Belonging in the Dark: Towards a constructive theology of belonging christianly

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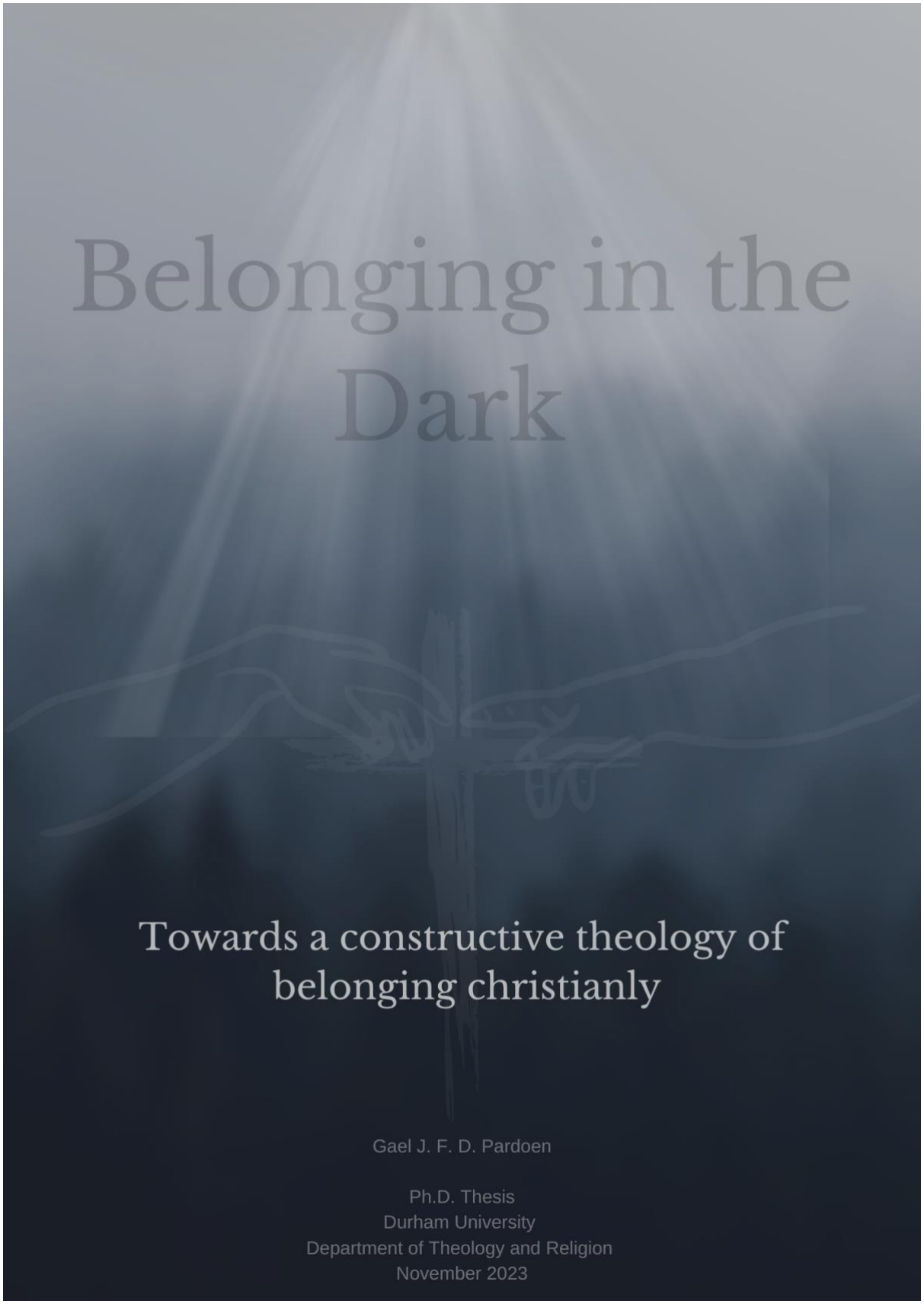

Belonging in the Dark

Towards a constructive theology of belonging christianly

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Abstract:

This thesis seeks to provide some critical tools and signposts for reflecting constructively and christianly on the concept of belonging. Thus, it is an experiment in magpie theology, seeking to reconfigure creatively a variety of primarily contemporary theological voices, Catholic and otherwise, around the theme of belonging, and a new concept—belonging christianly.

More specifically, this thesis endeavours to explore how the Christian story can nurture and affect our ways of understanding and reimagining belonging in a radical and subversive way that does justice to the longing for belonging, whilst also considering contemporary challenges such as the greater awareness of the defectiveness of traditional forms of belonging to which Christianity is not immune.

In Part 1, it seeks to identify a grammar of theocentric belonging, that is a grammar of belonging to God, in God, and under God. This will provide the foundations for how our God-talk can inform the way we think about belonging christianly. To do so, it resorts to three key Christian doctrines—The Trinity, creation, and the Incarnation. Part 2 seeks to hold in tension, interrogate, and (re)construct the relationship between the fundamental (and eschatological) reality or mode of theocentric belonging painted in Part 1, and the finite, transitional, performative, fragmented, and often distorted ways in which humans do effectively belong in a finite and fallen world. Here emerge the ideas of postlapsarian belonging, and of belonging christianly as the long journey of discovery from postlapsarian belonging into theocentric belonging. Key doctrines for this second part will include those of original sin and atonement. Part 3 will attempt to reflect further on what belonging christianly might look like through the themes of imitation of and identification with Christ. Here will emerge the ideas of apophatic identification, and that of belonging as fraternal, non-sacrificial, and eucharistic. Key doctrines include the Cross, kenosis, Resurrection, and the Eucharist. The thesis concludes by identifying possible directions of development for the concept of belonging christianly in areas such as ecclesiology, sacramentology, digital theology, eco-theology, queer theology, pneumatology, and practical theology.

Françoise Ménétrier, “Et le ciel se déchira,” peinture acrylique sur toile de lin, 80 x 60 cm.

To…

To all those who have been wounded by Christian churches and their members.

To all those who have been seeking open arms and a loving gaze, but met judgment, condemnation, and closed doors.

To all those who are only welcome in secret, behind closed doors, like an object of shame or scandal.

To all those who have been their own judge.

To all those who too often continue to be their own judge.

To all those who have been sacraments of God's unconditional love to others.

To all those who (still) seek Jesus.

To those who long for love and resurrection.

To those who strive for peace and justice.

To those who beg for belonging.

To Jesus.

“I called you by name you are Mine” (Isaiah 43:1)

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe in Me as well. In My Father’s house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and welcome you into My presence,
so that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

nolite te bastardes carborundorum. [Don’t let the bastards take you down]
(Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid’s Tale)

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands eternal in heavens. (2 Corinthians, 5.)

Man as yet is being made, and ere the crowning Age of ages,
Shall not aeon after aeon pass and touch him into shape?
All about him shadow still, but, while the races flower and fade,
Prophet-eyes may catch a glory slowly gaining on the shade,
Till the peoples all are one, and all their voices blend in choric
Hallelujah to the Maker “It is finish’d. Man is made.
(Alfred Lord Tennyson, The Death of Oenone, Akbar's Dream, and Other Poems,)

One tribe, one time, one planet, one (race)
Race, one love, one people, one (and)
Too many things that's causing one (to)
To forget about the main cause
Connecting, uniting
But the evil is seeded and alive in.. us
So our weapons are colliding

And our peace is sinking like Poseidon
But, we know that the one (one)
The Evil One is threatened by the sum (sum)
So he come and try and separate the sum
But he dumb, he didn't know we had a way to overcome
Rejuvenating by the beating of the drum
Come together by the cipher of the hum
Freedom when all become one (one) forever. (Black Eyed Peas, *One Tribe*)

See that I am God. See that I am in everything. See that I do everything. See that I have never stopped ordering my works, nor ever shall, eternally. See that I lead everything on to the conclusion I ordained for it before time began, by the same power, wisdom and love with which I made it. How can anything be amiss? ’(Julian of Norwich, in her third revelation)

We have different mountains and rivers, but we share the same sun, moon and sky. (Buddhist poem found on Japanese supplies given to China during the COVID-19 Pandemic)

A mosaic of belonging:

Acknowledgement may sometimes seem formulaic. Yet, I have always loved them, as they give us a window into the life of the stranger along whom we are about to start a journey. If these acknowledgments are long, perhaps too long, it is because I am most grateful to many people. Perhaps, they will give readers a glimpse into the myriad of people who have shown me kindness and support along my own bumpy journey, a complex web of relationships of different kinds, which together produce a colourful mosaic of… belonging.

It is often said that it takes a village to raise a child. Although comparing this thesis to a child might be a step too far, it is no less true to say that, as I write these lines and think about all those who have in one way or another been part of my journey in the last 5 years, I am filled with gratitude for the *many*, more than I can count or name, conversations and friendships which have decisively, directly or indirectly, contributed to shape, orientate, nurture and *sustain* this project. Without them, this thesis may never have come to fruition.

Prof. Tina Beattie once said to me that she "love[s] the serendipitous coming together of authors and ideas which so often happens through informal conversations." Although this serendipitous coming together has been challenged, and at times frustrated by Covid 19, the generosity and creativity of many, and first and foremost my three fantastic mentors have kept me going. Thanks, must first go to my brilliant supervisor Prof. Karen Kilby, who has gone well above and beyond in all sorts of ways, and for whom and to whom I am enormously grateful. Special thanks need also to go to Rev Dr. James Alison whose work touched my heart and soul and changed my life in a way that I have only begun to comprehend. I am also grateful for his time, his friendship, and his kind support throughout the years. Finally, I am also very grateful to and for Dr. Clare Watkins, my third mentor, with whom I have worked and traveled alongside this thesis, for her patience, friendship, and encouragement. I am proud to call Karen, James, and Clare my mentors.

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Special thanks must go to Jake Robins for his constant patience, steady love, care, and wisdom, and for teaching me the most difficult lesson in my life so far—to let oneself be loved and to love without fear and shame, "even when I am not so sure." I am a bad student, but to my daily amazement, he is a patient teacher.

I also wish to thank my family, especially my parents Vincent and Patricia Pardoen; my grandparents Jacques and Liliane Vepierre, and Francis and Jacqueline Pardoen; my great-grandmother Paulette Bonnafoux; my brothers Loïc and Erwann Pardoen; and my aunt and cousin Florence Pardoen and my Eliot Pardoen. Thanks also to the Lugagne Delpon family, Gregoire, Yseult, Marie-Kerguelen, Tristana-Fabiola, and Melchior, who have been a second family to me for many years, and who have provided me with amazing summer retreats at Figon and Creiscels, where parts of this thesis were written. I also wish to thank dear old friends, and new ones, who have come along the way and have been part of my life during the period I wrote this thesis. They have kept me going. Thanks must go to my friends on the continent, especially Tristana-Fabiola Lugagne Delpon, Celine Roque, Clémence Hillion,

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The comparison with childbearing is only vaguely analogous and perhaps even inappropriate for a man to use. Still, there is another way in which it may be applicable. There comes a point where one needs to entrust one's child, the fruit of one's love and labour, into the hands of God, in whom it always was, and into the hands of others. It has now become time for me to do the same, only asking my readers for a charitable and merciful reading.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

3.2. Eschatology and belonging

Gathering the Fragments (1)

Part 2: Belonging christianly and the "state of things".

Chapter 5: Reclaiming sin-talk.

1. "The Politics of Desire": Exploration of an emancipatory journey and its shortcomings.
2. Rehabilitating the doctrine of sin in the service of human flourishing.
   2.1. The function of sin-talk.
   2.2. The contribution of liberationist theologians to understanding the relationship between belonging and sin.
3. The doctrine of original sin as the proper framework for thinking about pathological belonging theologically.

Chapter 6: (Re)situating sin within the Christian story: A journey from belonging to the dead towards belonging to the Living.

1. (Briefly) introducing James Alison and René Girard.
2. The "significance" of sin.
3. How atonement helps define belonging christianly.
   3.1 . From payment to God's unfathomable generosity and solidarity.
   3.2 . The pathology of postlapsarian belonging.
4. Undergoing atonement.

Chapter 7: Being set free.

1. When Christ crashes the party: Christian discipleship is a disruptive force.
2. *Totus tuus* or nothing at all: The pitfall of perfect and unrealistic belonging.
3. Limping with grace whilst waiting for eschatological fulfilment.
4. Pollution, purgation, and social critique.
5. The Boy and the Lion.

Gathering the Fragments (2)

Part 3: Belonging christianly and Christology in practice: The pitfalls to avoid.

Chapter 8: Suffering and the shape of belonging christianly.

1. Co-suffering as participation in Christ?
2. What is wrong with suffering.
3. What can we say about suffering?
4. What belonging christianly does and does not say about suffering.

Chapter 9: Misidentification with Christ's condescension and the dangers of self-emptying.

1. A misguided *celebration* of vulnerability.
2. Kenosis and the dangers of (mis)identifying with the divine.

Chapter 10: From misidentification with the divine to disidentification with "the Black Christ".

1. Privilege and (mis)identification with the divine.
2. The conundrum of "being white" and Christian.
3. Misidentification with the divine and re-identifying with the human.
4. Expanding the Christological discomfort beyond whiteness.

Chapter 11: Learning the art of belonging in the dark: Apophatic identification and belonging christianly.

1. Distinguishing the threads.
2. Scandalous forms of belonging.
3. Beyond idolatry and retaliation: Jesus' fraternal relocation of God and our fraternal restoration after/in Christ.
4. Belonging beyond resentment: the difficult journey of belonging christianly for the marginalised:

   4.1. The Forgiving Victim.

   4.2. Beyond Victimhood.

   4.3. Beyond resentment.

5. Toward Eucharistic belonging.

Gathering the Fragments (3)

Conclusion: Belonging christianly beyond this thesis.

1. Reminder.
2. Moving forward.

Bibliography.

