases a matter of information we possess and can call to mind with little effort for our own ends. Knowledge of God is different from this. Knowing God is an act in which we turn in a very full way personally towards God, and act to which we entrust ourselves wholly. This has two aspects which are normally distinct with respect to knowledge, but here they converge: our intention and our attention.

In our habitual ways of thinking, knowledge is information which, once we have acquired it, lies at our disposal. The possession of particular knowledge is a distinct matter, in principle, from our desire for this knowledge in the first place, and from the ends to which we may choose to put it. Thus we may possess particular knowledge although we do not care much to have it; or we may have sought hard to acquire particular knowledge for some end of our own; or again, being in possession of particular knowledge we may recognise that we can use it to ends of our own, and use

it in this way. In other words, we commonly think of knowledge as property at our disposal or service for our own ends, as we see fit. Indeed in our own age there is a new push, by some people with power and private interests involved in the intensification of capitalist ideology, to secure new legal protection for knowledge as 'intellectual property'.

Knowledge of God is different from this. Knowledge of God is a matter inseparable from our aims and intentions. This is already implied by the integral relation, as we have just acknowledged, between knowledge of God and the act of entrusting ourselves, in faith, to the God who discloses the world and ourselves in a new light. To know God is to find ourselves engaged personally in a comprehensive way. This extends to finding ourselves engaged personally at the level of the aims and intentions which habitually shape our lives; we cannot hold these aloof from encounter with God, or put to their service knowledge of God; any supposed knowledge of God we can use to our own ends is not knowledge of *God*. To know God is to allow our ends to be re-oriented towards him. It is to put ourselves at the disposal of God. Knowledge of God is not at our service, but is an act of putting ourselves - and the ends to which we are habitually attached - at God's service. Thus the people healed by Jesus showed themselves, by their faith, open to receive not only the healing they wanted but also to receive, and participate responsibly in, all that God in his sovereignty might wish to bring.

To make God the end of our lives and of all that we think and do is not simply to replace one set of intentions with another. The matter is more fundamental than this. It is to allow ourselves to be shaped by a characteristic intentionality. This may be described as loving worship of God. This is a matter of active disposition of will. It is about a disposition of will in which we dispose ourselves utterly and freely to whatever is worthy of this. Knowledge of God is inseparable from a will turned towards God.

Just as knowledge of God involves our deepest personal *intentions*, so it involves our deepest personal *attention*. It is a matter of being attentive to receive all that God would have us know and understand, and to honour all that he asks of us. Whereas routine knowledge often can, once acquired, be recalled and recounted casually, knowledge of God involves our giving ourselves very fully in the act of attention to God, to the world and to ourselves.

John Wisdom has compared such attentiveness to that shown by a young child:

'Sometimes when a child sees something for the first time and we, wishing to help him to understand, tell him what it is, he hardly seems to hear us... The child still silently watches with the intentness of a lover or an enemy, only without their preconceptions. Perhaps this is part of why we are told that if we wish to find the truth, we must become as little children' (p.137)

(for adults) Such attentiveness involves being open to new self-awareness regarding concepts, assumptions and attachments - rising above casual, habitual ways into which we fall. Wisdom: 'the trouble is that the concepts, without which we do not connect one thing with another, are apt to become a network which confines our minds. We need to be at once like someone who has seen much and forgotten nothing, and also like one who is seeing everything for the first time'.

Knowing God is knowing the unknowable: the mystery of God

.....

Again, to speak of *experiencing* God: to encounter the mystery of God is not to experience the absence of knowledge - as when we have experienced a thing as present, or conceive of it as present, but here it is not so. As Denys Turner writes, we cannot be conscious of the absence of God 'in any sense which entails that we are conscious of what it is that is absent'. We are concerned not

with the experience of absence but with the absence of experience. This is how our 'unknowing' is described even in the medieval *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and it is integral to all our talk of God, and not just to certain 'mystical' experiences.

The paradox is that, just as to know God is to know what lies forever beyond knowledge, so in God we experience that which lies forever beyond experience. Denys Turner expresses well the negative pole of this paradox, while insisting that theology is 'at once and at every moment both apophatic and cataphatic'. The positive pole is expressed by P. T. Forsyth, who writes about faith as a religious experience. 'the content is the only thing that gives the experience religious value... It is the content which turns psychology into theology, thought into revelation, and experience to faith. We do not believe things *because* of an experience, but we do *in* an experience. They are true not *by* the experience, but *for* it. The content transcends in reality the experience whose language it speaks... faith is a religious experience, but religious experience is not faith' (*The Principle of Authority*, p. 30).

The mystery of God, then, is not to be equated with that which we do not know. It is not a problem, blocking access to knowledge of a thing, knowledge of the kind which we have of other things. Gabriel Marcel distinguishes between a mystery and a problem in the following terms: 'A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety. It is as though in this province the distinction between *in me* and *before me* loses its meaning.' (*Being and Having*, p.100. Marcel has in mind here not any kind of dissolution of myself but rather my fulfilment in the act of self-disposal [quote further]

The mystery of God is indeed a positive matter; indeed, as Gabriel Marcel writes, 'the recognition of mystery... is an essentially positive act of the mind, the supremely positive act in virtue of which all positivity may perhaps be strictly defined.'

Knowing God is a matter of radical responsiveness at once receptive and discerning

How shall we describe further the act of knowing God which involves giving ourselves with such unqualified intention and attentiveness to God? It is a matter of seeing God, the world and ourselves with new eyes, in a new practical way. This involves a radical *responsiveness* which is at once *receptive* and *discerning*.

On the one hand to know God in radical responsiveness is to be receptive to a whole new world, and to new life: it requires that we entrust ourselves to God in order to receive what he would give. We are to commit ourselves to him, to try to 'own' what he wants, to rely upon him, to give all weight to him, to ascribe all value to him.

On the other hand to know God in radical responsiveness is to be discerning: it is responsibly to inhabit and explore a new world and new life. We are to 'try' what he wants in the sense of testing it, to weigh, to evaluate.

It is important that we testify firmly to the indivisible, dual elements in responsiveness to God because in the cartesian picture these are set in contrast with each other. Either we rely on something, or we dissect it; either we give all weight to something, or else we weight it; either we value something, or else we evaluate it. In the former case we adopt something as our foundation; in the latter we attend to it from outside - possibly from another foundation. The two are mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, when we turn from the kind of routine theoretical knowledge which inspires the cartesian picture, and consider some kinds of practical knowledge, the two are not mutually exclusive. In effect we ask ourselves 'can I 'own' what is disclosed to me here, as meaningful and true? Can I embrace, with understanding, something as revealing itself to me here? Let me try...'. In the same way we test whether we can perform a particular task or acquire a particular skill precisely by trying to do so, in a self-critical way. Our critical appraisal is 'from within'.

This is how it is when we enter a new world and new life - inescapably 'from within', but always enlarging us. In a sense our evaluation here is of what counts as fair evaluation and valuing; we weight what counts as true weighing and deserved 'giving weight'.

The paradox of grace: responsiveness to God is our most lively, self-giving act, enlivened by God

In our habitual ways of thinking, activity and passivity are, at root, opposed: either we do something, or something is done to (or happens to) us. In the case of a complex event we may be active in certain respects and passive in others; the event can be reduced to aspects in which activity and passivity are evident and mutually exclusive. They constitute a 'zero-sum'.

This way of thinking bears upon the picture we have just considered of radical responsiveness. We usually think of receptivity as a passive affair, and judgement as an activity. These are two mutually exclusive matters.

