

Dedicated to my father, Herbert Ernest Kettle (1923-2010) who,  
as a Number 5 Commando fighting in the jungles of Burma in the Second World War,  
prayed, led worship at the request of his mates, and made vows to God.

David Kettle

**Preface** [to second book, *In the Deep Context of God: recovering our response to the mystery of God*]

I want to introduce this book in three ways. First, it is a theological engagement with philosophy. More precisely, it is a theological reflection rooted in the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, that seeks to take seriously the concerns of critical, analytical philosophy while not deferring to them in an absolute way. Second, it is a theological treatise connected closely with my book *Western Culture in Gospel Context* (Wipf & Stock, 2011). Indeed these two books began life as one single treatise. Third, it is an argument with a particular shape that I shall introduce.

### **God who was in Christ and the God of the philosophers**

The story is well known that when Blaise Pascal died, he was found to have a message sewn into the lining of his overcoat. It read: “Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars.”

To know and love and seek God and God’s will for us is a very different matter from the exercise of analysing philosophically concepts and logical reasoning with respect to the referent “God.” The former is rooted in encounter with the God who draws us to himself in an unqualified way in Jesus Christ, in fulfilment of the self-revelation of God testified in the Jewish scriptures; the latter is rooted in various attempts to describe the human being, knowledge, enquiry and action, to categorise this and to describe the concept of “God” by reference to this.

How shall we describe the difference between the two? What, in particular, does it mean to *know and love and seek God and God’s will for us*? The question is one to which we are awakened by God himself, who invites us to address and answer this question in testimony to his self-disclosure and to our reflective practice of faith. It is a question we must ask *for ourselves*, at once putting it to God and to ourselves in prayerful attentiveness towards God.

To ask what it means to know and love and seek God is not a preamble to enquiring into God, let alone a logical condition of it. P. T. Forsyth wrote well: “Neither philosophy nor psychology is there in order to determine what we may know, but to find and set out the conditions of what we *do* know. We know first, and then investigate the conditions of knowing. *Solvitur ambulando*. We cannot wait for knowledge till we have a satisfactory epistemology to license it.”<sup>1</sup>

This is true not only of knowing God but also of seeking and loving God.

What is it to know and love and seek the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? It is to respond to the personal God who has acted in history in particular situations and events among particular people. It is to respond to the mystery of God who, in Jesus Christ, acted towards humankind in unqualified self-disclosure; to the Creator who acted towards humankind in the history of the Jews, binding them in covenant with himself and calling them as his chosen people; to the God who elected this people to be his witness and servant, and to participate responsibly in his self-disclosing action towards humankind. The Old Testament tells the continuing story of God's action and of Jewish responses to this. It is a story of faith, sinful evasion and repentance, of blessing, loss and recovery. The climax of God's action arises as he gives himself in an unqualified way to his creation in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, 101.

All of this is mainly hidden from those who live in contemporary Western culture. George Steiner memorably conceives the idea that talk of God is today like talk of the sun rising and setting: although we have known for hundreds of years that it is the earth, and not sun, which moves, we continue to use this pre-copernican language. Similarly, “where God clings to our culture, to our routines of discourse, He is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech”.<sup>2</sup> Steiner, of course, argues the reverse, but in passing here he characterises well what 'God' means (or rather, does not mean) for so many people today.

Christian religion as such has not disappeared from Western culture, of course, although heaven knows it has been in striking decline for a century and more in Britain and Europe, most sharply in the last forty years. In some places Christian religion remains evident enough. However, when it comes to faith in a God who has acted through human history and above all in Jesus Christ, and who is the creator and saviour of all humankind, and who is rightly to be known and adored by all, this faith can sometimes be hard to find even within the churches. Christianity tends to be seen rather as a private choice, and the churches as private voluntary associations—which is a quite different matter from orthodox Christian faith.