Introduction:

Telling an ancient story anew

1. The power of stories

> Stories surround us. They cover us head to toe. […] The most powerful people in the world […] are the storytellers. In every society, storytellers shape reality. They guide us into the real […] because they play in the power of story. […] I will give you weapons and if you give me the power of story, I will win every time. The real struggle in this world is always against the storytellers. Jesus confronted the storytellers of the world.[1]

We are storytellers. We tell ourselves and others powerful stories. Those stories have all sorts of shapes and colours. They can be playful, entertaining, or illuminating. Some are comforting, liberating, and foster love. Others are scary and foster hatred and oppression. Some are true, others are false, and as we shall see, it is not always easy to distinguish between them. The best stories, mirroring reality, are complex and ambivalent stories. Like a shadow show, they play with light and darkness and the contrast between them. The best stories shake us up, they transform us, and through them, we grow to see the world differently or more deeply. Stories make us who we are… for better and for worse. They tell us what love is, what is right, and what it means to be human. Most of the stories we tell ourselves (or that others tell us) about ourselves and others remain unnoticed, quietly but decisively shaping and sometimes distorting our lives. There is *nothing* more powerful and captivating than a good story. "I will give you weapons and if you give me the power of story, I will win every time."[2]

"Jesus confronted the storytellers of the world."[3] If Jesus was a storyteller, he was also the Story he told. This Story emerged from the unique story of a particular people at a particular

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[1] Willie James Jennings, "The Image of God", sermon given at Wheaton College on 4 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFCov3qbn9s (last accessed on 2 September 2023).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

time, but it has since been proclaimed to the four corners of the world and beyond. Christians receive and share (in) this story, which is the story of a man who was God and God who became human. This man was called Jesus the Nazarene, and he is the Crucified God. They (rightly) call him Messiah, "Christ the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16: 16), and "my Lord and my God" (John 20, 28). They tell and relive 'the "Christ-Event", that is the story of Christ's life, his strange conception and (extra)ordinary birth, his ministry, his encounters with people of all shapes, his *words*, his Passion, his sacrifice, his death, his Resurrection, and his Ascension. Christ's story emerges from within the ancient stories of the Hebrew people. Among their many stories are the story of creation, the stories of particular individuals, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham, Moses, and David; the story of God's liberating and guiding God's people from Egypt and through the wilderness into the Promised Land where they truly belong; the story of exile to Babylon, and the lament which follows this vexing of belonging. These stories belong to different genres and echo different voices throughout the history of the people of Israel. For Christians, most of whom do not belong to the people of Israel, these stories became theirs by adoption.[4] As these stories become *their* story, they color their imagination, their aspirations and hopes, and also sometimes their fears. As this story is only theirs by adoption through Christ, Christians learn to read the stories of the people of Israel through his story which is for them a story to live by and even a life-giving story. This story Christians have treasured and passed down from generation to generation and throughout the world, more or less faithfully, at times secretly and at the price of their death, and at times with the power of weapons and at the cost of the lives of others.

Storytellers have in their hands a myriad of tools to communicate their stories, including music, painting, dance, symbols, and words. The Christian story, like all great stories, summons many such tools. It has been told in many languages, but it is always said in the same language, what Eugene Rogers calls "Christianese":

"a language you can learn, whether you believe it or not—one in which Christians have developed the ability to test their views and disagree with one another—one in which, they believe, the face of Jesus becomes legible over time and in the course of the controversy."

[4] See Eugene F. Rogers Jr, *Elements of Christian thought: A Basic Course in Christianese*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021, 71-85.

There is of course more than one “Christianese”, as those who speak Christianese will speak different dialects, with different accents, too often failing to understand each other.[5]

The Christian story is a strange story. It shines with a strange light. It doesn't distract us from the dark, but rather it tells us that there is light even in the darkness. It tells us that this light is inextinguishable and that we need not fear the dark, or be consumed by it, for death and fear do not have the last word. The Christian story is a story of hope. It speaks of people, normal, finite, and fallible people, people who walk, eat, sleep, fear, love, and betray each other, as humans do. It speaks of wise and foolish men and women, and fools who are wise, of fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and thieves who make a life-changing and indeed life-giving encounter and to whom incredible things happen in the midst of the mundane. It speaks of the creation and the consummation of all things. It tells us that their source is incomprehensible and gratuitous Love. It speaks of joy, suffering, death, and life everlasting. It speaks of judgment and mercy, of presence and absence. It speaks of cleansing water and blood, and of water thicker than blood. It speaks of food, bread and wine, and Christ's flesh and blood *as* food given and giving eternal life. *The Christian story is a strange story.*

The underlying hope of this thesis is twofold. First, it is that Christ is the deepest story of all things. The second is captured by another quote from Willie Jennings: "There is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging."[6] The Christian story, so this thesis will claim, can nurture and affect one’s way of understanding and reimagining belonging, in the light of contemporary challenges, including the greater awareness of the defectiveness of traditional forms of belonging, which Jennings calls “a disease of social imagination”,[7] and to which Christianity is not immune. Thus, this thesis hopes that through "the newness or distinctiveness or the

[5] Idem, xvii.

[6] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010, 4. This resonates with what Paul Murray calls “the therapeutic mission of theology”. Paul D. Murray, “Engaging with the contemporary Church” in Mike Higton and Fodor (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology*, London and New York: Routledge, 278-293, 279.

[7] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.

strangeness of being in this new Christian framework",[8] the Christian story can teach us a subversive "pedagogy of belonging", one that offers the possibility of "[re]form[ing] us in the art of belonging",[9] what I will call "belonging christianly". This thesis will therefore endeavour to explore how the Christian story frames and answers in a radical and subversive way the longing for belonging which takes many different shapes across cultures but seems to be universally shared by humans.

2. The power of belonging

The desire to belong, to "be in", to be part of something greater than oneself, a chain of solidarity and a community of origin and destiny is a powerful and exhilarating force that provides the belonger with a shared history, shared values, a shared home, a sense of shared purpose or destiny, shared identity and solidarity. Recent studies have also shown that belonging is a basic human need already present at birth, and possibly even before, and that lack of belonging can have severe consequences for one's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as one's physical health.[10] Thus, while on the one hand, "having a sense of belonging to groups is […] beneficial for physical health", on the other hand, "a lack of social connection is reported to be a health risk factor on par with smoking, obesity and high blood pressure."[11] Bearing in mind the warning on cigarette packs, one could therefore say that "not belonging" kills. Moreover, although the forms belonging takes evolve at the different stages of human development and life, the need to belong does not disappear with infancy or childhood but is even heightened in adolescence and remains crucial at every step of one's life. Lack of belonging or exclusion can lead to more radical and harmful alternative forms of belonging, as shown in gangs and hate groups. Indeed, "belonging is not an unmitigated good

[8] Benjamin Wayman, "Rowan Williams: Theological Education is for Everyone", *Christianity Today*, 19 August 2020,https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/august-web-only/rowan-williams-theological-education-for-everyone.html (last accessed 2 September 2023).

[9] Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging,* Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eebermans, 2020, 10.

[10] Kelly-Ann Allen, *The Psychology of Belonging*, London and New York: Routledge, 2021, 45.

[11] *Idem*, 44. Allen refers us to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social relationships and mortality rate: A meta-analytic review", *PLoS Med* 7(7) 2010.

and can be paradoxical in many ways".[12] As Thomas Kühne has shown "[in Nazi Germany] the desire for community, the experience of belonging, and the ethos of collectivity became the basis of mass murder."[13] Belonging is not *just* exhilarating, it can be intoxicating, for belonging we thirst, for belonging we sometimes die and even kill. Belonging can be nurturing, a force of life and growth, but also poisonous and a force of death. Despite their apparent stability, forms of belonging based on faith, race, nationality, language, gender, sexuality, class, age, politics, etc., are volatile and often lead to defensive reactions against perceived (or real) external (or indeed internal) threats to their stability. To preserve belonging, a reified and even demonised "other" who doesn't *share* in the identity, values, and solidarity of the group usually serves the purpose of reinforcing said identities and solidarities, as well as the group's boundaries, righteousness, and even its perceived integrity or purity.

Post-Reformation Christianities are obvious examples of reactionary forms of belonging built over against each other, whether it be against "popery" and "superstition" or against the Reform, the Enlightenment, and Modernity. The temptation to "get it right" seems irresistible. In a famous *Address to the Gay and Lesbian Christian movement*, Rowan Williams argued:

> Most people know that sexual intimacy is in some ways frightening for them; most know that it is quite simply the place where they begin to be taught whatever maturity they have. Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself; plenty know that it is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless. Culture in general and religion in particular have devoted enormous energy to the doomed task of *getting it right*.[14]

Although this thesis is *not* about sex and/or gender and will resist the trend in contemporary theological discourse to use symbolic sexual and gendered imageries to talk about God, it has emerged in the writing of this thesis that something along the lines of what

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community 1918-1945*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2010, 1.

[14] Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace", in Eugene F. Rogers Jr (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, MA: Blackwell, 2001, 309-321.

Williams describes is true of belonging. Firstly, there is a lot of fear around belonging. The fear to "get it wrong", that is *the fear of exclusion*,[15] but also the fear of the sacrifice(s) one may be asked to make to "get it right", that is *the price of inclusion.* Secondly, if belonging can indeed be the place of, and even arguably the condition for, human flourishing, and if authentic Christian discipleship normally requires some form of (ecclesial) belonging, belonging can also be a place of vulnerability where one can experience profound spiritual, psychological, and sometimes physical alienation. Thirdly, contemporary Western culture largely stresses the importance of authenticity, well-being, identity, diversity, safety, connection, and inclusion—in brief, the importance of getting belonging right.[16] Similarly, religious communities have traditionally been concerned with getting belonging right, delineating, and fighting at high cost to defend their borders as well as their integrity and purity.

In very general terms, contemporary issues as diverse as Brexit, the rise of the independence movement in Scotland and other parts of Europe, the anti-migration movements in many Western democracies, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Ukrainian's resistance to the invader, the refugee cris*es* in Europe, demand from or on behalf of minorities, are all, at heart, matters of belonging, or at the very least they can be analysed through that lens. In the church, calls to embrace radical or conservative counter-cultural identities are also matters of belonging and crucial to understand some of the challenges to belonging christianly as well as ecclesial belonging in the Twenty-first century. Indeed, hot-button issues such as euthanasia, abortion, the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people, women's ordination, religious liberty, but also migration, global warming, sex, the death penalty and even, more recently, vaccination can also be framed in terms of belonging. While they are presented by some church leaders or regular churchgoers as the hallmark of authentic Christian belonging,[17] they also lead others to distance themselves from, or even leave or be expelled from their institutional churches and

[15] Allen writes that "our desire to belong is so pervasive that a fear of being rejected and not belonging can determine how we navigate our day-to-day life choices and decisions." Allen, *The Psychology of Belonging*, 47.

[16] On authenticity see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge Massachusetts and London England, Harvard University Press, 1991.

[17] Stanley Hauerwas, "Gay Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology", in Hauerwas, *Sanctify them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified,* London and New York: T&T Clark, 2016, 111–128.

communities, thus putting stress or even an end to belonging. In After Whiteness, Jenkins writes that

> Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think of the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial, and […] the educational.[18]

3. Conceptualising belonging … "christianly"

Since the 1990s, the concept of belonging has received renewed and pluridisciplinary attention in fields as varied as neuroscience, psychology, ethnography, history, and practical and systematic theology. It has generated so much interest and academic production, especially in psychology and anthropology, that it would be impossible to engage with the literature around belonging in any exhaustive fashion. Iain Walker and Marie-Aude Fouéré point out that this coming into fashion coincided with, or was prompted by, a certain disaffection with the closely related concept of identity:

> The cognate concept of identity was increasingly being criticised for being too essentialist and too inflexible; belonging, in contrast, promised fluidity, contingency, and variability.[19]

Walker and Fouéré point out that "while identity is a noun in the classic sense […] belonging is a gerund, a verbal form that functions as a noun", which leads them to conclude that while "identity is a category, belonging is a process."[20]

The phrase, belonging "*christianly*", is of great importance. Through this neologism, I will seek to describe or represent a mode of belonging fundamentally rooted in God and subverting all areas of one's life, that is through all modes of belonging rather than one in particular. Thus, this theocentric belonging will seek to re-envision all the forms of belonging, including ecclesial belonging, to which we are committed. By using belonging christianly instead of Christian belonging, I therefore seek to avoid the kind of tribalism that has sometimes (mis)guided the Christian tradition, and its churches when thinking about belonging. Instead, I seek to find elements in this Christian tradition to tell the story of belonging anew.

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[18] Jenkins, *After Whiteness*, 10.

[19] Iain Walker and Marie-Aude Fouéré, *Across the Waves: Strategies of Belonging in Indian Ocean Island Societies*, Leiden, Netherlands and Boston, Massachusetts, Brill, 2022, 1.

[20] Idem, 4. They borrow the distinction from Floya Anthias, "Intersectional what? Social divisions, intersectionality and levels of analysis." *Ethnicities* 13 (1), 2012, 3–19.

4. Belonging in the dark

It may seem strange, counter-intuitive, and perhaps even (to some) a deficiency or contradiction in the terms, that a theology of belonging christianly should not focus more than this one will do on ecclesial belonging in particular and the church in general. Indeed, a theology of belonging christianly that neglects the church runs the risk of presuming an individualistic understanding of belonging, an oxymoron. After all, to reflect theologically (and systematically) on belonging is to ask about the (transformative) impact of the faith Christians communally profess on and in their common daily life; and the church is the community in which Christians normally and intentionally enter in relation with God and one another. Kathryn Tanner describes her involvement in systematic theology as "an attempt to meet an essential demand of everyday Christian living",[21] while Gerard Loughlin takes doctrine to be "the grammar of Christian discourse; the stage directions for the church's performance of the gospel."[22] As a result, Nick Healy argues,

> systematic theology *belongs* very much within the sphere of the church, simply because the church is *the condition of the possibility for its inquiry*. […] Academic systematic theological inquiry cannot be independent of the church and its other theologies; *apart from them, it has no ground for its inquiries or hopes for their success.*[23]

If the church, here understood as communit*ies*, institution*s*, and tradition*s*, is therefore the natural and indeed normative landscape within which Christian living and theology take place, it is in the service of the church, here understood in the widest sense as the *whole* people of God, that theologians perform their ecclesial mission of "doing" theology.[24] Therefore it

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[21] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, xiii.

[22] Loughlin, "The Basis and Authority of Christian Doctrine" in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Colin Gunton (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 41-64, 54. Also see Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 46-51. Also see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London: SPCK, 1984, 73-111.

[23] Nicholas M. Healy, "What is Systematic Theology?", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (1), January 2009, 24-39, 36-7.

[24] Idem, 38. Professional systematic theology should serve not just the bishops and official theology, but all church people and their attempts to engage in systematic theological inquiry.

may seem that the theological venture offered by this thesis is doomed before it has even started. Yet, as Healy also points out, professional systematic theology, 'rather than being normative, […] is developmental and experimental.'[25] This echoes Pope Francis' call in front of the International Theological Commission for theology to "dare to go further". It is in that spirit of daring and experimenting that one should read this departure from a primarily ecclesial and ecclesiological account of belonging to one of belonging christianly. Furthermore, this experiment does not intend to ultimately neglect or even reject the theological meaning and function of the church, but instead to offer a landscape within which the meaning and purpose of the church can then be discovered anew and explored, although this will not be done in this thesis. Therefore, while more thinking on the way belonging christianly relates to actual forms of ecclesial belonging, as well as the role played by ecclesial belonging within belonging christianly, will be needed, this will not be addressed in this thesis.