However, in knowledge of God, receptivity and judgement are inseparable. To receive from God and to give oneself to God are one; the former immediately entails the latter. This constitutes a paradox - the paradox of grace. The basic paradox is that the activity of God towards us does not demand or entail our corresponding passivity; on the contrary, it is an action which awakens in us a corresponding lively act, a demanding self-offering and openness in which we receive the gift of God. [not a zero-sum action] Our fullest act of receiving is paradoxically our most lively personal act.

God is the initiator in this. To know God - indeed already, to seek God - involves opening up personally to the discovery of oneself as personally sought and known, approached and engaged, in a radical way. That is to say, it is fundamentally a matter of *response*. Seeking and knowing God is, with varying degrees of self-awareness, response to a most vital, beckoning presence, a most arresting approach.

This response itself is, in a corresponding way, of the most lively kind. By its very nature, in our response to God we give ourselves personally without reserve. We give ourselves in an unqualified way to discovering and knowing God, and to knowing the world in the ultimate context of God. This is a practical affair, a lively pursuit of responsibility. Our response to God, expressed in other words, is of love for God and of loving service to God in the world, seeing God and the world as he shows them to be. The vitality of this response reflects the vitality of the One to whom we respond; it can be seen as a participation, by grace, in the vitality of God himself as he reveals himself to us.

The grace which characterises our response to God is a paradox - the great and deep paradox which, as Donald Baillie writes, 'lies at the very heart of the Christian life and vitally affects every part of it'. X From it flows a new way of seeing and acting towards the world, nourished by God. As Baillie writes, 'Never is human action more truly and fully personal, never does the agent feel more

perfectly free, than in those moments of which he can say as a Christian what whatever good was in them was not his but God's.'X

We have seen how, when God approaches us as our new and deeper context, he does so by engaging us in lively paradox so as to break open our familiar contexts of commitment and understanding and draw us into a lively, demanding personal response to a new world under God's sovereignty. We are now reminded once again that, in the grace of God at work here, paradox marks the character of this event itself: God's approach yields our most free, personally creative construction of a new world.

De Lubac

The paradox of grace is reflected in both the will (intentionality) and the attentiveness which characterise knowledge of God. The will is one of worship and obedience; yet it is our most lively act of willing. Our attentiveness is evoked by God himself, but it is not passive; it is a most lively act in which we give ourselves without reserve. Gabriel Marcel writes of contemplation, which is *par excellence* the practice of sustained deep attention to God, 'there is no question here of a passive state... we have completely lost sight of the classical idea, taken up and enriched by the Father of the Church, that contemplation is the highest form of activity' Being and Having, p. 191)

We shall consider further the liveliness of knowledge of God in section 8 below.

Knowing God is a personal, first-hand affair

It is possible for us generally to know something by report, or second-hand, without seeing it for ourselves. We can make a distinction between first-hand and second-hand knowledge. These are clear alternatives when, for example, we literally see some piece of data or are informed of this data by someone else.

However, in many areas second-hand knowledge is inferior to first-hand knowledge. Knowledge of a work of art is an example of this; and connoisseurship; and moral judgement. Especially when it comes to relationships of depth between people, to know someone personally involves much more than knowing them from a description by a third party.

When it comes to knowing God, this is essentially first-hand. This is paradoxical

'You cannot talk about God; you can only address him', Martin Buber said. At first sight this may seem a blanket prohibition upon theology. As if all we can know is *what we bring to God*, who remains himself unknowable. However, his meaning is found when in I and Thou he says 'God is the eternal Thou, which by nature can never become an It'.X This is not a prohibition of knowledge, but an insistence that this is personal. It points the hearer to look and see for themselves, to attend and receive and ?submit. 'I-It' talk is therefore about information available in principle for us to use to our own (prior) ends. It is theoretical knowledge of possible instrumental value. What Buber declares is that with regard to God, the question of such knowledge does not arise.

So when Buber says we can 'only' address God we are not saying that we can do no more than this with regard to God, but that we can do no less. Seeking God or asking about God is something we *do for ourselves*; and any knowledge of God we attain is something we know *for ourselves*. We are not saying that all we can do is ask and answer our own questions about the reality of God because that reality does not make itself known. Rather we are saying that the reality of God makes itself known and in so doing empowers us precisely to take responsibility for itself

The question of God is not only a question we ask *for* ourselves; it is a question *we ask ourselves*. We do not simply ask another, accepting as an answer what we do not know for ourselves.

This is not private. Asking ourselves does not mean turning from the other; it means searching to know for ourselves. The other opens our eyes to see for ourselves. Again it is not public in the narrow sense of information available for use; it is knowledge which makes claims upon us, and matters not because it matters to us but rather, it matters to us because it matters.

Buber's own dictum is of this kind. It claims itself to speak of God - by pointing to a paradox which requires us to attend personally.

On the other hand, our address of God is our fullest, most unreserved self-giving personal act. For us to address God is not to throw something, so to speak, in the direction of a God whose reality we already grasp, but to throw ourselves without reserve into engaging with God. This is from beginning to end something we must do for ourselves; we must look for and listen to God for ourselves; and we must offer up our whole world of meaning and value to be renewed by God in this moment. In so doing we take nothing for granted, we leave nothing to God; we take full responsibility for God in our situation. Or more precisely, we participate in God's act of taking responsibility for himself and for us.

Searching for God and knowing God are indivisible

In our above reflections on faith or trust in God, we acknowledged that the issue of faith generally arises where we are conscious of something we do not know. We conceive the act of trusting something as strictly alternative to knowing it. The same circumstance gives rise to the issue of questioning; and we conceive this too as strictly alternative to knowing; we question precisely what we do not know, or doubt; once we have an answer, we no longer question. Questioning is also alternative to trusting: where we do not know, we either trust or question.

The contrast between knowing and questioning is clear enough where the object of these is a routine data claim. Here to question is to ask about the correspondence between a subjective idea and reality, and to answer it is affirm such correspondence. The act of questioning originates with the subject, who freely posits doubt about a conceived correspondence.

However, questioning is less readily understood as 'doubting posited knowledge' where it is a matter of searching, or exploring, in a wider way than this. Here questioning incorporate a readiness to allow one's own presuppositions to be brought to light and questioned. It is to stand under the truth in order to understand it. In the case of dialogue at personal depth between people, to question allows the demanding possibility that one is oneself questioned by the knowledge of the other, which precisely informs this questioning.

When it comes to knowing God, the acts of knowing and of questioning are paradoxically indivisible. Questioning is radical, and includes self-questioning, and this is itself an act of knowing as we open to that which interrogates us. Such questioning is already knowing, and is not displaced by knowing, but is further enhanced by it. Seeking and finding interanimate each other in ever deeper searching and finding. Ebeling writes:

According to biblical usage the quest of God certainly does not mean that He is then found in a way that puts an end to the searching and the questioning. Rather it is a searching and a questioning which is stimulated more than ever by the true knowledge of God, so that the

true quest of God is possible only for the man who has found Him. To have found here means, to abide by the search for and the quest for God.'

This is, from one point of view, what we mean by the 'mystery' of God. Eric Mascall writes 'It is rather as if we were walking into a fog with the aid of a lamp which was getting steadily brighter... thus in the contemplation of a mystery there go together in a remarkable way an increase both of knowledge and also of what might be called conscious ignorance.' ..also 'a mystery, while it remains obscure in itself, has a remarkable capacity to illuminate other things.'