Much discussion people's religious beliefs takes place, of course, in the Religious Studies Departments of universities, and more in the mass media, although the latter is usually concerned less with the content of such beliefs than with the cultural fact of religious commitment and its implications for understanding and managing secular society and today. Such media interest in religion has increased in the West since Islamic fundamentalists have attracted attention by outrageous acts of terrorism. This has in turn allowed militant atheist secularists such as Richard Dawkins to attract new attention to their vilification of religion.

Where today people do worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of Jesus Christ - as in many Evangelical churches—they typically show little interest in Christian philosophy. And up to a point this echoes the message of which Pascal would keep himself reminded: if we would seek and serve God, we must find bearings for this from the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless—and Pascal's own reflections are a testament to this—there is a great task of Christian philosophical theology to be undertaken. There is need for the most careful, faithful Christian reflection upon God and our encounter with God, in engagement with philosophical thinking.

Indeed unless Christians are willing to take seriously the task of philosophical theology, there is a danger that Christian faith may lose its way. This is because it is so easily distorted by Christians deferring unawares to the dispositions and assumptions (again, upheld unawares) of the culture in which they live. Christian religion can rest upon belief in a “God” who belongs conceptually among the kind of things people find it natural to conceive in a culture even though the majority may contest or reject the actual existence of any such “God.” In this way Christian religion can become corrupted by evasion of the demands of faith. Melvyn Matthews writes:

There is a sickness of spirit abroad which forces us into cheap or sentimental theological solutions. An avoidance of moral conflict, a ready acceptance of so-called religion experience, whatever its origin or quality, these are the signs of a cheapening of the religious spirit in men and women. This is the direct consequence of our inability to accept, assimilate and take into our active lives the pain of contemporary existence.<sup>3</sup>

Christians are called before God to reflect philosophically upon God's self-disclosure with its disclosure, thereby, of human life and the world, in order to do justice to both. This is not to

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<sup>2</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Matthews, *Delighting in God*, 101.

defer in any final way to the premises of philosophers, subjecting Christian faith to analysis by reference to supposedly universal axioms. This would be to betray the reality of God. And it bears no fruit. As Michael Novak writes, “The ‘linguistic therapy’ offered by some philosophers, in any case, has failed to cure (the believer). Their scalpels and their tiny lights do not touch the area of intelligence in which his questions breed. They seem to speak a simpler, more puritan language than he has ever heard. They have too long spoken of God as someone else’s problem, a distant memory, a disease.”<sup>4</sup>

Christian philosophical reflection is rather a matter of uncovering and engaging philosophical premises in the light of God’s self-disclosure, in explorative testimony and in dialogue, with the hope of opening up philosophers to the wider, deeper vistas of God.

Where do we find exemplars of such Christian philosophy? Personally I think of—a diverse selection, this—the honest, careful reflections of Gabriel Marcel in his *Being and Having*; the eloquent, precise and devout reflections of Austin Farrer in his numerous sermons and papers; the fragmentary writings of Henri De Lubac, gathered in *The Discovery of God*; the profound verses of George Macdonald offered for daily reflection in his *Diary of An Old Soul*; the pensées of Blaise Pascal; and the seminal meditations of Martin Buber in his *I and Thou*.

But are these writings philosophy, we might ask? For Austin Farrer, the sight of Gabriel Marcel in Oxford reminded him of “the kingfisher I once saw perched on a dead elder tree between the gas works and the canal. A visitant from another world, a lonely phenomenon, but as a reminder of the many-sidedness of things by no means to be ignored.” He went on:

Tidy minds are three-a-penny, but seeing minds are rarer than fine gold. Bergson or Marcel may not present us with a philosophy, but they turn us into philosophers. When we have read Marcel we seize pen and paper: “Let us see,” we exclaim, “what this comes to”<sup>5</sup>

The philosophical musings of “seeing minds” arise from deep attentiveness towards God and a desire to honour the truth of who God is. They are rooted in prayerful contemplation of the mystery of God—a God who first knows us (and not we him), a God with respect to whom enquiry is never for us a simple, autonomous affair but one in which we are possessed and nourished by a divine self-disclosure forever deep beyond our fathoming.