To defend this experimental and counter-intuitive approach, I wish to put it in context, as it may shed some light on its theological pastoral, and even ecclesial potentials. The first context is that of Catholic theology and imagination in which the church, understood as a divinely instituted institution, community, or again mystical communion occupies a key place in the drama of salvation. In a way, rephrasing a well-known statement from *Lumen Gentium* on the Eucharist, one could even say that the church is "the source and summit" of Christian life.[26] At any rate, it is where the significant steps and moments of sacramental life take place. Parishes are also loci of what Tia Noelle Pratt calls, 'parish cultural production'. Drawing our attention to the importance of 'symbols' and 'liturgy as identity work' in the context of her work on Black American Catholics, [27] Pratt shows us that in the process of constructing this parochial culture, symbols, such as vestments, gestures, music, form, and length of the homily are mobilised, to reflect but also create belonging. Yet, while all this is true, and even precisely because all this is true, the temptation for the theologian is to focus on belonging in the ecclesial context, either at a highly systematic level or with greater attention to its local instantiation,

[25] Ibid.

[26] Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church - Lumen Gentium*, Vatican City, 21 November 1964, §11.https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (last accessed on 22 September 2023).

[27] Tia Pratt, "Liturgy as Identity Work in Predominantly African American Parishes", in *American Parishes: The Remaking of Local Catholicism,* Gary L. Adler Jr., Tricia C. Bruce, and Brian Starks (eds.), New York: Fordham University Press, 2019, 135.

thus neglecting the impact of the Christian story on other forms of belonging that remain uninterrogated, segregating profane belonging from sacred ecclesial belonging.

As pointed out by James Alison in a private conversation, PhDs are often our "first attempt at an autobiography" and this is now the second context in which this thesis's counter-intuitive approach must be read. This will also shed more light on the idea of belonging in the dark. Therefore, while seeking to be "self-implicating" without "being self-indulgent" can be a perilous exercise,[28] I will nonetheless venture to this very personal task in the hope that it brings honesty and further theological insight into this thesis' approach to belonging. This thesis initially emerged from the existential place of longing and wandering of a gay Catholic Christian struggling with the deep and intoxicating desire to belong (to the church), that is the urge to "be in" and to "get it right" … *and the fear not to*. Gradually, through the serendipitous conflation of my formal theological training as well as personal encounters, my understanding of who God is, what the church is, who I am, and what belonging means (or rather ought to mean) has evolved. As this slow but major tectonic theological and existential shift has taken place, the project itself has moved, although not completely, from the place of apologetical existential unrest in which it started, to a generally more adequate tranquillity, but also a different and hopefully fruitful kind of unrest. This journey is not a linear one, and relapses in shame and longing for certainty and security are all too frequent. This is another *crucial* way in which this thesis tells, implicitly, or between the lines, the story of belonging in the dark, from the place of an "internal exile."[29]

In an ecclesial context, belonging in the dark can thus be understood as the timid, at times *very* fragile yet somehow resilient or persistent act of faith and commitment of those who somehow, and to various degrees, are estranged from the church, or who wish to stay in solidarity with those estranged from or excluded by the church, and nonetheless have heard and wish to answer in their way Christ's calling in the depth of their being. This kind of ecclesiological agnosticism, belonging in the dark, can be an opportunity to witness a path for those who struggle to belong, but somehow want to follow Christ and cannot let go completely

[28] These terms were used by James Alison in response to a question from Karen Kilby about the autobiographical tone of his work. This conversation took place as part of the LGBTQI+ Theology and Religion Conversation series at Durham University hosted at Durham Castle, which I organised in collaboration with Dr. Stephanie Burette and Dr. Colin Donnelly. I am grateful to Kilby for asking the question and reminding me of the exact wording of the answer.

[29] Werner G. Jeanrond, "Sent into exile", *The Tablet*, 15 April 2023, 10.

of the church, that is those for whom belonging has become challenging but who wish nonetheless to maintain belonging. This kind of belonging in the dark, one could also call belonging in the wilderness, "belonging from afar" or again "belonging in the shadow".[30] The result is a fragmented, incomplete, but honest theological account of belonging.

5. Towards a systematic theology of belonging christianly:

> Theologians produce products (theological texts) with their bodies, yet the page of a theological text often pretends to be as far from the body as anything can be. […] What would happen if one wrote theology and allowed the writing to reflect its own conditions, its own truths? What if, in Althaus-Reid's memorable image, one sat down to write theology without wearing underwear? *What if theology were about reality*?[31]

Offering a systematic theology of belonging might seem at best very ambitious, at worse an illusionary and arrogant venture from another time. Can theology meaningfully engage with something so deeply embedded in the day-to-day life as belonging? Systematic theology does not exactly have the wind in its sails. In a contemporary Western intellectual landscape that is secular, sometimes aggressively so, the (systematic) theological discourse has become an anomaly, a vestige of yesteryear, and even an offense to intelligence:

> If you actually go to a department of theology, you will see that they do wonderful things. They are translating the Dead Sea scrolls, they are looking at biblical history… a form of anthropology, really. That's fine. What is not fine is heavy logic dropping about the fundamental meaning of the transubstantiation, or the Trinity, or something like that. *That is the kind of theology that I think is not a subject.* The kind of theology that is a subject is historical scholarship, literary scholarship. That kind of thing. […] I have better things to do, I do science.[32]

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[30] The idea of belonging in the shadow was suggested to me by Clare Watkins in a private conversation. For "belonging from afar" see Vanessa May, "Belonging from afar: Nostalgia, time and memory", *sociological review*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12402.

[31] Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2018, 74-5. My emphasis.

[32] Alex O'Connor, 'Richard Dawkins | Outgrowing God | On Atheism, Ethics, and Theology', *Cosmic Skeptics*, 19 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsLEf1Uwb5o. The transcription and emphasis are mine.

Although maybe in an inflated and polemical form characteristic of Richard Dawkins's well-known views on religion in general and Christianity in particular,[33] this quote shows the discomfort and nervousness generated by, and even in this case the animosity towards, systematic theology.[34] Systematic theology claims to engage constructively with a corpus—dogmas, and scripture—that it claims has been revealed by God, even though it has been mediated by men.[35]

It is in the light of this discomfort that we can perhaps best understand what Gerard Loughlin means when he argues that:

> Theology is a queer thing. It has always been a queer thing. It is a very strange thing indeed, especially for anyone living in the modern West of the twenty-first century. For theology runs counter to a world given over to material consumption, that understands itself as 'accidental', without any meaning other than that which it gives to itself, and so without any fundamental meaning at all. […] But even when theology was culturally dominant it was strange, for it sought the strange; it sought to know the unknowable in Christ, the mystery it was called to seek through following Jesus. And of course, it has always been in danger of losing this strangeness by pretending that it has comprehended the mystery, that it can name that which is beyond all names. Indeed—and despite its own best schooling—it has often succumbed to this danger, which it names 'idolatry'.[36]

What if, unlike Dawkins, one does *not* have better things to do? Worse, what if, like Loughlin, one still thinks theology is a worthy and even vital endeavour against the temptation of idolatry and absolutism? What if one still thinks that "to understand ourselves we must understand our

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[33] See Richard Dawkins, *The God's delusion*, San Francisco CA: Black Swan, 2007. For a critic of Dawkins and new atheism see Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, London: SPCK, 2007.

[34] See Healy, "What is Systematic Theology?", 25. Healy also points out that systematic theology is sometimes looked at with suspicion within the church, skeptically for being a constructive and/or intellectual venture.

[35] Here I use men because historically and still in many ecclesial contexts, men have had a near monopoly on mediating God's revelation. Healy notes that even the purpose of systematic theology "is a controversial topic in the discipline too." Ibid. Healy also addresses the idea that the only acceptable forms of theology are the study of religion or his history of religion. Idem, 36.

[36] Gerard Loughlin, "What is Queer? Theology After Identity," *Theology and Sexuality,* 14 (2), 143-4.

orientation to the unknown from which all things come and to which they return, that which—as Christian theology ventures—arrives in the life of Jesus"?[37].

Nonetheless, it may seem that if the theology of belonging christianly deployed in this thesis is to avoid the pitfall of "blueprint" theologies,[38] the theological discipline best equipped for this endeavour is practical theology. This thesis will nonetheless take another and perhaps less obvious path, as it will seek to offer a systematic and constructive theology of belonging, with the assumption that systematic theology can say something deeply practical, contextual, and prophetic about belonging. It is also worth remembering that Healy's important critique of blueprint ecclesiology is not a critique of systematic theology or ecclesiology *per se* but of a certain kind of systematic theology. This thesis does not seek to provide a robust, definitive, all-encompassing, and detailed theology of belonging. Instead, it only seeks to provide some critical tools and signposts to reflect constructively and christianly on belonging. It will therefore be no surprise that it remains fragmentary and lacking. I have already mentioned the lack of sustained ecclesiological treatment of belonging in this thesis. Others might be put off by the "magpie" style of the theology articulated in this thesis and the number and variety of primarily contemporary theological voices, Catholic and otherwise, summoned and drawn upon in each chapter.[39] This thesis can be seen as an exercise, or even better an experiment, seeking to reconfigure these voices creatively around the theme of belonging and a new concept, belonging christianly.

Two voices will be heard more often than others. Karen Kilby and James Alison have proven central in developing the theological vision and ethics of this thesis. As for the fragmentary nature of the thesis, beyond the fact that this is only the premise of what can perhaps be called a theology in the making, I also want to suggest that a fragmentary and "messy" theology might be entirely appropriate, and indeed the best way of reflecting

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[37] Loughlin, "What is Queer?", 143.

[38] Healy advocates for a "practical and prophetic ecclesiology" and offers a sharp critique of a certain kind of systematic ecclesiology that reflects abstractly and exhaustively upon the church as perfection and fails to reflect the messiness, the complexity, and the ambivalence of the church as it is. Healy calls this blue-print ecclesiologies. Healy, *Church, World, and Christian Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[39] Incidentally many of these voices, including Karen Kilby, Kathryn Tanner, Linn Tonstad, Nick M. Healy, Willie Jennings, Miroslav Volf, and Gene Rogers are connected, either as students and/or teachers at Yale Divinity School.

theologically and truthfully on a reality as fragmentary and messy as belonging. Considering the purpose of doctrine, James Alison argues that

> doctrine is not primarily something that we are supposed to know "about." Rather it is a constitutive chapter of the vision that empowers us to be children of God as Church, living grammar with which we learn to forge the intertwined life stories that we hope one day will surprise us as heaven.[40]

To reflect systematically on belonging is therefore to ask about the (transformative) impact of the faith Christians communally profess on and in their *daily* life, which includes *all* the forms of belonging that forge their life.[41] Indeed, even highly systematic theologians such as Anselm and Thomas did not understand theology as a purely intellectual enterprise. Although Anselm famously described theology as *fides quaerens intellectum,*[42] Paul Murray argues that 'the understanding that he [Anselm] sought was not only conceptual, doctrinal clarity (…) but also increased practical, ethical, and spiritual understanding of what it means to live in the light of this teaching.'[43]

Moreover, the "seeking" that prompts and constitutes the theological task emerges from within the life of the theologian, who too often have written, or are read, as if they were disembodied entities. Instead, Linn Tonstad contends,

> theologians produce […] discourses of abstraction laboriously hand-written or typed, perhaps with aching wrist and shoulders, seated somewhere or other (perhaps in one's favorite cheap Ikea office chair, marked by the claws of naughty cats, writing on an Apple computer, and so in direct relation to other animals and global capitalism, including exploitation of humans and natural resources). Is the writer waiting for a lover to arrive? Is there perhaps a child wailing to be fed? A domestic worker in the back, freeing the writer for a few hours? Has one gone to a library or coffee shop or

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[40] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroads, 1998, 2.

[41] Here I have in mind the narthex of the church of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Québec where the rich symbolic art and architecture convey powerfully that pilgrims enter the church with the richness of their own stories and lives. I am grateful to Gilles Routhier for his hospitality in Québec and for giving me a tour of this church.

[42] Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, II-IV in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

[43] Murray, "Engaging with the contemporary Church", 278. Murray also points to the significant place given to ethics in the *Summa. idem,* 279.

> bar or park to escape, or to be in the company of strangers, as an antidote to loneliness? How is the food that one eats or the coffee that one drinks to sustain the writing of theology paid?[44]

Theologians *cannot* and *should not* try to extract themselves from their context. This means that part of the task of the theologian is to engage constructively, both creatively and critically, with their own context, for "the vocation of the theologian is always to dare to go further, because he or she is searching and trying to make theology more explicit."[45]

This task is to be performed within and for the People of God, which is "the condition of the possibility for its inquiry."[46] This, however, does not mean that, like any of the baptised, the theologian's relationship with the church is always straightforward. Perhaps more than any baptised, the theologian should be wary of finding themselves at the centre of the church, even more so if the object of their inquiry is the church and/or belonging. Instead, they should pay attention to and even aim at locating themselves at the margins of the ecclesial community. Discussing the influence of Amelia Podetti upon the thought of Pope Francis, Massimo Borghesi writes that Podetti 'was a major influence on Bergoglio in a key area: the "peripheries"', with the idea that 'those in the "centre", in the heart of the metropolis, fail to grasp the drama of history, its faultlines, and points of rupture, and therefore the impending earthquakes."[47] Therefore, if belonging is perhaps a prerequisite to practicing Christian theology, a certain critical distance, and perhaps even ecclesial discomfort might be required if it is to exhibit the kind of curiosity and freedom of the children of God. This "distance", whether chosen or externally imposed, will enable the theologian to engage in the task of

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[44] Tonstad, *Queer Theology*, 74-5.

[45] Francis, "Audience with members of the International Theological Commission: The vocation of the theologian is always to dare to go further", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9 December 2022, https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2022-12/ing-049/the-vocation-of-the-theologian-is-always-to-dare-to-go-further.html (last accessed 2 September 2023).

[46] Healy, "What is Systematic Theology?", 36. In even stronger terms Healy argues that "academic systematic theological inquiry cannot be independent of the church and its other theologies; apart from them, it has no ground for its inquiries or hope for their success." *Idem*, 37. On the role played by the relationship with and the experience of God in the task of doing theology see Jürgen Moltmann, "What is a Theologian?", *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, 64 (1999).