Gabriel Marcel distinguishes such mystery from the problematic. Whereas a problem bars our passage, the mystery of God draws us forward. He writes:

We must carefully avoid all confusion between the mysterious and the unknowable. The unknowable is in fact only the limiting case of the problematic... The recognition of mystery, on the contrary, is an essentially positive act of the mind, the supremely positive act in virtue of which all positivity may perhaps be strictly defined.'X

Julian of Norwich writes of how, in our engagement with the mystery of God, seeing and seeking interanimate each other:

'I saw (God) and sought him, for we are now so blind and foolish that we can never seek God until the time when he in his goodness shows himself to us. And when by grace we see something of him, then we are moved by the same grace to seek with great desire to see him for our greater joy. So I saw him and sought him, and I had him and lacked him; and this is and should be out ordinary understanding in this life, as I see it'.(Showings, p.193)

Julian also testifies to God's initiative in this when she writes 'I am the ground of your beseeching'.

What, then of Tillich's account of God as the answer to human questions. His 'method of correlation' is inadequate insofar as it posits human questioning as prior, and lacking - opposite to having - the answer. It is fruitful insofar as it can allow that our human questions about existence, when they are truly asked, are precisely inspired by God; it is God who empowers us to ask them rather than to evade them.

T. F. Torrance describes how such empowerment comes through Jesus. He writes 'true questioning involves a backward movement of critical revision of its premises and a forward movement of reformulation of its questions. The further questioning is pushed, the more radically preconceptions are called into question, until real listening becomes possible and judgements are formed under the compulsive power of the objective reality. Genuine questioning is a strenuous form of repentance.... Who can question like this? 'taking our questions on himself, the Son of God has put his whole being into his questioning, so that though they are our questions, they are yet questions from the centre of God, capable of an answer from a centre in God - that is, questions so shaped by the object of their enquiry, the divine nature, that they are fruitful questions, yielding the fruits of their enquiry, in the true knowledge of God the Father.'

Knowing God extends to living faithfully alike in the presence and absence of God

The relation between knowing God and searching for God has another important aspect. As we have just seen, in our knowledge of God the contrast which holds in general between knowing and searching is paradoxically changed: the *activity* of searching is intensified, rather than left behind, in such knowledge, while the activity of such knowledge is already present in the activity of questioning. This account pays attention to the *activity* of searching or questioning as a movement

forward into deeper understanding. However, a second account can be offered which pays attention to searching or questioning in its aspect precisely as the state of *absence* of knowledge.

Here again, knowledge of God presents a paradox - this time to the contrast which holds in general between knowledge and absence of knowledge. Within knowledge of God, these are indivisible. The point is that the orientation towards God, which is the direction from searching to finding, from questions to answers, remains even when there is no movement, and questions remains unresolved. That is to say, the truth remains indeterminate even in its power to shape our questions. Our searching is reduced to simply waiting for God to reveal himself giving life alike to our searching and finding.

How does this constitute knowledge of God? It preserves the integrity and indivisibility of questions and answers. It refuses to turn away from this absence and find its own answers; equally it refuses to adopt the view that this absence is the last word and that there *is* no answer. We shall explore these evasions later in this chapter.

This is what is meant by experiencing the absence of God in the life of faith. It does not simply negate all knowledge of God, but leaves us the task of obedience in the form of waiting. This is not passive, but involves acting in the light of all that we have learnt is participation in God's widest horizons: obedience is demanded by God's absence and constitutes our faithful waiting for his return.

To know God is indivisibly to have faith in God

We may summarise what has been said so far by referring it to the relation between knowledge of God and faith in God as these are portrayed in the Bible.

When we speak of 'having faith' we think generally of when we do not know something personally, and face the question whether or not to act as we would if we did in fact know it personally. Seen in this way, 'having faith' is about trusting in something despite the fact that we do not have sure knowledge of it for ourselves. We may trust that a certain claim is true, or that some event will occur, or that a certain medical procedure will work; we may trust certain officials, professionals, experts or institutions to fulfil their designated roles. In each case the question of our trust or faith arises where we *do not know* or *cannot do* something personally for ourselves.

This way of picturing trust or faith can easily divert our attention, however, a more fundamental truth: the act of trust or faith is in many cases precisely a most personal act of response. In deep relationships with other people, our knowing them and trusting them are closely bound up; we can hardly conceive the one without the other. And when it comes to knowing God, knowledge and trust or faith become indivisible: paradoxically our knowing him is constituted precisely by our trusting him.

This is apparent when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. Speaking in parables and paradoxical challenges, he brought new knowledge of God by opening people's eyes to God's sovereign approach. He sought an act of personal recognition. But this required people to see *precisely with the eyes of faith*. Equally, when Jesus healed people, he looked for them to show faith *precisely by recognising and knowing for themselves*, in such healing, God's approach.

This paradoxical indivisibility of knowledge and trust presents a demanding challenge to cartesian habits of imagination, which hold the two mutually exclusive. It is vital that we honour these

demands, and not evade them by interpreting what Jesus said and did in ways which enable us to rely undisturbed on the cartesian picture of mutual exclusion.

One such inadequate interpretation holds that the act of faith which Jesus sought to awaken was directed towards himself and limited to faith in himself as an authoritative guide to what people could not see for themselves. In reality, as I have said, Jesus wanted people to have the faith to see for themselves. This makes faith more like the faith which a trainee or apprentice places in their tutor, through which they learn to look and see for themselves as does their tutor. However, this model is inadequate in turn insofar as it limits faith to a temporary state of affairs: the faith of apprentice in tutor becomes redundant once they have mastered skill and personal knowledge of their own. Here faith and knowledge retain still their cartesian opposition. By contrast, the faith Jesus seeks is directed, and always remains directed, towards the God who approaches making himself known. Such faith is not directed *away* from God towards Jesus, but towards God *acting through* Jesus; and such personal knowledge of God always remains *through* his Son.

Another interpretation evades demands upon cartesian thinking is as follows. We hold that the faith which Jesus sought was a response to what a person already knew, a decision to live trusting his message of the coming kingdom of God. Theirs would be like the faith of a doctor in clinical trials and reputable research on new pharmaceutical products; it falls short of personal knowledge. Again this analogy contains a valuable truth; 'the life of faith' to which Jesus calls people involves much perseverance in living by what one 'does not yet see'. Nevertheless, the faith Jesus sought was already at work when a person listened to Jesus' message of God's approach and there dawned upon them recognition of its truth, and faith remains oriented implicitly towards such recognition even when God seems absent.

The paradoxical faith Jesus seeks is a *radical* trust in God which lets go habitual commitments, beliefs, and all that we hold precisely as knowledge in the act of reaching out to receive God and his world anew as true knowledge. Here all that is familiar is entrusted into to the deeper context of a new, unfolding world which God discloses to us practically in his own approach. Such faith is about entrusting ourselves unreservedly to God, receiving from God what can only be received in such an act. In this faith we count God as himself definitive of radical trustworthiness. Such faith is a matter of attitude, heart, or will, and is inspired by God himself.

Such radical trust goes beyond trusting God for certain things within a familiar world, or even trusting God whatever he does in a familiar world; it means entrusting ourselves and our world to God. It is that this point we are reminded that trust in God is not a quiet reliance but a most lively opening up of oneself and giving of oneself to discerning and participating in whatever God wants: it is innovative, creative, responsible, and a vigorous act of worship.

The radical nature of such trust also affects what it means to have faith in God in his absence. As we have seen, this is about times when seeking and finding do not move forward, but remain unresolved. The temptation arises either to seek false resolution or to give up on resolution. Here, radical faith involves living in the space of this unresolved question, entrusting oneself practically to the truths of God as to a void, waiting obediently for an unknown gift. This is what Jesus, above all, did in his crucifixion.

To know God is indivisibly to know in communion with God

It is one thing for us to know a person, and another thing to know what that person knows. The distinction between the two is clearest when 'to know' refers in each case to pieces of information casually known.