The present author was set originally on the path of such philosophical theological reflection by three convergent factors. The first was finding my attention held by the attracting but enigmatic, teasing reality of God (mediated partly but not wholly by youthful involvement in church worship). The second was an interest in mathematics and logical structure including the phenomenon of self-referential consistency. Taken together, these two drew my attention early to the fact that the reality of God is at once a vital reality and irreducible mystery to be honoured personally without reserve, and at the same time a reality that, when we try to honour it in explicit testimony, drives us beyond conformity to the everyday rules of abstract logic. The third factor, resting upon the first two, might be described as an apprenticeship in honouring the vital but elusive reality of God provided by reading C. S. Lewis, and later (among others) George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton. These writers brought moments of recognition and illumination again and again into the ways of God, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. Theirs was, as I experienced it, the authority of personal knowledge, demonstrated by their ability repeatedly to open my eyes to see for myself and ponder upon the mysteries of God to which they pointed. The striking thing to me was that the words in which they did so were often logically enigmatic or downright paradoxical. And yet indisputably they mediated for me their own personal encounter with God and his ways. It

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<sup>4</sup> Novak, *Belief*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Farrer, *Freedom and Theology*, 162, 165.

seemed that the logically odd language in which they intimated God drew its warrant from the reality of God himself, and did so in the face of every logical objection which could be raised against it.

This led me to recognise that, as Donald Baillie writes, “Christian faith, when thought out, conceptualised, and put into human language, runs into paradox not only in the doctrine of the Incarnation, but at every vital point.”<sup>6</sup> What account can we give of this? How is this paradox to be distinguished from self-contradiction? How is it that the paradox we encounter in Christian faith does not block comprehension like a wall before us, but rather sheds light for us upon the mystery of the divine reality in the same way as the enigmatic parables of Jesus do not hide the light of God, but rather set it on a lampstand? (Mark 4.21-22).

The exploration of paradox in Christian revelation engages the concerns of philosophers including those in the critical, analytical and British empirical traditions. These concerns are perennial, for all that other philosophical concerns (such as the deconstruction of diverse discourses and their rationalities) have in recent decades become fashionable in many circles. And for Christians to engage these concerns is not, as I have said, to defer to any given philosophical premises in a final way, but rather to probe these in the light of attentiveness to God and thus (in an explorative, dialogical way) to witness to God's self-disclosure

In such engagement the logic of religious language and its irreducible paradoxes is a vital concern. It turns our attention to the nature of knowledge. John Wisdom remarks that whereas the pure logician is concerned with how one could know the truth of one statement of a religious, moral, physical or psychological type given another of the same type,

The pure metaphysician is concerned with how one could know the truth of a statement of a given type, say of the moral type, not from other statements of the same type but from the sort of thing which in the end is the ground for any statement of the type in question. We might say that he is concerned not with the 'domestic' logic of statements but with the ultimate logic of statements of a given type. Such an study is not ordinarily called logic but epistemology.<sup>7</sup>

The present author has found few writers who explore carefully and well this “ultimate logic” of religious language in terms which engage closely with the concerns of critical, analytical philosophy. Among these few writers are Ian Ramsey. He offers a fertile account (in *Religious Language* and other works) of how religious paradox works to evoke divine disclosure in a religious situation which has the dual character of a logically odd discernment evoking a response of total commitment. Other interesting proposals regarding religious paradox and its logic are included in the ambitious attempt by an earlier writer, Karl Heim, to provide foundations for a Christian metaphysic in a book called *God Transcendent*. However, neither in the work of Wisdom nor Ramsey nor Heim do I find clear recognition that (as itself a matter of logic) there simply cannot be offered a detached, second-order account of religious language and its logic: the only possible account of religious language and its logic is one which itself shares in first-hand testimony to God. A faithful account of religious language is necessarily as paradoxical as first-order religious language itself. To adapt an aphorism of Martin Buber, “One cannot talk about religious language. One can only speak it.” Again, this enigmatic utterance does not block the way to comprehension of religious language, but rather invites us into that first-order participation in religious language to which are driven by encounter with God, and which is the only way in which we comprehend religious language for what it is.