[47] Massimo Borghesi, "Living with contradiction: a new biography of Pope Francis challenges the suggestion that he lacks the intellectual substance of his predecessors", *The Tablet*, 7 February 2019, https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/12338/living-with-contradiction-a-new-biography-of-pope-francis-challenges-the-suggestion-that-he-lacks-the-intellectual-substance-of-his-predecessors-(last accessed on 2 September 2023).

"demystify[ing], undo[ing], and subvert[ing]" grand narratives of belonging, [48] while recovering, or uncovering "a profoundly creaturely belonging that performs the returning of the creature to the creator, and a returning to an intimate and erotic energy that drives life together with God."[49]

As I am discussing the distinctive task of the theologian, it seems important to introduce two other key concepts already briefly mentioned—*humility* and *honesty*. Benedictine monk and poet Sebastian Moore described theology as 'the mind making a fool of itself for the love of God'.[50] Indeed, is it not foolish to wish to speak of that which, in the words of Augustine, is 'the immutable light higher than my mind (…), utterly different from our kinds of light'?[51] What level of clarity can one hope for when reflecting theologically on belonging christianly?[52] Kilby argues that "the search for clarity, at its best, begins in confusion, or rather, it begins in *honesty* about confusion".[53] The theologian, who ought to be humble regarding the scope and outcomes of their work, also needs to be honest about and recognise their confusion as a constitutive part of any theological endeavour.[54] This very recognition might help turn fear into wonder and open the possibility of telling old stories anew.

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[48] Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 'Thinking Theology and Queer Theory', *Feminist Theology*, 2007, 3(15), 311.

[49] Jenkins, *After Whiteness*, 11.

[50] Sebastian Moore, 'Two ideas and a Poem', *Lonergan Workshop* 17, Fred Lawrence (ed.), Boston College, 2002, 163.

[51] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick (trans.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7.10, 16.

[52] For an enlightening account of clarity in theology see Karen Kilby, "Seeking clarity", in *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology*, 72-87. I am exploring here a few points raised by Kilby: the idea that the search for clarity starts in confusion and that theology is a mystery. This will be further developed in Part 1.

[53] Karen Kilby, "Seeking clarity", 61. My emphasis.

[54] Kilby points out that Augustine neither tried to hide his own confusion regarding the doctrine of the Trinity nor avoided raising difficult questions. Thus, we should be inspired by "Augustine's enormous freedom to be puzzled." Kilby insists that acknowledging one's confusion is a sign of faith. ibid. However, it might be necessary to distinguish between two kinds of confusion or unsettlement. The first, the one Kilby describes, is that which assails us when we explore the mystery of the Christian faith in its various doctrines such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, as they help us to encounter God. Yet, another form of confusion, which is particularly important to acknowledge in ecclesiology is the puzzlement created by the gap between the church as it *ought* to be and as it *is*. There are countless examples of this confusion: while some, animated by righteous anger in the face of the church's corruption and sinfulness, have left the church, others would rather not hear that the reality of the church is often different from that which normative theology would like it to be.

6. Gathering the fragments

The thesis will be divided into three main parts. Each part will be composed of a series of chapters which I will call fragments, all built around a common theme.

In Part 1, I seek to establish, or more appropriately, identify a grammar of theocentric belonging. This grammar will provide the foundations for how our God-talk can inform the way we think about what I have already called belonging christianity. The aim of Part 1 is to establish the foundation, what I call theocentric belonging, upon which belonging christianly is built, or of which belonging christianly is the reflection or sign, and toward which it aims. Part 1 will resort to three key Christian doctrines—The Trinity, *creatio ex nihilo*, and the Incarnation, and consists of four chapters. In Chapter 1, I will discuss Karen Kilby's and Kathryn Tanner's noted critiques of Social Trinitarianism, specifically issues linked to projection into the Trinity and imitation of the Trinity, and the way this helps us articulate what the doctrine of the Trinity does not have to say about belonging, that is how it can*not* or even should *not* shed light upon and provide the foundations for thinking belonging christianly. Through a discussion of belonging as participation and salvation, Chapter 2 will endeavour to begin to rediscover and deploy what I call theocentric belonging. More specifically, Chapter 2 will explore the idea of belonging as participation and participation as creation and incorporation. Here belonging is understood as synonymous to life (participation as creation) and salvation (participation through incorporation in the life of God). Therefore, in contrast with Chapter 1, Chapter 2 tells us how the Trinity *does* provide the foundations for thinking about belonging christianly. In Chapter 3, engagement with recent developments in the theology of creation, specifically the ideas of kinship and deep incarnation, led me to propose what I call deep belonging which allows for an expensive approach to belonging christianly. Chapter 4 explores the limitations that a theology of theocentric belonging entails. It argues that a christocentric theology of belonging must also be pneumatic and that apophasis and eschatology are characteristic marks of theocentric belonging.

It would be easy but misleading to identify the underlying or dominant theme in Part 2 as sin *per se.* Instead, the underlying aim of Part 2 is to seek to hold in tension, interrogate, and (re)construct the relationship between the fundamental (and eschatological) reality or mode of theocentric belonging painted in Part 1 and the finite, transitional, performative, fragmented,

and often distorted ways in which humans do effectively belong in a finite and fallen world. In other words, Part 2 is interested in how grace appears, emerges, is received, and grows amid the mess, in unexpected places, and unexpected ways. The distorted forms of belonging will in time be called postlapsarian belonging, but for now, we can call them lived belonging. Belonging christianly will emerge as the long journey or pilgrimage from postlapsarian belonging into theocentric belonging, that is from the darkness of sin into the darkness of God. To put it differently, the rest of this thesis will seek to inhabit creatively the tension between theocentric belonging and postlapsarian belonging to reflect on how to receive and gradually inhabit/embody belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong christianly amid postlapsarian belonging. To do so, Part 2 will fall into three chapters. Chapter 5 will endeavour to articulate the place and role of the doctrines of sin and original sin within the theology of belonging christianly. Chapter 6 will seek to further refine our understanding of sin and its place within the Christian story and vision, as well as the role of atonement within this vision to create room for thinking belonging christianly beyond our numb imaginations as well as beyond shame. Expanding on this, Chapter 7 will explore the dynamics and freedom of belonging christianly, as well as its challenges and even obstacles.

Part 3 will attempt to reflect further on what belonging christianly might look like through the themes of imitation of and identification with Christ. To discern how to imitate and identify with Christ, the first three chapters will focus on what I suggest are ways of *mis*identifying with Christ. Thus, Chapter 8 will explore the role suffering should (not) play in our imitating and identifying with Christ. Chapter 9 will seek to reflect on vulnerability and more specifically the idea of self-emptying or kenosis. and the two ways in which this can lead to misidentification with Christ, which in turn can have dire consequences on how we conceive belonging christianly. Chapter 10 will discuss another, potentially more controversial, misidentification with Christ. Here we will talk about misidentification with "Black" Christ and the conundrum of following Christ as "white". As a result, this chapter will reflect critically on identification as well as on the replacement strategy of disidentification with Christ suggested by Harvey and Teel. Expanding on Chapter 10, Chapter 11 will propose what I will call apophatic identification with Christ as the orientation of belonging christianly. Firstly, I will briefly identify and reject two paths of disidentification and explore a third one, which I will call apophatic identification. This will lead me to discuss what, after Alison, I will call Christ's fraternal relocation of God and our own fraternal restoration as key to the possibility of, and also a defining feature for the shape of belonging christianly. Finally, I will reflect on

Alison's critique of victimhood and resentment and what constitutes authentic fraternal identification to Christ and indeed belonging christianly, with a particular focus on the marginalised.

Part 1:

Towards a theocentric understanding of belonging

In Part 1, I seek to establish, or more appropriately, identify a grammar of theocentric belonging. This grammar will provide the foundations for how our God-talk can inform the way we think about what I have already called belonging christianly. To do so, I will resort to three key Christian doctrines—The Trinity, *creatio ex nihilo*, and the Incarnation. Part 1 will consist of four chapters.

Chapter 1 discusses Karen Kilby's and Kathryn Tanner's noted critiques of social trinitarianism specifically issues linked to projection into the Trinity and imitation of the Trinity, and the way this helps articulate what the doctrine of the Trinity does not have to say about belonging, that is how it can*not* or even should *not* shed light upon and provide the foundations for thinking belonging christianly.

Through the discussion of belonging as participation and salvation, chapter 2 endeavours to rediscover and deploy what I call theocentric belonging. More specifically it explores the idea of belonging as participation and salvation. Here belonging is understood as synonymous with life (participation as creation) and salvation (participation through incorporation in the life of God). Therefore, in contrast, to chapter 1, chapter 2 tells us how the Trinity *does* provide the foundations for thinking belonging christianly.

In Chapter 3, the concepts of kinship and deep incarnation serve to articulate what I call "deep" belonging, which in turn allows for an expansive approach to belonging christianly.

Chapter 4 explores the limitations that a theology of theocentric belonging entails. It argues that a christocentric theology of belonging must also be pneumatic and that apophasis and eschatology are characteristic marks of theocentric belonging.

As Part 1 unfolds, what I mean by “theocentric”, “deep”, and “apophatic” will become clearer. Like social trinitarianism, the approach developed in Part 1 will seek to offer a *distinctly* Christian understanding of belonging. However, it will aim to avoid the robustness that Kilby finds worrying in social trinitarianism. Its most demanding and ambitious goal perhaps, is to allow the centrality of Mystery to act as a key conceptual, spiritual, and expansive tool for thinking belonging christianly.

Chapter 1:

What the Trinity does (not) have to say about belonging

The doctrine of the Trinity and more specifically social theories of the Trinity, also called social trinitarianism, can initially seem uniquely equipped to achieve such a goal, offering tantalising prospects for an exalting, enthusiastic, generous, and bold theology of belonging that articulates diversity in unity. However, Karen Kilby's and Kathryn Tanner's noted critiques of social trinitarianism have brought into question such an intuition. At this stage, it is important to clarify that the aim of this first chapter, and indeed Part 1, will *not* be to contribute directly or further to the already impressive corpus of critiques of social trinitarianism.[55] To achieve this aim, it would need to engage directly and more expansively with social Trinitarians themselves, as well as all or more of their critics. Our aim is not either to contribute more broadly to Trinitarian theology as such. Instead, and perhaps more modestly, in engaging with Kilby and Tanner, I merely seek to articulate how the doctrine of the Trinity can (and *cannot*) or even should (and *should not*) shed light upon and in turn provide the foundations for thinking belonging christianly.

Kilby's critique of social trinitarianism, especially her early article "Perichoresis and Projection", has recently been described by Michael Brain as "thus far one of the twenty-first century's most important pieces of trinitarian theology".[56] Brain continues,

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[55] Karen Kilby, Kathryn Tanner, Linn Tonstad, Sarah Coakley, Lewis Ayres, and Michel Barnes have contributed to the decline of interest in social rinitarianism—what Kilby once called 'the new Orthodoxy'—in the last twenty years. See Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with social doctrines of the Trinity" in Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 6n4. Kilby's essay was first published in *New Blackfriars,* vol 81 No 956, October 2000, 432-445. I will reference the re-edited version in *God, Evil and the Limits of The Theology*. This applies to the various articles that have been re-edited in this new volume. It is also worth mentioning that while the influence of social trinitarianism in English-speaking academic theology has decreased significantly in the last twenty years, except maybe in analytic theology and practical theology, in recent years, the focus towards race and queer theories has seen new analogous pathway presenting some of the same dangers emerge. Arguing against this see Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality and the Transformation of Finitude,* New York and London: Routledge, 2016.

[56] Michael Brain, "The Grammar of Salvation: The Function of Trinitarian Theology in the Works of Karen Kilby and Robert Jenson", *Pro Ecclesia* 31(4), 481-2.

> One simply cannot be a trinitarian theologian today without addressing Kilby's work. She has changed the landscape of contemporary trinitarian thought, such that uncritical appeals to social analogies are now impossible.

Yet, Kilby's and Tanner's contributions to disputes in contemporary trinitarian theology are not merely critical. Instead, they offer *distinct* and constructive alternatives to social trinitarianism. Kilby, a former student of Tanner, acknowledges her "persistent influence" on her work. In light of this lasting influence, Kilby also remarks: "This makes it particularly intriguing, of course, when our theological sensibilities diverge." Indeed, another reason to look at Kilby and Tanner's alternatives to social trinitarianism conjointly is precisely that although they both reject social trinitarianism, it is one instance where their "theological sensibilities diverge" in two ways which can be identified with two kinds of "pessimism":—epistemic on Kilby's side and anthropological on Tanner's side.[57] I will explore these divergences or tensions as we encounter them in Part 1, but for now, it is enough to say that in this creative tension resides an opportunity for rethinking the task of constructing a theology of belonging christianly.[58] This first chapter says something about that journey and the process of purgation and maturation required to refine and indeed reorientate the trajectory of this thesis, as well as the new "expansive" possibilities this offers.

1. The danger of projectionism in social trinitarianism

Anne Hunt's useful, albeit generic,[59] definition of social trinitarianism is a convenient start. social trinitarianism, she says, "focus[es] on the Trinity as a community of persons and

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[57] See Kilby, "Reply to Critics", *Political Theology*, 22(5), 423-432, 425. Also see Kilby, "The Trinity and Politics: An Apophatic Approach" in Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 55n25.

[58] To be clear, I do not wish to say that *this is* the only way to (re)think belonging in Christian terms, but that I found that particular space and the tension between Kilby's and Tanner's approaches creative.

[59] A fair assessment of social trinitarianism requires emphasis on its sheer (ecclesial) diversity. Its foremost proponents have included influential figures such as Jürgen Motlmann, Leonardo Boff, John Zizioulas, Richard Swinburne, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and Miroslav Volf. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl, NewYork: Harper, 1980; John Zizioulas, *Being as* Communion, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society,* trans. Paul Burns, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988; Richard Swinburne, *Could There be More than One God?*", *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (3),1988, 225-24; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for* Us, New York: HarperCollins, 1991; Miroslav Volf, ""The Trinity is our Social Program:' The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of the Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14(3), 1998, 403-23. On the theological diversity and even disagreements between social trinitarianism proponents see Volf, "Apophatic Social trinitarianism: Why I Continue to Espouse 'a Kind of' Social Trinitarianism'", *Political Theology*, 22(5), 2021, 407-22. Kilby describes Volf as "one of the most substantial and serious proponents of the approach". Kilby, "The Trinity and Politics", 45.

seek[s] to explicate the social and political ramifications of that understanding of the Trinity for the human condition."[60] The aims of social trinitarianism are ambitious. Firstly, it seeks to deepen our knowledge of God's inner life. Secondly, it tries to discern, from this newly gained knowledge, ways of healing and reforming a wounded, sinful world (and church), whether through a renewed sense of community in a fractured world and divided church, an overcoming of inherited patriarchal hierarchical structures, or through providing such structures with new—or supposedly rediscovered—meaning and purpose.[61] Kilby describes this as a 'three-stage process',[62] which includes projection from creation into God, and 'reverse' or 'corrective projection[…]' from God back to creation, at once a critical and constructive move.[63] Although it is helpful to distinguish these stages for analytical purposes, it is important to notice that the curative or therapeutic intent of corrective projectionism is already present, even if silently or unconsciously, during the initial stage of projectionism. For while projectionism entails projecting what is godly about human living, and thus must be found in God, it has *also already* in mind what is lacking in human living and must therefore be found in God.