In our deepest relationships with another person, however, our knowledge of a person and of what they know are closely bound up. To know them is to enter into their world, and to see the world to some measure with their eyes. C. S. Lewis, writing of love between friends, quotes Emerson: in this kind of love, he says, "'Do you love me?' means 'Do you see the same truth?' - or at least, 'Do you care about the same truth?'" In other words, to know another person deeply is to enter into the world of that person's ideas, concerns and activity.

When it comes to knowing God, knowing God and 'knowing with' God are paradoxically indivisible. To know God is precisely to enter into God's world, so to speak, and look upon the world as he does *in communion with him*. Insofar as we do so - and this is always a provisional affair - we find our own world set in the context of a new and deeper world.

One way of putting this is to say that, while to know God is always to see God from our familiar world, to know God is also indivisibly and more deeply to see the world (including the presuppositions we habitually bring to it) from God.

Accordingly, knowledge of God flows into knowledge of the world. At a deep level it frames a worldview. But it is also practical knowledge: to know God is to participate by God's grace in the work he is doing in his world, seeing the world as he sees it in this work. As we saw earlier, the status of Christians as 'adopted sons and daughters' of God implies a kind of apprenticeship to God in his work, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

I have compared our knowledge of God with raising our eyes to find ourselves in a person's loving gaze. It is also, we are now reminded, like seeing in a person's company and with their eyes. Importantly, neither of these is like looking *at* a person's eyes. It is rather to look out into a bigger world than the one we inhabit.

To know God is indivisibly to know oneself known by God

This is echoed in a variety of terms in the bible, from covenant ('you among all the nations have I known' (...)) to more personal devotion to God. 'Keep me as the apple of your eye' prays the psalmist, asking that God gaze attentively as a mother watches over her child. The theme of living 'in the face of God' has been explored by David Ford; it offers the contrasting images of God's face shining upon his people and of his face turned away. When, in the New Testament, refers to the defining event for new Christians, he can write: 'now that you have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God'.

It is one thing for us to know a person, and another for that person to know us. The distinction between the two is most obvious, perhaps, when such knowledge comprises statistical data; for example, in matters of commercial or police surveillance we may have much data about a particular person while they have no such knowledge about ourselves.

In our deepest relationships with another person, however, our knowledge of them and their knowledge of us are closely bound up; it becomes hard to conceive the one without the other. And when it comes to knowing God, knowing and being known are paradoxically indivisible: the One we know, we know as One who knows us. So to speak, raising our eyes to God we find ourselves in the gaze of One who has himself, as we now we realise, raised our eyes to him. Moreover God's knowledge of us precedes our own knowledge of ourselves; it is deeper, inviting us to learn more deeply who we ourselves are.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, icons of Christ are sometimes crafted in metal with the eyes of Christ looking upon us as a space or window through which the beholder is invited to see the gaze of God.

In the Old Testament, it is God's knowledge of Israel which constitutes them as the chosen race, whom he has chosen to know him. The psalmist speaks of God whose face is turned towards his people; memorably in Psalm 139 the author expresses wonder at the depth and comprehensiveness of God's knowledge of himself.

Jesus teaches his disciples that God holds them in his care, knowing them in the most intimate way: 'even the hairs on your head have been counted' (..) The mutual relationship God intends for them is expressed in the fourth Gospel: 'I am the good shepherd: I know my own and my own know me - as the Father knows me and I know the Father (John 10.14,15).

St Paul places God's initiative in this regard before Christian knowledge of God: 'now that you do acknowledge God - or rather, now that he has acknowledged you..' (Galatians 4.9). But God's knowledge of us always exceeds our knowledge of him, until the final resurrection; Paul writes 'my knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me'. (1 Corinthians 13.12).

P. T. Forsyth asserts the primacy of the latter as follows:

'We find him because he first finds us. That is to say, the main thing, the unique thing, in religion is not a God whom we know but a God who knows us. Religion turns not on knowing but on being known. The knowledge in religion is not absolute knowledge but the knowledge that we are absolutely known, in the sense of being both destined, sought, and searched'.

Our 'knowledge that we are absolutely known' is personal. Paul Minear writes: 'God's address crystallises a new and peculiar kind of self-awareness. He speaks to man directly and personally... the upshot of such a dialogue is a keen awareness on the part of the listener that *he is known*, and this awareness conditions all areas of consciousness.'

Talk of God is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace

How does lively knowledge of God relate to other knowledge as its paradigm? A lead is offered by G. K. Chesterton who, in a well-known passage in *Orthodoxy*, considers the vitality of knowledge in the case of God's knowledge of the world, that of infants, and that of our own. The passage occurs in an argument opposing the secularist assumption that a world marked by repetition - repetition of the sort upon which experimental science relies to establish cause and effect - contains only dead, 'mechanical' processes and does not testify to the personal action of a loving God:

A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have unbounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.'³

Chesterton sees in the human infant, then, a vitality reflecting that of God. This vitality is lost when we 'sin and grow old'. How shall we understand this vitality? Is it a matter of subjective feeling which happens to accompany an act of comprehension? Rather, such liveliness belongs integrally to the act of comprehension in the first place. God sees his creation and, full of life and full of love, delights in it. This defines creation for what it is, and shows what it means to see creation for what it is: when we see the world in this way, as God sees it, we see it as it is.

The fact that 'we have sinned and grown old' does not mean, however, that we cannot be revived to see the world as God sees it. Thus the lively delight with which an infant discovers a meaning and truth - a lively delight reflecting that of God in his creation - can be renewed. Chesterton describes how fairy tales try to achieve this:

'when we are very young children we do not need fairy tales: we only need tales. Mere life is interesting enough. A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door.... (nursery tales) say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water.'⁴

Metaphors work in a somewhat similar way. Like references to golden apples or rivers running with wine, they involve unexpected conjunctions which arouse our imagination in a lively act of comprehension. However, like references to green apples or rivers running with water, as they become familiar to us they can lose their power to enliven us. Metaphors can 'die'. Thus we speak routinely of a computer mouse or the leg of a chair without that lively moment of recognition in which our eyes are opened by a metaphor. Religious metaphors and paradoxes are distinctive in that they are 'undying': if they are understood in a routine way, without mediating lively recognition, they are misunderstood; they fail to refer us to God. We shall give further attention to religious metaphors and paradoxes below.

How, then are we to understand the liveliness characterising knowledge of God, infant discoveries, and metaphorical disclosures? Let us start with metaphorical disclosure. Here we are invited to see one thing 'through' another; technically the former is called the 'tenor' of the metaphor, which seen through the 'vehicle'. In a 'living' metaphor, vehicle and tenor mutually inter-animate each other, and this gives rise to the disclosure of a new referent.^X In other words, what is indicated in a lively metaphor cannot be known routinely beforehand - a lively metaphor is not reducible - but discloses itself through the metaphor; and the metaphor is integral to this disclosure.

When we turn now to Chesterton's passages on infant discoveries, we are reminded that such lively disclosure does not depend upon bringing together familiar things in unexpected ways; it is characteristic of our original acts of comprehension, before these fade in vitality. The fact that, once this vitality has faded, it may be restored for us by unexpected conjunctions does not mean that it belongs within a prior world which is familiar to us in a routine way. Rather it points to the lively context in which this familiar world originates in the first place. .. God

The logic of talk of God is distinctive in character, mediating the paradox of grace

Caird on metaphors. Paradox is a limiting case. It is characteristic of religious disclosure, although not always explicit.

Paradox is not simply contradiction. Crossan offers a good image of sailing into the wind.

Perhaps the most sophisticated account of this is offered by Ian Ramsey. Present this.

Then critique it:

acknowledge self-reference: 'logical impropriety' is itself logically improper.

discernment not prior

disclosure breaks open existing framework of meaning

We'll explore this further in terms of tacit knowing, via Polanyi.