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<sup>6</sup> Baillie, D., *God was in Christ*, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery*, 120.

I have said that the concerns of critical, analytical philosophy are perennial; however, this does not mean that they are inherently universal and a-historical. Rather, the form in which they are familiar to us reflects (in part) habits of Western thought associated with the European Enlightenment. These are nourished by certain basic habits of imagination which dominate the modern mind. They involve a certain way of picturing knowledge—a way of imagining what it means to know, or to enquire into, something. However, as I shall argue, they rest upon experience drawn without adequate reflection from our visual perception of objects. Gabriel Marcel expresses this matter strongly, saying that Descartes and Kant “made illegitimate borrowings from optics in their epistemology, with effects that can hardly be exaggerated.”<sup>8</sup> I shall refer to these as Cartesian habits of imagination, because they have a particular association with Rene Descartes and his “method of doubt,” although they have a longer history associated with what has been called the “primacy of theoretical thought” in Western philosophy since classical Greek philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Yet to say this may be to mislead: arguably we are dealing here, not with the history of ideas but with basic habits of imagination which tend to recur in cultural history as fallen human beings attempt to interpret themselves and the world in which they live.

Some thinkers have recognised that analytical philosophy involves distortions of this kind, and have struck out in new directions with the purpose of correcting this. Notable among them are John Macmurray, J. L. Austin, and Michael Polanyi.

For John Macmurray, a foundation insight is that in dualistic Cartesian philosophy, epistemology has been distorted by a false reliance upon visual experience. This leads, he says, to the assumption that theoretical knowing is receptive, while personal action is active. In his Gifford Lectures for 1953-4 (published in two volumes as *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*), Macmurray proposes that the former is to be understood within the context of the latter, as a limiting case of personal action, rather than vice-versa. He demonstrates that when knowing is acknowledged to be such a personal act and this is integrated properly into the foundations of philosophy, major implications follow for philosophy.

J. L. Austin, in lectures that were later published as *How To Do Things With Words*, analysed and classified carefully the speech-acts in which we perform actions by means of utterances—actions such as warning, expressing emotions, and effecting such acts such as acceptance and resignation. He demonstrates that, once the ‘illocutionary’ dimension of speech is acknowledged and integrated properly into the foundations of philosophy, major implications follow for philosophy.

Finally Michael Polanyi, in his major book *Personal Knowledge* (arising from his Gifford Lectures in 1951-2) and in other shorter books and papers, explores knowing as a lively personal act with an irreducible tacit dimension. As he demonstrates, once this is acknowledged and integrated properly into the foundations of philosophy, major implications follow for philosophy.

Regrettably, however, each of these philosophers broke only imperfectly with Cartesian habits of imagination because they each retained in one key way or another the Cartesian assumption of the primacy of the autonomous individual knower and agent over against the world. Crucially, none of them allowed for the radical import of the paradox of grace whereby human agency finds its paradigmatic form in radical responsiveness to God in communion

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<sup>8</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, 192. See also my reference to John Macmurray below. Another scholar who finds the key error of cartesianism in the false dominance of visual imagery is William H. Potat. For him, this has reflected a preoccupation for engaging the static conceptuality of classic Greek philosophy rather than drawing nourishment from the aural/oral Hebraic tradition.