Projectionism is a particularly attractive feature of social trinitarianism for several reasons. Firstly, it offers a robust model for belonging—the immanent Trinity. The project which unfolds thereafter appears to be authentically, distinctively, Christian, even boldly so,

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[60] Anne Hunt, "Psychological Analogy and Paschal Mystery in Trinitarian Theology", *Theological Studies* 59(2), 1998, 197-218, 197, in Brian Doyle, "Social doctrine of the Trinity and communion ecclesiology", *Horizons*, 33(2), 2006, 239-55, 240.

[61] Social trinitarians have different and sometimes competing agendas, even though there seems to be a general tendency towards more 'progressive' theologies. Tanner disputes that progressive theology can be so easily drawn from trinitarian theology. See Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 217.

[62] Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projectionism", 14. Also: "First, a concept, perichoresis, is used to name what is not understood, to name whatever it is that makes the three Persons one. Secondly, the concept is filled rather suggestively with notions borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness. And then, finally, it is presented as an exciting resource Christian theology has to offer to the wider world in its reflections on relationships and relatedness. Ibid. Elsewhere she describes the pattern as follows: "So we first project our best ideas about human community onto the Trinity, and then claim to have discovered *in* the Trinity a new map for structuring human communities." Kilby, 'Trinity, Tradition, and Politics' in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian theology: An International Symposium*, Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (eds.), Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014, 75. My emphasis.

Kilby speaks of 'reverse projection' in Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projectionism", 15. Tonstad coined "corrective" projectionism which she describes as follows: "Corrective protectionism identifies certain problems of human existence […] and then generates a trinitarian theology that shows how the constitutive relationships of the trinity uniquely critique and overcome such human problems."Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude*, New York and London: Routledge, 2016, 13.

since it is rooted, or so it claims, in the life of God God-self! As such it seems beyond questioning. Secondly, a central characteristic of projectionism in social trinitarianism is imitation—what is found in the Godhead, can and must be reproduced in human living. Later in this thesis, borrowing from René Girard and James Alison, I will contend that imitation is crucial to hominisation as well as crucial to the way humans live together, and therefore central to understanding belonging.[64] Therefore, theologies that find their root in God *God-self* and that grant imitation such a prominent place may seem hard to resist.[65] Thirdly, social trinitarianism offers *practical* outcomes for the life of the concrete church and beyond, since it claims that it can draw on the immanent Trinity to shape human living.[66] Indeed, one of the strengths of social trinitarianism is that it renders the Trinity concrete, accessible, and indeed imitable, or in Kilby's words, 'not a difficulty deep in the technical bowels of theology but *something useful, applicable, motivating*.'[67] Finally, for some, the attractiveness of social trinitarianism also resides in its emphasis on relationality and its suspicion of hierarchical, impersonal, juridical, and authoritative ecclesial structures, as well as individualism. Instead, social trinitarianism usually seeks to promote equality, communion, love, and mutuality, as key to ecclesial relationships and communities.[68] Although such aims may seem perfectly legitimate and desirable, Kilby and Tanner take issue with 'the legitimacy of deriving these conclusions from the doctrine in this *way*.'[69]

While addressing the issue of projectionism in social trinitarianism, it is important to acknowledge that theology always involves a certain level of projection. Theology shapes, but is also shaped by one's context, colouring one's interests, vision, imagination and priorities

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[64] "Mimesis keeps human beings together and apart, assuring at the same time the *cohesion* of the social fabric and the relative *autonomy* of the members that make it up." Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire*, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991,11-12, cited in Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, Lanham, Chicago, New York, Toronto, and Plymouth, UK: Rowman, and Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 17-18.

[65] We will soon see that the problem with social theories of the Trinity is not imitation *per se* but, to speak in Girardian terms, the model.

[66] Kilby also points out that this type of projectionism propels the theologian at the centre, gifted with some special knowledge that the laity and people outside the church need. Kilby, "Trinity and Politics", 51. Also Kilby, "Reply to Critics", 431.

[67] Idem, 45. My emphasis.

[68] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 207. Tanner also argues that 'many contemporary theologians overestimate the progressive political potential of the trinity'. Idem, 208.

[69] Kilby, in "Trinity, Tradition and Politics", 74.

and orientation, what Healy calls our "theological horizon". Different "regimes of truths" entail different understandings of God or the church and its mission in the world precisely *because* they involve projection.[70] As a result, reflexivity—in this instance, awareness of one's theological roots, landscape, location, narrative, and agenda,[71] and how these shape one's theology even before the cognitive level, should lead the theologian to approach their task, as well as their positionality, with greater honesty, responsibility, and humility.[72] This raises a further question. If it is to be expected that any theological endeavour or proposal for ecclesial renewal will, on the one hand, try to find ground in Christian data and on the other hand will inevitably involve some level of projection, the question we thus face is that of the 'distinctive[ness]' of the kind of projectionism which Kilby finds so 'particularly problematic' in social trinitarianism.[73] To answer this, Kilby contrasts social trinitarianism projectionism with Anselm's satisfaction atonement theory. Anselm's satisfaction theory borrows from the highly hierarchical cosmology, social order, and values of his time, especially the key feudal concepts of honour and justice, to understand the redeeming meaning of Christ's death, that is its role in the economy of salvation. Despite its long-lasting influence in shaping the understanding of redemption in the West, Anselm's theory has been the object of fierce criticism. Amongst the critics, Elisabeth Johnson has accused it of offering "a disastrous image of God" as a 'morally repulsive', 'vindictive', 'sinister' and 'sadistic God'.[74] It has also come under scrutiny for legitimising an iniquitous social order, 'sanctify[ing] violence', 'fostering an ethics of submission in the faith of injustice' and 'glorify[ing] suffering'.[75] Whether those criticisms are fair, or whether Anselm can be salvaged from such critiques is beyond the scope

[70] Yann, Raison du Cleuziou, "L'attente et la règle. Quelques éléments de réflexion sur le lien entre le sentiment de sacramentalité et les régimes de vérité dans le catholicisme contemporain", in Hélène Bricout (dir.), *Du bon usage des normes en liturgie. Approche théologique et spirituelle après Vatican II*, Paris: Cerf, 2020, 35- 49. 36. Also see Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds.), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian* Context, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

[71] I am very grateful to Pete Ward, Nick Healy, and Clare Watkins for introducing me to the importance of reflexivity in theology.

[72] Theological hubris is precisely one of the main issues Kilby identifies with social trinitarianism and modern systematic theology.

[73] Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection", 12.

[74] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril,* Maryknoll, New York Orbis Book, 2018, 15-16.

[75] Idem, 20, 22, 23.

of this chapter.[76] What matters is that despite those serious attacks which Kilby does not deny or even challenge,[77] she maintains that the kind of projection at work in social trinitarianism, 'particularly problematic in at least some social theories of the Trinity', is more concerning.[78]

> If Anselm had, in other words, trumpeted as the most important thing about the doctrine those very concepts which he himself had imported to solve the intellectual difficulty posed by it, if he had said, these concepts are the heart of the doctrine, they are what we must learn about God and ourselves from the doctrine of the atonement, then, I think, he would have been doing a very different, and a much more worrying, kind of theology.[79]

At the centre of Kilby's concern is the worry that social trinitarianism is redefining the doctrine of the Trinity whose purpose may no longer be solely to articulate certain fundamentals of the Christian faith,[80] but to make normative claims about human living. Echoing the quote from Loughlin at the start of this chapter, Tanner points out that corrective projectionisms also run the risk of falling into idolatry by canonising particular theological agendas and reshaping God according to those agendas and into our so-called better selves, even if this entails 'systematically modify[ing] as many of the socially and politically problematic aspects of trinitarian theology as they [social trinitarians] can.'[81] Such strategies thus risk neglecting God's unknowability, one of Kilby's main concerns, as well as corrupting

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[76] For a nuanced (and more positive) assessment of Anselm's soteriology see Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*, 61-3. For a rehabilitation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* see David Bentley Hart, "A GIFT EXCEEDING EVERY DEBT: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*", *Pro Ecclesia*, 7(3), 1998, 333-49. For another essay in defence of Anselm, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *An Introduction to Medieval Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 93-97. I am grateful to Daniel Parkinson and William Crozier for pointing me to Bentley Hart's and Van Nieuwhenhove's essays.

[77] For examples of feminist and womanist critiques of classical atonement theories see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Execution of Jesus and the Theology of the Cross" in Fiorenza*, Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, New York: Continuum, 1994, 97-18; Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogate Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of World Religions*, Paula M. Dooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.), Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991, 1-13. For a Girardian critique of atonement theories, on which I will come back later, see *Mimesis and Atonement Theories: René Girard and The Doctrine of Salvation,* Michael Kirwan and Sheelah Treflé Hidden (eds.), London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

[78] Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projectionism", 15.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Idem, 16.

[81] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 218.

or 'polluting' the doctrine of the Trinity by introducing more historically conditioned and highly questionable concepts into the doctrine of God in order to earn greater clarity about God and ourselves.[82]

2. The impossibility of imitating the Trinity

Although the role of imitation in the making and maintaining of belonging will be explored throughout the rest of the thesis, here I focus on the imitation of the immanent Trinity, an essential feature of social trinitarianism corrective projectionism,[83] and the reason why this is a fundamentally problematic way of *relating* to the Trinity and *construing* belonging. Instead, I will argue that "participation" and "incorporation" are more appropriate and better equipped to think about belonging in the light of the Trinity. This gives me the possibility to find in the doctrine of the Incarnation, rather than in the Immanent Trinity, the foundations for belonging christianly. This leads me to argue that participation and incorporation constitute a distinctive Christocentric-Trinitarian mode of belonging rooted not in a gnostic possession of knowledge of God's inner life, which we could then mimic, *but* in the gift of life bestowed by God upon creation and in God's invitation into God's life, in Christ, through the Spirit. In other words, to use one of Kilby's distinctions, it suggests a mode of belonging that is not shaped by contemplation *of* the Trinity but by contemplation *in* the Trinity.[84]

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[82] Tonstad, another fierce critic of corrective projectionism, thus argues that "corrective projectionism remains indebted to ideas of personhood that belong to a philosophy of the subject as the self-contained, self-possessed *noumen* that both determines and overcomes itself by positing itself as that which is not restricted to self-determination and self-possession, a bordered whole that cancels its own borders." Tonstad, *God and difference*, 13.

[83] It is important to stress that social trinitarianism, especially in its chastened form, does not deny the ontological discontinuity between God the uncreated originator and creatures and thus does not hold that a strict analogy between the life of Trinity understood as community and human communities is adequate. Responding to Kilby's critique, Volf insists that "from my perspective, neither Swinburne nor Moltmann worries sufficiently about the limits of analogies between human persons and communities, on the one side, and the trinitarian persons and community, on the other, a concern central to my account. I espouse a strictly perichoretic account of the identity and relation between divine persons, human analogs to which, though existent and important, are distant." Volf even suggests that ultimately social trinitarianism can take on board Kilby's critique and proposes what he calls "apophatic social trinitarianism". Volf, "Apophatic Social trinitarianism: Why I Continue to Espouse 'a Kind of' Social Trinitarianism'", *Political Theology*, 22(5), 2021, 407-22. While she salutes Volf's caution and finds his convoluted approach "*almost* irresistible" ultimately, Kilby "remain[s] a little wary […] of an intellectual procedure which sets out a good deal of complex, technically difficult, even daunting trinitarian argumentation to arrive at a social vision which at all its most significant junctures is shaped by instincts imported from elsewhere." Kilby, "Reply to Critics", 431.

[84] Kilby, "Is an apophatic trinitarianism possible" in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology,* 38.

"We are caught up in the Trinity. The Christian life is a life of being brought into the Trinity – not a contemplation from a distance, nor a mimicry at a distance, *but a genuine incorporation, a being taken up by the Spirit into the movement of the Son from and to the Father.*"[85] Kilby's distinction between contemplation *in* and *of* the Trinity therefore results from our location in relation to the Trinity. Indeed, contemplation of an object requires the capacity to step aside and stand at the appropriate distance from the object gazed upon. However, God's nature as well as ours, renders such inquiry impossible, for God is not another, even superior, and external object directly available to contemplate. Thus, God, the creator of everything is simultaneously infinitely distant and infinitely close to us.[86] Tanner dedicates an entire chapter of *Christ the Key* to the political use or application of the doctrine of the Trinity, especially in the work of social trinitarians.[87] Aside from all the ambushes and risks that seeking socio-political guidance from the Trinity entails,[88] the most important and concrete challenge remains what Tanner describes as 'the lack of ontological continuum' between God and humans.[89]

> No matter how close the similarities between human and divine persons, and between human society and the unity of the trinity, differences always remain - *God is not us* - and this sets up the major problem for theologies that want to use conclusions about human relationships on the trinity.[90]

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[85] Kilby, "The Trinity and Politics", 52-3. My emphasis. It is worth noticing that Kilby, like Tanner, uses the language of incorporation. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

[86] "The unknowability of the Trinity needs not just be conceived as the result of some sort of unfathomable distance between us and God, but also as a result of our involvement in the Trinity, its closeness to us, our incorporation into it." Idem, 55.

[87] While Tanner also engages with the work of Moltmann, Boff, LaCugna, and others, particular attention is given to the work of Volf, especially "The Trinity is Our Social Programme".

[88] Among the important concerns that Tanner identifies, we can mention the claim to the inherent political superiority of trinitarianism (as allowing for diversity and relationality) over monotheism (associated with uniformity and even deemed responsible for centralised authoritarian power). Two other concerns identified by Tanner pertain to the use of gendered language and sexuality, often reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, as well as confusion around ideas of personhood, identity, agency, and relationality. See Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 205-46.

[89] idem, 12. Also See Ian A. McFarland, "Sin and the Limits of Theology: A Reflection in Conversation with Julian of Norwich and Martin Luther", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 22 (2), April 2020, 147-168, 148.