Evasion of God

[here is the point to set out a range of connotations for dismissiveness and capture/seduction/disorientation]

'The kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe the Gospel'. When Jesus proclaims the in-breaking sovereignty of God, this demands a response of 'repentance' and 'belief'. What does this involve? And how does this accord with our understanding of the dawning sovereignty of God as our *ultimate context*? Surely 'context' signifies, so to speak, what we respond *from*, not what we respond *to*? Such is the paradoxical challenge to our Cartesian habits of thought presented by the place of belief and unbelief in the context of God's sovereign approach.

In Chapter One we have noted in passing how Jesus sought a response from people which might be characterised as a matter of *discernment* and *commitment*: discernment as people saw for themselves the secret truth of the in-breaking sovereignty of God, disclosed in the paradoxes of Jesus' teaching and activity; commitment as people responded to Jesus' summons to offer everything to God. This corresponds with Ian Ramsey's account of a 'religious situation' as one marked by a religious discernment and by a commitment which is unqualified both in depth and scope. I suggest that this situation may also be seen in terms of our response to God as our ultimate context, as follows.

An essential feature of God's approach is its paradoxical challenge to every human context. God's approach breaks open every such context. Clearly, then, apprehension of God requires of us more than the kind of routine attention we give to things within an established framework of meaning. Also, response to God involves more than it does when we respond to something apprehended within an established framework of meaning. In the latter case, the question of how we respond does not arise until we have apprehended something. We cannot believe a claim to be true until we have understood it; we cannot obey an order until we have understood it. By contrast, when apprehending God our response is integrally part of this apprehension itself. This is why, encountering God, we find ourselves participating in the life of the one whom we encounter.

Again, we have seen that openness to God involves more than abandoning one context or vantage-point for another. Nor is it equivalent to adopting a new hypothesis. Rather it involves offering up our familiar world and familiar context in an act of radical responsiveness to the new. In the course of this our familiar contexts are revealed as signs pointing to the new. The demands of such responsiveness are great; we cannot receive God's self-revelation passively, or participate in our ultimate context unreflectively.

Such radical responsiveness has a dual character. It is open at once to adopting whatever we are required to rely upon in an act of personal commitment, and to discerning that reality which presents itself to us. Accordingly, presented with the paradox of God's approach, in radical

responsiveness we pour ourselves into the paradox, so to speak, relying upon it as the source of possible new meaning, on the one hand; on the other hand we hold to ourselves our powers of judgement in order that we may see meaning for ourselves in this paradox. In such a way our radical responsiveness is constituted by the intention at once of 'trying to' see, and 'trying or testing whether' we see; or the intention of at once 'giving weight to' a revelation, and 'weighing whether' it is such. Correspondingly, when new understanding arises it is characterised at once by commitment and discernment, in which what we rely on and what we attend to mutually inter-animate each other.

Sometimes these two elements within responsiveness settle down into two distinguishable acts within knowing, becoming respectively (1) an habitual, unreflective commitment and (2) an act of critical assessment which rests upon this commitment. Associated with the former is our familiar context of understanding; associated with the latter is that which we view from within this context. In the case of our knowing God, however, lively inter-animation remains between our commitment and discernment, and between the context of our viewing and that which we view. Accordingly that through which we know God, by way of a sign, is at once that from which we look to God, and that which we see from God; it participates in the discernment and commitment in which we know God through it.

What, however, of unbelief? How shall we understand this? We have seen that radical responsiveness is a personally demanding affair. Unbelief connotes the evasion of these demands. Yielding to this temptation, however, we effectively posit our ultimate context elsewhere than in God. I have said that such false 'ultimate contexts' reflect the self-evasion and self-contradiction in which we construct them. Can we elaborate on this?

Evasion of the demands of radical responsiveness to God has two faces which can be thought of as two ways of evading the demands of responsiveness to the paradox in which God confronts us. One involves our denial of the paradox; the other involves our being overwhelmed by contradiction. The former may be characterised as the *dismissive* face of evasion, in which we cling to our habitual framework of interpretation, maintaining what now becomes a falsely closed integration of our world. The latter may be characterised as the *disoriented* face of evasion, in which our habitual framework of understanding collapses and, failing to rise to the demands of new integration, we lapse towards dissolute passivity and personal despair. Both are present together in evasion, each one haunted by the other; characteristically, however, one face or the other is presented uppermost. Let us consider each in turn.

I am aware that what I am writing here may seem to some readers to introduce psychology into a discussion of belief and unbelief in an improper way. Sufficient answer to this will, I hope, unfold in the course of what follows. Meanwhile I would only point out that all knowledge is personal; that knowledge of God is that in which we are most fully engaged and self-expending as persons; and that this knowledge is inseparably linked, in the testimony of biblical and Christian tradition to a heart filled with trust, hope and love, and its absence to their absence. It may happen that these are regarded by some today as 'psychological' phenomena, but they are indubitably central to Christian belief.

Evasion: its dismissive face

The first way of evading the demands of opening up to an emergent deeper framework, I have said, is to deny the existence of these demands from within our familiar framework of understanding. Instead of yielding up this familiar framework in the task of responding to that which newly confronts us intimating an emergent deeper context, such intimations are dismissed and what confronts is construed (insofar as it is acknowledged at all) by reference to our existing framework.

Do we find examples of such dismissive evasion in the Gospels as we read how people responded to Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom of God? There would seem to be a ready example in the rejection of Jesus by many scribes and pharisees. Many of these held strong views on religious matters. They presented themselves to their peers as religious leaders and role models, and policing the behaviour of the population. They laid great store by cultural conformity to outward rituals relating to, for example, sabbath observance and ritual cleanliness; they seem to have regarded this as the key to preserving the identity of the Jewish nation as God's chosen people under continuing occupation by foreign powers, and as the way to secure the blessing of God's promised future sovereignty. Jesus challenged this framework of understanding, and led people to a deeper grasp of God and of what it really meant to embrace God's sovereignty. Many scribes and pharisees resisted this challenge, dismissing any possibility that it was 'of God'. Clinging to their familiar framework of understanding, they saw Jesus merely as leading people astray.

Dismissive evasion is to be found more widely than in encounter with God. While the approach of God necessarily requires us to yield up our familiar framework of understanding, there are other encounters and situations which demand that we do the same in the first instance. In particular we may find that our encounter with people who are markedly 'other' than ourselves makes such demands upon us. For example, another person or group of people may, by virtue of their situation or how they see the world, challenge our own familiar understanding of our world and ourselves. Here, too, we may respond dismissively. We may evade the demands of encounter, refusing to try and put ourselves in the place of the other and to see the world through their eyes and be attentive to the questions which this raises for ourselves. In so doing we effectively shield the other person and their world from our eyes; we actively keep them invisible from ourselves as a person, that is, as one who may invite us into an emergent new context of understanding and to personal enlargement. Wilfully blind to them, we make ourselves ignorant of them as subjects in the act of ignoring them. Nevertheless in so doing we may turn upon them attention of another kind, in which we cast them in the role of one with whom we precisely do not identify, but rather treat as inescapably 'other'. We type them as (for example) our competitor, our enemy, the object of our management or manipulation, the scapegoat, the outcast, or (ironically) the oppressor. Correspondingly the attention we turn upon them may be that of execration or devaluation, self-entertainment or contempt. Where we adopt this dismissive stance towards another over whom we have power, it readily finds expression in oppression and exploitation, although we may just as readily adopt this stance in a position of powerlessness over the other.