<sup>9</sup> The “primacy of theoretical thought” was a central concern in Herman Dooyeweerd’s writings. On sources in classical Greek philosophy for Cartesianism see Yu, *Being and Relation*.

with God and with other people. Even Michael Polanyi—whom I would argue demonstrated insight (tacitly, at least) into the paradox of grace, in his insight both into knowing and enquiry as a lively, passionate act of receptivity and also into the importance of tacit participation (in such knowledge and enquiry) in a living tradition of enquiry—was judged by Marjorie Grene never fully to have grasped the revolutionary potential of his challenge to Cartesianism.<sup>10</sup>

A huge consequence of the failure of Christian thinkers successfully to engage and critique Cartesian habits of imagination is the widespread intellectual domestication today of what remains of Christian religion to Western culture. Christian beliefs and practices tend today to be shaped fundamentally not by the mystery itself of a self-disclosing God who acts towards humankind in history and is revealed in Jesus Christ, but by (largely unwitting) deference to the ideas of contemporary Western mass culture about the meaning and purpose of human life in its public and private aspects.

If the Church is to renew its bearings from the self-revelation of God in Christ, and to fulfil its vocation to witness to God in discerning engagement with the presuppositions of modern Western culture, it has no more important task than to witness reflectively and in an explorative way to *what it means to know and love and seek this God*—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to what it means to evade him. To do this will be to find light shed from our knowledge and love and enquiry into God, into all human knowledge, love and enquiry.

Accordingly, two basic themes will occupy us in what follows:

(1) the nature of God's self-disclosure, in all its historical and particular character, testified in the Hebrew and Christian traditions.

(2) the nature of human response to God—of what it means to know (and to evade) God, participating in the central paradox of grace—and the implications of this for how we should understand all human knowledge, love and enquiry.

### **The connection between this book and my *Western Culture in Gospel Context***

These two books began life as one. I do not mean that the material in this book was written after that published in *Western Culture in Gospel Context*, by way of further development of some of its themes, although those who have read the earlier book will find the present one can be read in this way. Rather, the present book sets out the core ideas out of which the earlier book grew. Part One of the earlier book was an attempt to summarise these core ideas in a relatively accessible way, indicating the theological insights in which were embedded the ten conversions that were then identified in Part Two of that book. These conversions offer bearings for mission and spirituality for the Church in the engagement between the gospel and Western culture today.

Therefore it may be helpful if I now recall briefly my presentation of these core ideas in Part One of *Western Culture in Gospel Context*.

I began by noting that the hospitality of God is an important theme in the bible. It is woven into a range of .. participation...

Via the argument that humankind is unique in creation in “inhabiting a world,” I introduced the idea that God discloses himself to us as our ultimate context. Provisional and ultimate. contextualization, inculturated, transcendent.

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<sup>10</sup> Grene, *Tacit Knowing*

Knowledge of God is lively intention and attention, a personal disposition of radical responsiveness that is at once receptive and responsible.

Paradigm for all knowing, which is quieter.

Evasion, two faces.

Theoretically distorted by Cartesian habits of imagination, with history in Greek primacy of theoretical thought.

### **(3) The argument of this book**

In this book, I develop two themes relative to Western Culture in Gospel Context. First, I set out further the understanding of sign and its integral place in all our knowledge of, enquiry into and obedience to God who is our ultimate context. I do so by examining the nature of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, and in the Old Testament.

Second, having summarised the distinctive and paradigmatic character of knowledge and of context as these are in our knowledge of God as our ultimate context, I then describe our knowledge of God and show how we may understand all human knowledge, enquiry, action and evasion by reference to this. Here I enlarge upon proposals in Part One of Western Culture in Gospel Context so as to engage more closely with analytical philosophy in the areas of the mystery of God, epistemology, the logic of question and answer, the logic of language, and community and hermeneutics.

The structure of the book is as follows.

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(earlier introduction:)

Western culture presents a vital challenge to Christian mission and evangelisation today. There are two special reasons for this. The first is Western culture's huge and expanding power to effect and to shape global change; the second is the steadily growing gap between this culture and the Church.