[90] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 221.

Although the lack of ontological continuity may initially seem an obstacle to belonging, it is the very condition for the mode of belonging that is slowly emerging, carved as it is the space or movement between God's infinite presence and God's infinite distance.

For Tanner, "figuring out the socio-political lessons of the trinity is a fraught task' and the significance of the Trinity for human relations is to be found in the Incarnation (and Christology).[91] Through the Incarnation, humankind is incorporated into and invited to participate in the life of the Trinity 'as members of Christ', thus creating the possibility for a *Christo-centric* Trinitarian mode of belonging.[92] While the relations between the persons of the Trinity do not offer guidelines for inter-human relations, Jesus teaches us how to relate to the Father and the Spirit, and *also* "the trinitarian form of human social life" embodied in his way of relating to other human beings.[93] In other words, while the relations *between* the members of the Trinity (the immanent Trinity) or the way we are called to relate to the Father and the Spirit do not provide us with clear guidance as to how to behave vis-à-vis other human beings,[94] Christ's life provides us with an example, a call to conversion to God, as well as a hermeneutics for intra-human relationships and therefore, for belonging, reshaped according to Christ's life. Therefore, it is important to stress that Tanner's move does not constitute a radical rejection of imitation, but rather a salutary reorientation or refocusing of the kind of imitation that is appropriate, from the relations between the persons of the Trinity to Christ, "the key" to the Trinity, the only adequate model.[95]

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[91] Idem, 207 and 208.

[92] "Christ's own life provides not just the pattern of a new human way of life for our imitation, but the cause of that pattern in us, by way of the uniting of humanity and divinity in him." Idem, 57.

[93] "Jesus' way of life toward other people as we share in it *is* the trinitarian form of human social relations." Tanner, "Trinity", *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott (eds.), 2nd Ed, London: John Wiley & Sons, 2019, 373.

[94] Tanner asks: "But why think we will relate to other humans in the process in anything like the way we are to relate here to Father and Spirit?" Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 237.

[95] idem, 140. The implications of this form of imitation will be explored in the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 2:

Conceiving theocentric belonging as participation and salvation

I concluded the previous chapter with Tanner's affirmation that Christ is the key to understanding *and relating* to the Trinity. Imitation of Christ will prove a central aspect of the critical assessment of the forms of belonging which will be discussed in the rest of the thesis, as well as a map to reshape appropriately our relationship to God as well as to one another, Nonetheless, imitation is not Christ's primordial contribution toward a theocentric mode of belonging. In this chapter, I will endeavour to articulate what this primordial contribution is through an account of theocentric belonging rooted in participation in God. Before I introduce the idea of theocentric belonging, however, it is important to introduce what I call divine belonging. To articulate the crucial distinction between divine and theocentric belonging, as well as our limitation in speaking of the former, I will briefly engage with Simon Oliver's clear and succinct articulation of the language of participation as well as human language about God. Once this is done, I will be able to propose belonging as participation and explore what I will call the two pillars of theocentric belonging.

1. Distinguishing between divine and theocentric belonging

Theocentric belonging flows directly from the Trinity. Christ is the one who prays to the Father, sends the Spirit, and "has united us to one another in Himself":[96]

> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

And also:

> But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16: 7)

Although I agree with Kilby and Tanner that perichoresis cannot provide a map for human sociality,[97] it is nonetheless possible, and even necessary, to say something about this highly technical term. It helps us articulate the *mysterious* relationality between the persons of the

[96] Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, London: HBJ Books, 1955, 87.

[97] See Tanner, "Trinity", in William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed, London: John Wiley & Sons, 2019, 363-75, 369: "Human society could take on the very shape of the Trinity only if people were no longer human."

Trinity characterised by procession, constitutive relationality, and indivisibility. Here, I want to suggest, perichoresis gives us a glimpse of what I propose to call Divine Belonging. This, we only know, and only partially, through the Son who is God's self-communication. Here again, I am not saying that perichoresis provides a map for belonging or that intra-human belonging or theocentric belonging should seek to imitate perichoresis. What perichoresis allows us to say, however, is something at once very simple and profound—that belonging is at the core of mystery that characterises the life of the immanent Trinitarian, that is that God *is* Belonging.

This requires several qualifications. To start with, I am not saying that God is present, or at least equally present, or even fully present in each and all forms of creaturely belonging. Thus, the claim is *not* that belonging as we encounter it and experience it, in its partial, vulnerable, and often exclusionary form is divine. Rather, informed by the doctrine of divine simplicity which compels us to say that "God's attributes (what God *has*) and God's existence (what God *is*) are one and the same",[98] we can affirm that, just as God is Truth, God is Love, or God is Good, we can say that God is Belonging. A further qualification is to be made regarding the relationship between Divine Belonging and theocentric belonging. At the beginning of this paragraph, I said that theocentric belonging flows directly from the Trinity. It is now possible to say that theocentric belonging flows from, finds its roots, but also its completion, in the Trinitarian life, that is in Divine Belonging. Several questions remain. What exactly is the relationship between Divine Belonging and theocentric belonging? Does "belonging", as understood in divine, theocentric, and creaturely forms mean the same thing? How and why can we speak of these different realities with the same word? Underneath the surface is another fundamental question for theology: How can a finite and contingent reality speak of the infinite and primordial reality upon which its existence relies? A first obvious answer is that in some sense it cannot, or it can only do so in very limited ways. Although I will speak of apophaticism and its focus on God's unknowability in chapter 4, for now, I will consider another form of language that is central to our God-talk, and which will help us articulate the relationship between Divine Belonging and theocentric belonging.

[98] Simon Oliver, *Creation, A Guide for the perplexed*, London: T&T Clark, 2017, 44. Augustine says: "the nature of the Trinity is called simple, because it has not anything that it can lose, and because it is not something different from what it has, in the way that a vessel is different from its liquid or a body from its colour or the air from its light or heat, or the mind from its wisdom." Quoted in ibid.

Alongside metaphors, analogies are key to the way we speak about God. Unlike metaphors, which convey truth but are "*literally* false", analogy offers an alternative to univocal and equivocal ways of speaking. Thus, Simon Oliver remarks, "for Aquinas, when we speak of God, we do not equivocate, but neither do we speak univocally".[99] Using the example of goodness, Oliver points out that "when we say that 'God is Good' and 'Benedict is good', we are using the word 'good' neither equivocally (in completely different senses) nor univocally (in identical senses)."[100] Oliver continues, "what it means for God is not what it means for Benedict to be good even though Benedict goodness might be an expression, or a faint reflection of, divine goodness." The relationship between the two forms of goodness is described as analogical. Unlike metaphorical language, "predicated primarily of creatures and secondarily of God", "perfection terms", such as Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, to which I now want to add Belonging, "are predicated primarily of God and secondarily of creatures […] because these perfections flow from God to creatures."[101]

Our language about Divine Belonging and theocentric belonging can therefore work in the same way that our language about God's goodness and human goodness does, that is analogically and in terms of participation. Finally, being able to name these "divine perfection" does not mean that "we have a firm grasp of" them.[102] This last point is important because although we can say that theocentric belonging flows from Divine Belonging, the ultimate reality in which it participates, this does not mean that "we have a firm grasp" of the divine perfection that is Divine Belonging, or even that the highly technical jargon of trinitarian theology provides us with a clearer or more robust understanding of what Divine Belonging looks like. Thus, although the suggestion that perichoresis can tell us something about belonging might initially seem in tension with, or open to Kilby's critique of social trinitarianism, it avoids the pitfalls of saying or finding too much in the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, to claim that theocentric belonging flows from the Trinity, and thus from Divine Belonging, does not mean that humans possess the means to imitate or emulate such Trinitarian Belonging, for that would lead us back into the sort of issues raised by social trinitarianism's

[99] Oliver, *Creation*, 66.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Idem, 69.

[102] Idem. 70

projectionism addressed in the first chapter. Rather, as we have seen, the key to understanding properly the relationship between Divine Belonging and theocentric belonging is not imitation, but participation.

I will now turn to the exploration of the modalities of this participation, what I call the two pillars of theocentric belonging—Creation and the Incarnation. By being created, which is a Trinitarian act, we already participate in a loose yet fundamental sense in God's *esse*. Through Christ—the Word made *flesh—we* are incorporated in a radically new way into Trinitarian life.[103] I shall now return to Tanner and look at her description of the two modes of participation in the divine life.

What Tanner says about participation, I want to suggest, can be said of belonging too. Moreover, all forms of belonging are a form of participation of some kind, and exclusion is precisely when one is refused participation. Pushing it further, I want to claim that it is not just that participation offers us another language to talk about belonging, but that participation *is* belonging or belonging *is* participation and therefore that belonging is at the root of what it means to be created beings. Thus, drawing on what Tanner, and in time, Kilby have to say about participation, we will be able to articulate what I will call a trinitarian grammar of belonging. Such a move, however, requires further exploration of what is meant by participation. Tanner distinguishes between two kinds of participation,[104] "weak" and "strong", are related to the doctrines of creation ex nihilo and the Incarnation. Although it is important to distinguish between these two modes of participation or belonging, it is also important to affirm that not only are they not opposed or even separate, they belong together: for “Creation and Incarnation [upon which they rely] belong together as two aspects of the one divine

[103] We will see in chapter 3 that an important aspect of our reflection on belonging christianly is *who* this “we” encompasses.

[104] This distinction in kind is not merely qualitative. See Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 11. Tanner provides us with bibliographical resources about the distinction between weak and strong participation. Idem, 12n25. She finds this distinction “implicitly” in David L. Balás, *Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Rome, Herder, 1966; and “explicitly” in Verna Harrison, *Grace and Human freedom according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Lewiston, New York: Mellon, 1992. She also refers to “a similar distinction in Cyril between participation by nature and by grace” in Daniel A. Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, chapter 4.

expressiveness".[105] Indeed, the Logos, who in the Incarnation "became flesh" (John 1:14) is also "the principle of creation",[106] "without [whom] not one thing came into being" (John 1:4).

2. Participation as Creation:

To the extent that creaturely existence is derivative from God's *esse* who alone *is*, "to be a creature means […] to lead a continually borrowed life."[107] This is why creaturely existence can be described both as contingent and as participation in God.[108] Tanner calls this "weak participation" since "the difference between God and creatures requires this first sort of imaging through participation to be quite weak."[109] Such a mode of participation is therefore a consequence or even a requirement of the lack of ontological continuum or the radical distinction between Creator and creation, which the Christian tradition professes in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Creation *"*out of nothing" is crucial to understanding how God can be fully present and distant at the same time. In fact, it allows us to articulate how God's absolute difference and transcendence are the conditions for God's most intimate presence and "infinite immanence", not as another superior being to whom we could relate to various degrees like any other beings,[110] in our terms or according to our means, but as the source and sustainer of all, 'pervasively present as self-communicating Love throughout the cosmos from the beginning of time to the end".[111]

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[105] John McDade, "Making sense of the God-Man", *Priests and People*, December 1999, 443-7, 444-5.

[106] Niels Henrik Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*: Jesus and the Cosmic Story", *Theology and Science* 11: 4, 2013, 370-393 , 381.

[107] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 10.

[108] Aquinas distinguishes between God's existence "ens per essentiam" and creaturely existence which is "ens per participationem". See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.4. *responsio*; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.3.ad 3, See Oliver, *Creation*, chapter 2 and 3.

[109] Idem, 8 and 12.

[110] It is important to stress that God's presence does not require the Incarnation, as this would imply that God gains something from, and therefore would be less than God, without the Incarnation. It is as creator that God is primarily present to all beings.

[111] Elisabeth Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos; Soundings in Deep Christology" in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, Niels Henrik Gregersen (ed.), Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015, 134. McDade also quotes Peter Beach's poetic metaphor: "God sustains the world as a singer sustains his song." McDade, "Making sense of the God-Man", 446.

Belonging thus understood, that is at the most basic level, is rooted in God who is Love and consists in "sharing in something that one is not".[112] Thus, it is possible to say that through creation, all are born into being by Being, love by Love, and belonging by Belonging. Paradoxically, this mode of participation which Tanner calls weak is inalienable for it is rooted in God's creative act, rather than in any actions or decisions on our part. It is also expansive or catholic, for *all* creatures share in this mode of belonging by their creatureliness—"Creatures participate in God by leading a derived life in that sense, a life derived from a God who does not derive from another as they do."[113] Therefore, this mode of belonging which attests to the radical dependence of all creatures on their Creator in whom they find their fundamental orientation is theocentric, rather than anthropocentric. For *all* belong *to God.* While belonging as creation affirms the radical dependence of creation upon the Creator, it also stresses the kinship of all creatures for all have the same Creator and depend upon each other as part of the same creation and ecological community:[114]

> with evolutionary genetics we have come to see ourselves as *belonging to an ecological community* beyond the skin and skulls of our bodies, embedded as we are in ecological networks, ceaselessly active as niche-constructors, and with a deep history behind us and in us, shared with our forebears.[115]

This is an important reminder that belonging as creation is not merely vertical but that it is also horizontal.

A caveat to this primordial mode of belonging is that through the Fall and original sin, which will be discussed at length in Part 2, this primordial mode of belonging, which is nature, is distorted. That is to say that through sin, the relationship between creatures and the Creator is distorted on the creature's side and, as an effect of this, the relationship of creatures among themselves is distorted too. Yet, this is not the end of belonging as creation. As we will see in Part 2, although sin has seriously affected belonging, it is not beyond redemption for "in the Catholic understanding grace perfects nature, takes something which, while good, is severely

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[112] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 7.

[113] Idem, 8.

[114] Here I mean inter-species as well as intra-species dependence. Humans, perhaps more than any other creatures, are heavily dependent on each other for their own survival.

[115] Gregersen, "*Cur Deus Caro*", 387. My emphasis.

damaged, and transforms it starting from where it is."[116] Nonetheless, sin distorts to various degrees all the ways in which we belong to one another as well as the way we Belong to God. Such forms of belonging therefore need to be critically reassessed, which will be the object of the rest of the thesis from Part 2 onwards.