An encounter which may especially prompt dismissive evasion of the 'other' is that with a person who has suffered misfortune. When we are faced (for example) with someone who suffers some form of handicap, or who suffers from ill health or disease, or who has experienced tragic loss, then the demands of putting ourselves in their place are personally great: our personal horizons are enlarged in a costly way. The intimation that we might happen to be in their place is not one we can casually embrace, while the practical cost of giving the help they deserve may be great. In response we may defend ourselves from these demands by devaluing the other: we may 'normalise' their situation by blaming them for it, or we may dismiss its significance for them as a subjective matter of no *real* significance. Tragically, the misfortune which confronts us in such circumstances may of course have arisen in the first place precisely through such devaluation by others. In this way a vicious circle may be established in which the act of dismissive evasion re-victimises those who are already victims.

We are also prompted to respond in dismissive evasion by those who violate our norms of behaviour. There is a deep human fear of violence which extends through the violating character of 'uncleanness' of one kind and another, through the violence of personal abuse, to the violence of chaos and destruction in the public world we inhabit. These fears have often fed into the practice of propitiating religion. Those who attract such fear become a threatening 'other', and as such are likely

to be hated and despised. Ironically such contempt is often directed today towards those who seek to resist the violation of moral principles: they are seen as violating the freedom of others. In this way moral people have today become themselves the target of moralising dismissal.

In general terms we may be prompted to dismissive evasion simply by those who are different. Racism, sexism, 'ageism' and other 'isms' represent dismissiveness towards the demands of putting ourselves in the place of someone 'different'. At the same time, this passing reference to the concerns of contemporary ideology might remind us that our understanding of what constitutes 'otherness' or 'difference' can be simplistic. There is a world of difference between any two human beings. The demands of radical responsiveness may be as great when identifying with one's brother or sister as with someone with from an ostensibly very different world to ourselves.

All such occasions of dismissive evasion are echoes of dismissive evasion of God and are most deeply understood by reference to him. In particular it is by reference to God that dismissive evasion is revealed as *a claim to false autonomy*. Whereas the requirement of deference to other persons may be contested and does indeed vary, the requirement of deference to God is inescapable and evasion of this is exposed as a claim to false autonomy. Accordingly, that to which we hold in dismissive evasion before resistance to the demands of openness to God may be designated an idol.

Although concern for oppression is widely expressed in Western societies today, the deeper dynamics of this which we have just described are concealed by our familiar Cartesian habits of thought. We readily miss the character of oppression as an act of evasion and a claim to false autonomy. Lacking this understanding, our attempts to defend diversity and to uphold the rights of the oppressed or victimised are limited by an assumption that these differences make no demands upon our context of understanding beyond a supposed area of 'private' values where we are required to allow other people alternative values alongside our own. We fail to acknowledge the need for serious wrestling in which we place ourselves under obligation and ultimately obedience to God in our concern to free others and ourselves from oppression.

The claim to false autonomy (which is traditionally referred to in the Bible and Christian tradition as rebellion against God) is linked to two fundamental aspects of dismissive evasion. The first aspect is the constructive activity of maintaining a world or context which reflects what has become habitual as a source of personal identity, and of construing what is seen by reference to this. The second aspect, which concerns the falsehood of this claim to autonomy, is the act of *self-evasion* entailed in evasion. Let us consider each in turn.

Firstly, the context which we come to inhabit in the act of dismissive evasion does not reflect the real world as it is within the ultimate context of God, but is constructed and shaped precisely by our continuing act of evasion. This constructed context is not a genuine integration, but is a disordered one, haunted by that which it forbids to play its proper part in the act of integration. Our world becomes split here between the world as we see it through our wilfully maintained framework of understanding, and that which as a surd refuses integration into this framework in its own terms.

Secondly, this act of false autonomy and the disorder which it produces are not simply external to ourselves. When we dismiss reality, we dismiss demands encountered precisely within our own perception: we are *internally* divided; and this remains an active affair. The stance of dismissal continues as both an evasion of reality and an act of self-evasion. Importantly, such self-evasion or self-deception is not a second-order response, one which we may make having once been accused of evading reality; rather it is integral to that evasive stance in the first place.

We might note that there is a challenge here to the tendency in modern Western culture to think of issues of honesty and evasion as arising in the realm of individual personal *values* held, as distinct

from the realm of *knowledge* possessed. Of course in an older Christian and Biblical tradition knowledge and virtue, wisdom and a pure heart are integrally related.

We might also acknowledge at this point the possibility that traits of honesty and dishonesty may characterise groups and cultures as well as individuals. Our proper concern not to stereotype groups unjustly should not blind us to this possibility. These traits can become institutionalised; they can be mediated through 'plausibility structures'. Fundamentally, groups and cultures may, like individuals, make common claims to false autonomy, dismissing their integral relation to other cultures and ultimately to God.

Evasion: its disoriented face

We have considered one face of evasion which may be displayed when we are met with the personal demands of responding to our ultimate context. We may be dismissive of these demands, and dismiss the paradox in which they confront us as a mere self-contradiction.

However evasion has another face. Met with the demands of responding to our ultimate context, we may be overcome by these demands in a wrong way. We may give up both our familiar framework of understanding and the very effort of integration in which we come to indwell, uphold and revise such frameworks. Rather than embracing the demands of achieving a new and deeper integration, we may take these demands into ourselves, *as unfaceable*. The paradox with which we are confronted becomes a self-contradiction *within us*. We experience the endless personal disorientation and dis-integration of unresolved loss. The world is lost to us, and we to the world. Loss becomes the final word upon us.

It may seem unreasonable to describe such a grievous experience as an act of evasion. We shall return to this point later.

Do we find examples of such disorientation in the Gospels? We might think first of the reaction of Jesus' own disciples to his trial and execution. Despite Jesus' personal anticipation of these events, and his apparent efforts to prepare his disciples for them, when these events arrived his disciples were not able to see this as lying within the embrace of God's purposes. They saw only the final destruction of their hope in Jesus' Gospel of the kingdom of God.

Such personal disorientation is to be found more widely than in encounter with our deepest context such as confronted Jesus' disciples on the occasion of his crucifixion. Like dismissiveness, it may also be displayed on other occasions when the personal demands of responsiveness are great. Such personal disorientation is found wherever people are emotionally paralysed by unresolved pain in relation to personal tragedy, loss or guilt. It is also found where people take into themselves the unresolved pain of their violation by oppressive people and become crippled by loss of self-worth and by self-hatred.

How shall we further describe such disorientation? Characteristically, we are faced with great personal demands before which our relatively ordered and creative perception of the world is subverted, giving way to a state of personal distraction, anxiety and boredom in which nothing comes into focus. Insofar as our familiar context remains present to us, we see it through the lens of loss and alienation; we experience it, in self-contradiction, as devoid of the personal meaning it has for us. Our meaning seems to lie elsewhere, if in fact it lies anywhere. Indeed personal meaning may take a certain disordered shape 'elsewhere' as, disoriented and restless, we become distracted by and captive to mirages and spectres. Here, while fundamentally we fail to rise to attentiveness, there forms in us that compulsive, promiscuous attentiveness which characterises escapism, disordered passion and addiction. Here the focus of our attention offers no true integration of our world, but arises pre-emptively, capturing our attention and passion. We are captured by phantoms

which refuse to be integrated into our familiar world, but which in a hidden way press upon us the power of the unfaceable over us. Whether as objects of our desire or fear, they lie essentially beyond us as that in which we invest our own meaning, yet which we cannot attain or cannot escape. They paralyse us, gripping our attention and arousing our passions and yet always displacing themselves from us. The mirages which seduce us we never attain; they always slip through our grasp. The spectres we flee we never escape; they always haunt us. As these phantoms tighten their grip upon us, there is no movement towards a promised resolution, in a creative integration of the world. Rather, in truth they subvert our apprehension of reality. They bind us in a self-preoccupied existence. Pursuing or fleeing them, we are in truth turned away from the real and turned in upon an illusory self.