#### ***A changing world***

'When I was your age...' begins many a tale heard with bemusement by young people today. Life has changed a great deal in recent generations for people in Western society. Sweeping change continues today, reaching from Western society around the globe.

What is the nature of this change? What is its source? In what direction is it heading? In the Western past, there has been widespread belief and faith in progress, and change has often been linked by people to this. Today, however, faith in progress is often mixed with doubt and even profound apprehension regarding the future.



Times change. Belief in progress presupposed faith in the basic goodness of man, in his rationality and in the power of education to direct to good ends the power generated by advances in science and technology. But two world wars, the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weaponry, and evidence of huge environmental damage have challenged this faith. At the same time, heightening our concern, we see the future of humankind falling increasingly into human hands. We see increasingly a world deriving from human purposes and efforts, rather than a creation ordained and given by God. This combination of human perversity and expanding power gives us good reason to ponder with C. S. Lewis that 'Each new power won by man is a power over men as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger.'<sup>1</sup>

Our questions about change are therefore pressing. We have to ask: what are the human principles, ideas and habits of thought guiding these changes and shaping how they are managed? Where is the power of vested interests at work? How is the material and social structure of the world and of our technologies influencing change? What is contributed by popular interests and appetites, worthy and unworthy?

These questions about change are not driven merely by conservatism. They are not, at their deepest level, doubts about the need for, or advisability of, change, although such doubts may well have their place. Rather they reflect a concern responsibly to understand and address the particular forces which are at work behind change today - the (perhaps *unchanging*) forces associated with Western culture which give contemporary changes a certain impetus and direction.

Western society and the direction of current change within it have global implications. The high age of colonialism may have passed, but the power exercised by the West within non-Western cultures today is arguably greater than ever through new penetration by the mass media, the globalisation of the market including the imposition of structural readjustment programmes and the shift of production bases to the Third World, and the progressive enlargement of property rights.

### ***A widening gap***

For people of Christian faith the question of the direction of change has further poignancy, seen in the fortunes of faith today. In many places around the world - including parts of China and East Asia, Africa and South America - the Christian Church is growing and thriving. In Western societies, by contrast, the Church is widely in decline. Moreover a gap is widening between organised Church life and Western culture. This gap is such that today's 'unchurched' people often find the environment of the Church quite alien. The Church with its defining beliefs and practices simply does not fit or figure in the world to which they belong; it lingers on from another age, from a world which has been decisively and without regret left behind. Churchgoers, by what seems an odd personal choice, move each Sunday between these two worlds increasingly separate from and unrelated to each other. And what is happening here in the West today, we have every reason to expect to happen in other parts of the world tomorrow.

What is to be made of this state of affairs? How shall we of Christian faith interpret it? Often we go along with our changing Western culture without giving it much thought. Or, aware of the changes that are taking place, we assume without thinking

that these are neutral vis-à-vis Christian faith: we see the world simply as becoming a rather different place in which Christian faith will have to fare as best it can, finding new ways to commend itself in a new and challenging market place. Again, surrounded by so many secular attractions we may casually conclude that in the past many people went to church because they had nothing better to do - whereas today they have. Perhaps deference to Christian belief and values was for long extracted under social pressure, pressure from which people are rightly free today? Indeed, perhaps the great exercise of social and political influence by the Church was, for all the centuries it lasted, only ever a passing opportunity dependent upon hierarchical forms of society which were always destined to fade into the past?

Of course we should take these questions seriously. At the same time, we should notice that none of these interpretations of our situation goes so far as to ask critically about our own modern cultural presuppositions, which we bring with these questions. Such presuppositions may seriously distort our perception of faith and culture in past and present alike. If we are to take God seriously, we must pay deeper, more comprehensive attention to what God wants to show us today *about God himself, about our culture, and about our vocation in this setting.*