3. "Over the top" belonging: Participation through incorporation or attachment

The second kind of participation, Tanner names "strong" participation and describes it as a form of participation through "attachment" rather than "likeness".[117] Although both modes, weak and strong, proceed from God, it is important to notice that while weak participation is within the realm of the natural existence of creatures, creatures exist as *ens per participationem*, strong participation, that is participation as incorporation, is not. Indeed strong participation i,e, through incorporation or attachment, is "the gift to [creatures] of what remains alien to them, the very perfection of the divine image that they are not, now having become their own."[118] Strong participation is realised in Christ "as a result of this hypostatic union or incarnation, perfect human imaging of God is achieved by way of perfect unity with what is perfectly and properly the image of God, the second person of the trinity."[119] Thus, Tanner writes: 'What Jesus achieves perfectly and primarily, we will then enjoy through him *imperfectly* and *derivatively*.'[120] Here again, if one understands that participation is belonging or belonging is participation, this means that in Christ perfect belonging to God is realised, and that it is only through him and imperfectly and partially for the time being, that we belong to God in a new, fullest, extravagant, even "over the top" way, yet a way that respects our creatureliness as articulated in the doctrine of the hypostatic union.

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[116] James Alison, ""The Gay Thing" Following the Still Small Voice" in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Loughlin (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 55.

[117] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 13, 16 and 20, 34.

[118] Idem, 12.

[119] Idem, 13.

[120] Idem, 143. My emphasis.

This mode of participation, or belonging as incorporation or attachment, is not derived from nature or resemblance with the divine, and it is not primarily the fruit of our own action or merit either.[121] Finally, unlike social trinitarianism it does not depend on the extent to which we are getting the doctrine of the Trinity, or any other doctrine, "right".[122] Rather, it is the fruit of God's Love in the gratuitous self-giving in the Incarnation:

> By way of the incarnation humanity is united to, bound up with the Word. The incarnation is for the purpose of humanity's entrance into trinitarian relations. (…) Room is carved out for us within it [the Trinity] by him; *we are taken along with him* into the space that has opened up for us within it by his side.[123]

This not only confirms that participation can rightly be understood as belonging and vice versa, but it also suggests that the primary function of the Incarnation is not atonement but salvation as belonging.

4. Participation as salvation

The dogmatic axiom *Extra Ecclesia nulla Salus* seems to present salvation and belonging as natural bedfellows. It goes back to the patristic period, more specifically Origen and Cyprian, and has received a variety of interpretations throughout the Christian tradition. A detailed survey of the variety of interpretations and the doctrinal development of the maxim to this day is beyond the scope of this chapter.[124] Nonetheless, regardless of how strictly or generously one understands "belonging" or indeed "church", ecclesial belonging is understood as the salvific membership the body of Christ. Moreover, it is easy to get distracted by arguments about what "church" and "belonging" mean, and their function in the aphorism, and

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[121] This second mode of participation or belonging can therefore rightly be called supernatural.

[122] This is important when considering how an intellectually centred mode of belonging or participation would exclude people with intellectual disability. See for instance Medi Ann Volpe, "Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination", *Journal of Moral Theology* 6(2), 2017, 87-102.

[123] Tanner, *Christ the Key,* 144-5. My emphasis.

[124] On this see the work of Yves Congar, Francis Sullivan, and more recently Andrew Meszaros. Yves Congar, "Salvation and the Non-Catholic", *Blackfriars* 38, 1957, 290-300. Also, Congar, *The wide World My Parish: Salvation and its Problems*, London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1961. Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002. Meszaros, "Yves Congar and the Salvation of the Non-Christian", *Louvain Studies* 37, 2013, 195-223; "Extra Ecclesial Nulla Salus: Lessons for Doctrinal Development Theory in Catholic Theology" *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 24(1), January 2022, 100-121. Ross Jesmont helpfully pointed to me that Edward Schillebeeckx would say that "there is no salvation outside of the world". See Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 5-21.

thus neglect another, and arguably more fundamental or decisive question—what is meant by salvation? This is indeed a problem because the meanings of "church" and "belonging" depend to a large extent on the way salvation itself is understood. If the purpose of the Incarnation is salvation and salvation is manifested in the Incarnation, then reflecting on the purpose and scope of the Incarnation will give us the scope of salvation and the adequate frame for belonging christianly.

In saying that the purpose of the Incarnation is salvation I am simultaneously following and departing from mainstream Christian tradition.[125] Indeed, while the Christian tradition classically understands the Incarnation as the means of/for salvation, it does so primarily in terms of atonement. This is famously the case with Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* or Aquinas' understanding of the Incarnation in the Summa. Both have largely contributed to shaping the mainstream Christian understanding of the Incarnation in infralapsarian terms, that is as God's loving response to human sin and a direct consequence of the Fall. Against, or rather, in contrast with the Infralapsarians are the Supralapsarians, chiefly associated with Duns Scotus,[126] who identify the primary reason for the Incarnation elsewhere and think that it would have happened regardless of the Fall. For reasons that will soon become clear, Béraud de Saint-Maurice described infralapsarianism as "anthropocentric" and supralapsarianism as "christocentric".[127] The distinction between these two schools or traditions shows the richness within the Christian tradition on issues as important as soteriology and the incarnation. More importantly, it shows different theological sensibilities and inflections regarding the purpose of the Incarnation as well as the meaning of salvation, which in turn allows us to reflect on the boundaries of belonging christianly. In what follows, I argue in favour of a supralapsarian understanding of the Incarnation, which enables me to challenge what I consider to be Tanner's reductive understanding of participation as incorporation and will give us ground to expand such boundaries toward what I will soon call "deep" belonging.

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[125] Here I say "mainstream" rather than "orthodox" because the minority view I am discussing, albeit marginal, was never condemned as unorthodox or heretic.

[126] Daniel P. Horan, 'How Original was Scotus on the Incarnation? Reconsidering the history of the absolute predestination of Christ in light of Robert Gosseteste", *The Heythrop Journal*, 2011, 374-91. Horan shows that the chief association of the supralapsarian school with Scotus is not entirely fair as it does not give justice to Scotus' predecessors, Deutze and Grosseteste.

[127] Béraud de Saint-Maurice, J*ohn Duns Scotus: A Teacher for Our Times*, trans. Columban Duffy, NY: Franciscan Institute Press, 1955, in Daniel P. Horan, "How Original was Scotus on the Incarnation", 375.

Another way of articulating the distinction between the infralapsarian and supralapsarian schools is in terms of the *central* soteriological questions underpinning their salvation narratives. Indeed, the infralapsarian or anthropocentric narrative asks and answers the question "what are *we* saved *from*?". The supralapsarian or christocentric narrative asks and answers the question "what are *we* saved *for*?". An obvious limit to this distinction is that in practice, in a postlapsarian world, salvation as participation, divinisation or deification is indissociable from redemption from sin through atonement and justification. Moreover, *both* divinisation and redemption are accomplished *by* and *in* Christ in whom humanity and divinity are denied by humans and in whom the former is *restored* and *divinised* by God. Yet, just as it is important to distinguish between participation as creation and participation as incorporation and attachment, such a distinction stands as a reminder that God's plan for salvation as salvation is bigger than and prior to God's plan for restoration because it is God's plan or will for creation from all eternity.[128] Restoration is therefore a step towards salvation as participation rendered necessary by the fall of humankind, but crucially salvation is not limited to or primarily concerned with restoration.

If, however, the incarnation and its salvific significance are understood *primarily* in terms of atonement for the sins of humankind, that is according to the infralapsarian narrative, then God's greatest gift to creation is prompted by human mischief and cosmic disorder, *not* God's loving primordial intent to glorify or deify God's creation. In the words of McCord Adams,

> How metaphysically preposterous [we may want to add presumptuous] to suppose that creatable substance natures acquire their most dignifying capacity for union with God as a consequence of Adam's fall [the so-called Felix culpa].[129]

Moreover, if one understands incorporation primarily as restoration, then participation as creation and participation through incorporation are no longer "two aspects of the one divine expressiveness" or God "making the world be" (creating) and God bringing about the deepest

[128] Here prior is not meant in a temporal sense, for God is beyond time and omniscient. Rather prior means in terms of order of importance or priority.

[129] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 176, in Ronald Cole-Turner, "Incarnation Deep and Wide: A Response to Niels Gregersen", *Theology and Science,* 11:4, 2013, 433.

communication of himself within that world (becoming incarnate)".[130] Rather, the latter becomes God's (successful) attempt to correct the former having gone wrong. In narratives where redemption is at the centre of God's action into the world, *we*, the fallen race, not God, are at the centre and the rest of creation is eclipsed. If it is true that the Incarnation, and more specifically the Cross, achieves the redemption of humankind, and is, therefore, God's salvation brought to a fallen world, it is important to insist that the Incarnation's primordial purpose is to be the mean of the recapitulation through incorporation or attachment of *all* creatures in Christ. Finally, if it is true that salvation is not merely the recovery of our prelapsarian (natural) state, *but* divinisation or glorification, that is the supernatural participation through incorporation into God's life, then salvation is not simply or even primarily about atonement. *Salvation is about belonging*, an extravagant and "over the top" mode of belonging.

5. Limitations

As a result, one may wish to challenge Tanner's anthropocentric account of incorporation. Tanner's anthropocentric reductionism echoes that of the mainstream Christian tradition. Yet, while such a reductionism might seem coherent and inevitable within an infralapsarian framework, I have now shown that Tanner's implicit commitment to a supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation suggests the possibility to expand beyond an anthropocentric theology of incorporation towards a properly theocentric and cosmic one. Indeed, if Tanner rightly recognises that (weak) participation pertains to the whole of creation, she restricts this supernatural mode of participation in the divine life to humankind and in doing so neglects the significance of the incarnation on and for the rest of creation.[131] Instead, we may find ourselves compelled to ask why this mode of participation should be restricted to humankind, which leaves us with an arguably impoverished and narrower account of belonging which, although theocentric in intent, remains primarily concerned with the fate of humankind, independently of the rest of creation. Daniel Horan remarks, perhaps self-evidently yet crucially, that "the way we talk about our connection to creation impacts the way we treat creation." Yet, the political relevance of an anthropocentric theology of the Incarnation, although promising as far as humans are concerned, remains limited if not irrelevant to and for the rest of creation, at a time when the environmental crisis presents us with the urgent

[130] John McDade, "Making sense of the God-Man", 444-5.

[131] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 12-13.

challenge to rethink our "disjointed sense of connectivity to creation".[132] A theology of theocentric belonging therefore needs to take into account, challenge, and offer an alternative to this disjunction from within the Christian tradition if it is to rise to the challenges of our times.

[132] Daniel Horan, *Francis of Assisi and the Future of Faith*, Phoenix: AZ, Tau Publishing, 2012, 101.

Chapter 3:

Towards a theology of "deep" belonging

To explore the issue identified in the last section, this third chapter will engage with recent developments in the theology of creation, specifically the ideas of kinship and deep incarnation. The concepts of kinship and deep incarnation offer a threefold opportunity. Together they help us to expand our conception of participation as creation, as incorporation, as well as, perhaps more surprisingly, of atonement. As a result, kinship and deep incarnation allow us to expand our conception of theocentric belonging to the entire cosmos in what I will call deep belonging.

1. Kinship: Rethinking the place of humankind *within* creation:

In his fascinating book *Plants as Person*, the botanist Matthew Hall challenges our conception of personhood and its boundaries, pointing out that "a detailed study of the nature of Christianity's attitude to, and relationship with, the plant kingdom is conspicuously absent from discussions of the wider attitude to nature."[133] This omission or "plant blindness" is far from anecdotal, Hall contends, for it uncovers another form of bias—zoo-centrism to add to Lynn White famous accusation that Christianity is the "most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and, as a result, the "root cause" of the present ecological crisis.[134]

By enlarging the sphere of their concern and care for animal life, dignity, and rights, while still largely neglecting the plant realm, humans continue to place themselves at the centre, as the point of reference and value maker. Animals are more relatable and more easily anthropomorphised than plants, and not all animals are the object of the same concern, as humans also establish hierarchies between animals based on relatability, attraction, purpose, rarity, symbolic value or prestige, and danger. Hall's vital contribution is to invite us to expand the horizon of our attention and care to all the living realm. Interestingly, Hall describes "the

[133] Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, New York: State University of New York Press, 56.

[134] See Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis", *Science* 155(3767), 10 March 1967, in Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 55. Hall's study shows that although Judeo-Christianity has played a key role in the Western anthropocentric and even zoo-centric tropism, other influences need to be taken into account.

rendering of plants as passive and radically different" as "a deliberate process of exclusion."[135] It is not incidental that he uses the word exclusion here as it implies that the heart of the matter here is one of belonging. Indeed, not only is exclusion the negative side of belonging, belonging requires the sort of agency, sameness, and worth that most of the Christian tradition has failed to see in non-human creation, and which contemporary post-Christian society currently grants to (some) animals. Hall gives examples of other cultures and belief systems that foster or provide for a "horizontal, or heterarchical, relationship between plants and human beings" rather than a strictly instrumental one.[136] This leads him to distinguish between what he calls "philosophies of inclusion" and "philosophies of exclusion". Although he identifies the Christian tradition with the latter, Hall acknowledges the emergence of eco-theologies and a model of stewardship to replace the model of dominion presumably at the origin of the Christian distorted understanding of nature.[137] Stewardship is a positive step toward deep belonging as it acknowledges creation's value and vulnerability. Yet as we will now see it remains deficient. This will lead us to introduce another concept/model: kinship.

In recent theological discussions, the stewardship model, which had come to replace the dominion model to articulate the relationship between humankind and creation, has itself been the object of critique.[138] Here I do not wish to conduct a thorough or detailed examination of the model, but merely to note that the shift from a stewardship to kinship model can be understood as a shift toward a theology of cosmic belonging, which echoes the idea of theocentric belonging as it has emerged in this chapter. For Daniel Horan, "the stewardship model, while an improvement to the previous approach, continues to bear the disjointed sense of connectivity to creation that places humanity over and against the rests of creation […] albeit in a more subtle fashion than is found in the dominion model."[139] Among other things, the stewardship model continues to see humans as outside of creation, and neglects the dependence of the former upon the latter, as well as the eschatological destiny of all creation.[140]

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[135] Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 71.

[136] Idem, 99-117.

[137] See Horan, *Francis of Assisi and the Future of Faith, Exploring Franciscan Spirituality and Theology in the Modern World*, AZ: Phoenix, Tau Publishing, 2012, 102.

[138] Idem, chapter 8.

[139] Idem, 103.

[140] Idem, 106.

Moreover, the bond that unites humans to creation according to the stewardship model is a contractual one, between God and humans.[141] That is, what is stressed is relationality between God and humans, with the rest of creation only approving as the object of the care entrusted by the former to the latter. Humans stand outside of, they do not belong to, creation.