This world of paralysing spectres and mirages lies at the heart of pagan culture and its religion. Central among its images are those of sex and violence with their brute power over human imagination. Biblical allusions to this include temple prostitution and human sacrifice.

(from Grove booklet:) There has been a tendency traditionally to think of sin as driven by pride and a spirit of rebellion and false autonomy. This has led us to see sin more readily in the oppressor than in the oppressed, and in the dismissal of victims rather than in being overwhelmed by victimhood. The need to take seriously the sinfulness of inner personal defeat has been argued recently by Alister McFadyen, however, who proposes, in *Bound to Sin*, that 'self-loss' is a sin - the sin of sloth. Further light is shed when we recall how the 'deadly sins' including sloth were first understood. Simon Tugwell traces them to the teachings of the Desert Fathers for whom they represented 'logismoi' - trains of thought which shape how the world is seen and which have an inner momentum of their own towards deepening, enslaving perversity.

'Six characters in search of a part': no coherence, or story, only a fixated event. Also Sartre.

Also mention addiction...

And it kills. Chesterton can point to a flame and say in warning, to a colleague:

'That flame flowered out of virtues, and it will fade with virtues.
Seduce a woman, and that spark will be less bright. Shed blood, and that
spark will be less red. Be really bad, and they will be to you like the
spots on a wallpaper. [footnote: *Tremendous Trifles*, p. 230]

Although such disorientation occurs more widely than when we are presented with our ultimate context, it is in this context that the temptation of succumbing to this appears at its most powerful. Whereas in other, provisional contexts the power of events to overwhelm us in this way is a contingent matter, our ultimate context always holds this power over us in an unqualified way. This is the power, for Jesus and ourselves, of 'the hour when darkness reigns' (Luke 22.53) when, facing his death, Jesus undergoes the great, final temptation to lose faith and be overcome by despair. We shall explore these themes at greater length in the next chapter.

Now is it reasonable to call such disorientation an act of evasion? Certainly it is a temptation; certainly it is a failure to rise to the demands of our ultimate context, and therefore less than a truthful experience of reality. But surely it is not an act at all, but something passively suffered? This is how we experience it. And yet our experience of unresolved victimhood is constructed precisely by ourselves in the face of demanding encounter. While we experience certain events and circumstances as having power to disorient us in this way, this power is one which ultimately we give them. Our readiness to collude with this power indicates our fallen, sinful nature, and the power with which we collude and to which we give wing is of course that which we call evil or Satan. But such dark power over us is in truth parasitic upon our life.

Our construction of the experience of disorientation and loss is a continuing activity: we actively maintain the stance of 'being violated', of suffering loss of integrity. Moreover as we do so we collude in the act of inflicting our loss; our loss is not simply an event external to us, but is an action within us, in which we collude in violating ourselves, assaulting our worth. We are not passive victims, but are divided within ourselves between victimhood and concealed oppressiveness. However, as with dismissiveness, the evasion characterised by disorientation entails *self*-evasion; we conceal from ourselves our collusion with, and active construction of, that which we experience as oppressing or seducing us.

Again, although today concern is widely expressed about oppression and its victims, Cartesian habits of thought conceal the deeper dynamic of evasion within the experience of unresolved victimhood. Without this deeper insight, it is assumed that the restoration of victims is simply a matter of asserting and securing their rights. However, insofar as a victim has been overcome by his or her violation, it also entails a conversion on the part of the victim. It entails a change of heart and a changed perception of the world and of themselves. Part of this conversion is for them to acknowledge that they have secretly colluded with their violation by taking its contradiction unresolved into themselves.

We might note that disorientation, like dismissiveness need not be simply an individual affair. It is possible for a group or culture to conform habitually to disoriented evasion. An illustration of this is a culture in which drugs are exalted and the despair from which they offer illusory escape is endemic. For someone inhabiting such a culture, the act of rising above disoriented evasion will constitute a break with their culture.

Belief and unbelief within an eschatological framework

We have been reflecting upon encounter with Jesus as encounter with our ultimate context, the in-breaking kingdom of God. This encounter summons us to believe in a demanding act of radical responsiveness. However it may be met instead with unbelief, that is with evasion, in which either dismissiveness or disorientation is uppermost. Now three questions arise in connection with this. When people accepted or rejected Jesus' proclamation, (1) did this necessarily amount to a response at all to the approach of God? (2) did this necessarily amount, for them, to a new and unprecedented response to God? (3) did this necessarily amount to a final response to God? Let us consider these questions in turn.

(1) When people responded to Jesus by accepting or rejecting his message, had they necessarily encountered the in-breaking king-dom of God at all? May they not have missed Jesus' meaning? For example, may they not have continued thinking of 'the king-dom of God' merely as the political overthrow of the Romans? In this case, should we not say that although these people had met Jesus and heard his message, genuine encounter with the Gospel of the sovereignty of God lay for them still in the future?

We can surely agree that a person's defining encounter with God's coming king-dom is not simply to be identified with their witness of Jesus' words and actions on a particular occasion. It may happen that these words and actions do not 'come alive' for them at the time. Therefore we cannot say that a positive response on such an occasion is necessarily faith-filled, or that a lack of response necessarily amounts to evasion and unbelief. It may be that Jesus' words and actions will not come alive for someone until later on, triggered by certain events of personal significance. When God speaks later through such events, this may well be hidden from public view; the personal encounter with God in one's soul is an unpredictable providence. Until then, as signs they may lie dormant within the memory of a person or community. The resurrection of Jesus is a key instance of a later event which brought alive not only the meaning of Jesus' death but also of his words and actions.

On the other hand, we should hardly interpret every lack of response to Jesus in this way, as a matter of a person having not yet 'heard' the Gospel. There really is such a thing as a response of evasion and unbelief, and it is important that this be granted. Conversely we should hardly disparage every positive response to Jesus; there really is such a thing as a response of faith or belief, and it is important that this be recognised.

(2) When people responded to Jesus by accepting or rejecting his message, was this necessarily for them a new and unprecedented act of response to God? Could it not be that they had encountered and responded to God in the past and that their present response to Jesus was simply a further instance of this and no more? Thus, we have noted that dismissiveness and disorientation may be displayed in contexts other than encounter with Jesus, in circumstances where there is a similar challenge to enlarge our context; may not rejection of Jesus simply be one more example of such evasion?

We can surely agree that those responding to Jesus in belief or unbelief may have had other encounters with God in the past. However, in Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God people were met with something decisively new. Their past responses of belief or unbelief may have anticipated their response to Jesus, but they were now met with something new. In the new context of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom their earlier belief found its true meaning, while the paralysis of their earlier unbelief found itself embraced and healed in forgiveness. Of course in this new context opportunity was also presented for reversal of belief, or of further entrenchment in unbelief.

(3) When people responded to Jesus by accepting or rejecting his message, was this their final response? Was the die cast for them, so to speak, in their response to God? Or if further, deeper encounter remains possible, could their faith in Jesus turn later into unbelief, or their rejection of Jesus turn later into belief? To ask this is to ask about the relation between peoples' response to Jesus and their final judgement by God.

In answer to this we must begin by reaffirming that in Jesus we encounter none other than the approach of God. And our further encounter with God will be with none other than Jesus himself. Accordingly, our response to him is indeed our final response to God. 'If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this wicked and godless age, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (Mark 8.38).

We may enlarge upon this connection between final judgement and our response to Jesus in terms of God's call, through Jesus, to participation in his own life. God's judgement upon us is one in which we will participate for ourselves; we shall judge ourselves with him. Even now, when we know God in Christ, we know ourselves judged - and forgiven; and we participate with God in forgiving ourselves. Equally, however, when we evade the message of Jesus we defer facing demands which we secretly know are made upon us. This is precisely the terror of judgement: the spectre of one day facing that which we have deferred facing, and thereby constructed as, unfaceable; the spectre of facing ourselves whom we have constructed as unfaceable, and have thereby judged in condemnation.

Responding to Christ, then, we respond to God; and yet, our ultimate context in God indeed always remain deeper than that which we know and to which we respond. Where we are responsive towards God, he always remains as the deeper context of that which points to him as a sign; where we are evasive of him, there God always remains as the deeper context of our evasion, calling us to repentance in endless forbearance. Our own fearful deferral of encounter and judgement met by God's endlessly deferred judgement.

Notes

1. Baillie, Donald, *God was in Christ*, Faber & Faber, 1948, p. 114.
2. *ibid*, p. 114.
3. Chesterton, G. K., *Orthodoxy*, John Lane, 1909, p. 94.
4. *ibid*, p. 106-7.

Chapter Three in outline (for my own use - not for inclusion in an 'official' outline)

Knowledge, context and evasion in our encounter with God

When God reveals himself, practically though signs and definitively through Jesus Christ, God reveals himself as worthy of unqualified praise and thanksgiving and devoted service. To know God for who he is, as our ultimate context, is to find ourselves raised to this response. At the same time, God's self-revelation may challenge us with regard to our existing commitments and personal attachments, and these demands may tempt us to evade such an unqualified response.

None of these things can be understood, however, within our usual cartesian framework for thinking about 'knowledge' and its 'context'. Rather God's self-revelation practically gives to these a new meaning paradigmatic for understanding all knowledge and context, and also for understanding evasion of God.

When I explore this meaning below, I am not offering a second-order detached account of it. Rather I am testifying to it out of God's self-revelation and inviting readers to enter into and acknowledge this for themselves.

Knowledge and its context: the cartesian picture

The cartesian imagination sets side by side the knowing subject and that which is there to be known, each viewed from a wider space containing both. The subject's claim to know something is understood as a claim for correspondence between an idea held by the subject and what is objectively there; pursuit of knowledge is understood as a matter of doubting such claims and examining the question of such correspondence from a position of detachment.

In this picture, the knowing subject is seen as limited by belonging to a discrete location which allows only a particular perspective upon the world. This 'locatedness' is seen as analogous for the 'objective context' of the subject's knowledge-claims. Also, the subject's commitment to a claim *as constituting knowledge* - rather than questioning this in detachment - is seen by analogy with this discrete locatedness, as a matter of subjective context.

When this cartesian picture of knowledge and its context is imposed upon God's self-revelation and our response, it creates its own interpretation of and prescription for these. Christian faith tends to be seen as a matter of questionable allegiance to the truth of certain religious propositions and the rightness of certain moral rules.

Knowledge, context and God's approach as sign

Biblical writers bear witness to a God who reveals himself precisely through his action in particular and historical contexts which now become provisional contexts relative to the ultimate context of this God himself. In such self-revelation, people are led to see God *through* the events and circumstances of the created world, and to see the world *through God's eyes* and *in the setting* of his purposes. This is the biblical character of sign.

John Baillie's characterisation of divine self-revelation as 'mediated immediacy' reflects part of this.

This picture violates the cartesian assumption that context - whether objective or subjective - is analogous to a discrete location discernible before us. Where it is God who is known, the claim to knowledge cannot be understood and appraised as a claim fundamentally about God from another context than God himself, but rather as addressed from God to such a context breaking it open precisely as a context. All claims arising from divine self-revelation have this character when understood properly, i.e. precisely in their provisional context. This can be illustrated with respect to both 'subjective' and 'objective' contexts (illustrations are provided from doctrine and the 'Christus victor' image).

J. D. Crossan's parable of the collapse of classical theism is critiqued as captive to cartesianism.

Our ultimate context

Knowledge of God

When we know God who reveals himself to us, knowledge acquires here a new paradigmatic meaning. This knowledge connects with such wider Christian themes as personal relationship with God, trusting God, seeking, attending to, obeying, and waiting upon God. The following aspects of such knowledge are described:

1. Knowledge of God is not about property available for use to other ends, but is precisely about being oriented towards God as our end. It is about turning towards God - an honouring of his call. It is about attentiveness and intentionality, in purity of will.
2. Knowing God is about responsiveness towards God, which is at once *discerning* and *receptive*. Through such responsiveness, knowing and context form together as they do for infants first rising to thought and intentional action (quote John Wisdom).
3. Knowledge of God is our most lively, creative human act, in which we give ourselves without reserve. As such it is, however, a response. This is the fundamental paradox of grace (quote Donald Baillie and Henri De Lubac).
4. Knowledge of God is knowledge by personal acquaintance. Knowledge of God is irreducibly personal. We ask about God for ourselves; we ask ourselves about God; and we know God for ourselves by acquaintance. Whereas some knowledge can be held second-hand almost as well as first-hand, the contrast between first-hand and second-hand knowledge of God is extreme. Hence Martin Buber's dictum - we cannot talk about God, we can only address him. But this is not a ban on theology; rather it is a testimony which invites us to look and see for ourselves.
5. Knowledge of God extends integrally to other actions which, in the cartesian picture, are distinguished sharply from knowledge. These include questioning (knowing and searching for God reinforce each other - quote Mascal, Von Rad, Marcel, Julian of Norwich).
6. Knowledge of God extends to living with the unresolved absence of God, waiting faithfully upon God when he is concealed or 'absent' and acting in obedience while waiting (quote George MacDonald).
7. Knowledge of God and faith in God are inseparable features of the same act. This stands in contrast with the cartesian understanding of faith and knowledge which inevitably sees faith either as an act of presupposition prior to, or as a subjective response following, knowledge.
8. Knowing God involves knowing in communion with God

9. Knowing God involves knowing oneself known by God
10. Talk about God is distinctive. The liveliness of this personal address reflects the liveliness of its subject. This is captured linguistically in lively metaphors which, referring to God, are properly 'irreducible' or 'undying'. (quote Soskice on 'mutual interanimation of vehicle and tenor'). But this isn't consequent upon a world of 'dead' references: Chesterton on golden apples and rivers of wine.
11. A noteworthy account of religious language is provided by Ian Ramsey. A brief description and critique of this is offered here. He needs to integrate commitment, as desire, more closely with discernment; allow that disclosure transforms the world we started from; and give the paradox of grace clearer place.

Evasion of God

The demands of such responsiveness to God may be evaded in one of two ways. Each involves self-contradiction and self-deception, both in what we attend 'to' and what we attend 'from':

- (5) *Dismissal*: We may dismiss the challenge presented to our habitual contexts and personal attachments by the approach of God as our ultimate context. This is the way of false orientation and integration. It gives rise to knowledge and contexts of its own kind in which our claim to mastery is haunted by the demands of a subverting God.
- (6) *Defeat*: we may be overwhelmed by the challenge presented to our habitual contexts and personal attachments by the approach of God as our ultimate context, finding their loss unfaceable. This is the way of dis-orientation and personal dis-integration. It gives rise to knowledge and contexts of its own kind in which our personal bondage to spectres and mirages is exorcised by a liberating God.

Redemption may be understood in these terms as about God in Christ restoring human responsiveness to, and knowledge of, God in the place of evasion, and restoring the ultimate context of God for human life in place of distorted forms of context associated with such evasion.

to add:

'The eye with which I see God is God's eye seeing me' (Meister Eckhart)