Yet, as Horan points "our interconnectedness is biological as it is theological", for all were made by the same God and from the same "stuff". [142] This leads Horan to argue that "humanity's relationship with creation is best described as familial rather than viewed as contractual,"[143] that is *through kinship*, "for everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being".[144] Therefore it is not incidental that the metaphor to describe the relationship between humankind and creation is one of belonging.[145] Horan also speaks of "the theological significance of adopting a grammar of kinship in place of stewardship."[146] The point of this grammar of kinship,[147] which I want to call a grammar of belonging, is to articulate the relationship of belonging that unites the whole of creation to God and each creature with each other, as part of the one family of God. Such grammar creates a way forward to reimagine our way of inhabiting the world and relating to each other, with the other here expanding far beyond humans and our next of kin, for all are kin in God. Here it is important to notice that proponents of a kinship model do not necessarily advocate for the abandonment *tout simple* of the stewardship model. Rather the idea of stewardship, the special responsibility of care entrusted to humankind, must be understood in the context of kinship (and interdependence) with the rest of creation to whom humankind belongs.[148] With the background for the idea of kinship and

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[141] Ibid.

[142] On this see Elisabeth Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos; Soundings in Deep Christology" in Niels Henrik Gregersen (ed.) *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2015, 133-56.

[143] Horan, *Francis of Assisi*, 107.

[144] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos; Soundings in Deep Christology", 137.

[145] Behind this is also the idea that a certain level of belonging is a requirement of care.

[146] Horan, *Francis of Assisi*, 105.

[147] Horan also speaks of "a comprehensive and Franciscan theological grammar of creation". Idem, 104.

[148] I will come back to this point shortly when discussing the place of humankind in the concept of deep incarnation.

cosmic belonging in place, we can now turn to the concept of deep incarnation, which will in turn enable us to speak of "deep" belonging.

2. Deep Incarnation: From "skin deep" to "deep" belonging:

According to Niels Henrik Gregersen who first came up with the concept,[149] "*Deep incarnation* means that the 'divine logos'…has assumed not merely humanity, but the *whole malleable matrix of materiality*".[150] Celia Deane-Drummond writes that "while the idea of deep incarnation is predicated on Christology and follows from its most expansive interpretation, the idea of divine immanence is predicated on the belief in God as Creator."[151] This is important because it brings together the two kinds of participation as creation and through incorporation discussed in the previous chapter. It is only because God is Creator that the creation can be called creation and in turn be attached to God through incorporation. In other words, although distinct, participation through incorporation relies upon participation as creation.

Gregersen identifies similarities and divergences between deep incarnation and the concepts of "deep ecology" and "deep history".[152] Thus, he writes that "common to the three approaches is not only the term "deep," but also the attempt to overcome the contrast between man and nature, which has become typical of the modern Western mindset."[153] Against this artificial and damaging schism, deep incarnation "suggests that God does not only tolerate material existence but *accepts it and incorporates it in a divine embrace.*"[154] This idea of the

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[149] Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World", *Dialog*, 2001.

[150] Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology." *Toronto Journal of Theology*, 26/2 Fall 2010, 173-187, 176.

[151] Celia Deane-Drummond, "The Wisdom of Fools? A Theo-Dramatic Interpretation of Deep Incarnation" in Niels Henrik Gregersen (ed.) *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, Mineapolis, Fortress Press, 2015, 177. Deane-Drummond also warns us against the danger of christomonism and proposes a pneumatological understanding of deep incarnation.

[152] On the links and differences between the concepts of deep incarnation, deep ecology, and deep history see Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*: Jesus and the Cosmic Story", *Theology and* Science 11 (4), 2013, 370-393, 376-9. Deane-Drummond is also skeptical of the association. She writes: I am questioning whether the association with deep ecology is helpful as part of a constructive systematic effort in understanding the meaning of deep incarnation." The reason for her reluctance to associate deep incarnation with deep ecology is that "deep ecology promotes a specific political platform alongside what might be termed a 'grand narrative,' and tends to neglect the particular demand of other human beings by its emphasis on biocentric value." Deane-Drummond, "The Wisdom of Fools?", 180n11.

[153] Gregersen, "Cur Deus Caro", 376.

[154] Joshua M. Moritz, "Deep Incarnation and the *Imago Dei:* The Cosmic Scope of the Incarnation in Light of the Messiah as the Renewed Adam", *Theology and Science* 11(4), 436-443, 437. My emphasis.

fundamental unity of all things can also be found in another, perhaps more traditional, concept that Gregersen does not mention—catholicity.[155] Indeed catholicity can help articulate the scope of the depth of deep incarnation and deep belonging beyond time, space, kind, and even death, "into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature.[156] The concept of catholicity reminds us that "as variously written into the *deep* fabric of creation in all its variegated particularity, the whole truth of things in Christ and the Spirit touches on all things, all times, and all places."[157]

Deep incarnation raises important challenges and requires several qualifications as far as ethics is concerned. Although Gregersen tells us that deep incarnation does not require a commitment to universalism, there is an "elective affinity" between deep incarnation and universalism.[158] Gregersen remarks that

> Even if Paul's soteriological focus is on the Christians to whom he is writing, there is in this soteriological vision no distinction between the baptized and the unbaptized, between humans and other creatures, or between heaven and earth. The incarnate One constitutes the reconciling bond between all things.[159]

Therefore, the same kind of ethical concerns often raised, rightly or wrongly, vis-a-vis theologies of double-predestination and universalism might also apply to deep incarnation. If all that *is* is assumed by Christ in the Incarnation if all there is is incorporated in the divine life by the joint action of the Word and the Spirit, one might want to ask if there is any room left for ethics, that is whether human actions in this life have consequences, and whether suffering and evil are addressed at all. One version of this challenge can be resolved by a clarification about what deep incarnation does and does not mean, and what it does and does not entail, as we will see shortly. Another complementary answer is that the expansiveness of deep incarnation does not diminish but expands or deepens the requirements of ethics so that we

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[155] As far as I can see no one seems to have worked on the connection between deep incarnation and catholicity. Might it be because the idea of deep incarnation has emerged from within the reformed tradition?

[156] Gregersen. "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World", 205.

[157] Murray, "Living Catholicity differently: On growing Into the Plenitudinous Plurality of the Catholic Communion in God" in *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*, Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (eds.), The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016, 117. My emphasis.

[158] Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 386. Gregersen borrows the phrase to Max Weber.

[159] Idem, 387.

could speak of deep ethics, as the domain of ethics is no longer limited to humankind or even certain animals but the whole creation. That is to say that deep incarnation responds to the challenge addressed by Elizabeth Johnson to christology when she asks:

> For centuries, emphasis has been placed on Christ's significance for the human race as Savior from sin and death. Can this anthropocentric focus widen to include biocentric and cosmocentric dimensions? Without losing its meaning for human salvation, is Christology capacious enough to allow for an intrinsic connection between Christ and the natural world? If so, what would be the result of ecological ethics?[160]

Consistently with what I have argued in the previous chapter, especially in the section on participation or belonging as salvation, Gregersen argues that deep incarnation "has soteriological implications. For while the reconciliation of humanity with God is the *focus* of salvation, the peace and union between God and creation is the more comprehensive *scope* of salvation".[161] Therefore, deep incarnation presents us with the challenge to expand our understanding of the significance of the Incarnation, as well as *how* and *for whom* incorporation takes place.[162] Put in belonging terms, deep incarnation asks us about who belongs and how, and it offers us what I call deep belonging.

How do we understand this deep belonging, if it is to incorporate the whole creation, and where does it leave the church? How does this expansive understanding of incorporation and belonging challenge the identity and function of the church as Body of Christ and community?[163] Indeed, if we may (reluctantly) admit that any humans who do not belong to the church by their own fault fail to respond positively to Jesus' invitation to incorporate them into the life of God, what about the multitude of those past, present and future who did not, do not, or will not belong to the church at least in any visible or positive way? What about them? If this last concern goes back to the Patristic period and is present throughout the Christian tradition, deep Incarnation, however, expands it and asks:

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[160] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos", 140.

[161]. Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 385. My emphases.

[162] The kinship model and the idea of deep incarnation are both rooted in the affirmation of creatureliness and therefore the profound and ontological similarity between all created beings.

[163] The question of the place of the church within the narrative of deep incarnation, deep belonging and more broadly belonging christianly is an important one that I identify in the conclusion as one possible direction among a non-exhaustive list of avenues or paths deemed worth exploring beyond this thesis to enrich and strengthen the concept.

> Where does that leave the non-human hominids such as Neanderthals, the Denisovans, and the "Hobbits" of Flores? Where does that leave chimpanzees and highly intelligent social carnivores such as dogs? Where does that leave whales and dolphins? And what about any creatures (intelligent or otherwise) that might inhabit other star systems?[164]

Similarly, Matthew Hall, whose concern it is to direct our attention to the plant realm, provides us with a salutary reminder of our place on Earth, let alone in the Cosmos:

> "In the Earth's deserts and on her mountainous peaks, much of the nonhuman world is composed of rock. In her seas, lakes, and rivers, the biggest nonhuman presence is water. However, in the majority of places that are inhabited by people—even within towns and cities, particularly in Europe and North America—plants dominate the natural world."[165]

As we saw in the previous section, the Christian tradition in the West at least since Anselm has raised the question of the purpose and scope of the incarnation in anthropocentric terms—*Cur Deus Homo?* Deep incarnation seeks to reframe the question and expand the scope, thus asking instead— *"Cur Deus Caro?*" To this question, deep incarnation replies that

> God became flesh for the purpose of reconciling humanity with God, *and* of conjoining God and the world of creation so intensely together that there can be a future also for a material world characterized by decomposition, frailty, and suffering.[166]

The merit of this answer is twofold. First, it directly addresses the challenges captured in Moritz's and Hall's quotes. Second, it shows that such an expansive reframing does not come at the price of salvation as redemption and therefore the distinctiveness of the Incarnation as human and for humankind, but instead restates it into a wider eschatological horizon for all, what Johnson calls "a new line of vision".[167] To use Gregersen's language, it does not change the "focus" of salvation but explores and affirms its "scope", which was exactly my intention

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[164] Moritz, "Deep Incarnation and the Imago Dei", 436.

[165] Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 3. For amusing calculations of our place as well as that of Christ in the temporality of the Big Bang cosmology according to an idea of Carl Sagan see Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 370-1.

[166] Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 375. My emphasis.

[167] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos", 143.

in the previous section. By focusing on the "more comprehensive scope" of salvation, I only wish to counterbalance a myopic tendency in Christian theology and life to focus on redemption at the expense of participation, and thus resituate the former in the light of the latter. Such a distinction enables us to expand our vision of salvation to all creation and enrich our understanding and language of belonging.[168] All this being said, it is however vital that this emphasis on participation does *not* lead to abandoning salvation as redemption *simpliciter*. Such neglect would be catastrophic because it would fail to ground ourselves in the concrete reality of the postlapsarian world, in which our participation in God as well as our relationships with each other, and the forms of belonging that these take, are distorted by sin and in need of redemption and restoration. If understanding salvation purely or primarily in terms of redemption would impoverish belonging christianly, as I have argued before, another myopia, which would this time consist in neglecting the need for redemption, would have the opposed, yet equally disastrous effect. It would lead to an optimistic theology of belonging uprooted from the concrete fallen and finite existence of which it seeks to speak meaningfully.

Another contribution of deep incarnation is to help us expand our understanding of redemption beyond sin. Gregersen initially intended the concept to address "the theological challenges of an evolutionary theodicy, developing the concept of a co-suffering God based on an understanding of the cross of Christ as *the divine assumption of the frailty and pain of all biological creatures*."[169] In her essay, Johnson asks: "is this solidarity [that of Christ on the Cross] limited to human beings alone?" Indeed, she continues, "all creatures come to an end: those with nervous systems know pain."[170] I will not expand further on this here because this idea of Christ as a co-sufferer will be explored further in a subsequent chapter. Here, I just want to point out that this movement to expand redemption's meaning beyond atonement for sinful humanity, to a "solidarity with all creatures' living and dying through endless millennia of evolution, from the extinction of species to every sparrow that falls to the ground" challenges a perhaps too quick and sharp distinction drawn in the previous section between redemption as anthropocentric and participation as cosmocentric. As we have now seen, deep incarnation offers the possibility to think of both redemption and participation beyond anthropocentrism,

[168] I will soon introduce the idea of deep belonging.

[169] Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 376.

[170] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos", 139.

zoo-centrism, and even biocentrism and be properly cosmocentric. This is important because a theology of salvation that would neglect or abandon redemption, would be devoid of any meaningful ethical implications. It would leave us powerless and speechless to name, address, and resist evil, natural and moral, as well as its effects. As a result, it wouldn't be properly rooted in the Incarnate Word. Indeed, as Kilby points out: "if Jesus is understood as the Word of God spoken into creation, then this speaking, it seems, takes place in the midst of things, in the midst of the messy, suffering, conflicted reality that is the world – this is how and where we have to listen for God."[171]

Further clarifying the ethical dimension of deep incarnation, Gregersen distances himself from and even strongly rejects a pantheist or even panentheistic understanding of God and creation. An important ethical implication is that a "bio-historical pantheism […] would identify the kingdom of God with just any other forceful reign of nature or history", which would inevitably lead to seeing God, not merely as present in all but indeed as manifested and revealed in all things, including evil forces or structures, which in turn would leave us powerless and speechless to name, address, and resist evil. To avoid this, Gregersen articulates "a subtle but theologically crucial distinction" between God's "omnipresen[ce]" and God's manifestation as God's "self-revelation, self-identification, or self-characterisation" in the person of Jesus Christ.[172] This distinction is essential for thinking about deep belonging in a way that is both theologically appropriate and ethically responsible. This, in turn, leads him to distinguish between what he calls the "strict", "broad", and "soteriological" "modes of incarnation".[173] Respectively, they are the unique mode of incarnation in the person and body of Jesus, somehow continued in the ecclesial body or community that is the church; the fact that in Christ the entirety of the material (or created) world is assumed and divinised; and finally, Christ taking upon himself all the suffering of this created world, and uniting it to God in himself and through the Spirit.

Through this distinction, Gregersen not only solves an important ethical concern, but also offers an answer to another significant challenge that the idea of deep incarnation brings

[171] Kilby, "The trinity and politics", 58.

[172] Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 383.

[173] Idem, 384-7.

to Christian theology. Indeed, traditionally, incorporation has been understood in ecclesial terms. Through the sacraments of initiation, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist—which we could perhaps call sacraments of belonging, for through them we enter the church and belong to God—one becomes a member of the *Totus Christus*, of which Christ is the Head and the church the Body. At first sight, deep incarnation might be seen as radically challenging the purpose and necessity of such means. However, what Gregersen's three modes of incarnation show is that if deep Incarnation comes to challenge the narrowness of a narrative of incorporation, which would focus exclusively on the first or strict mode, it does not abandon it for all that. (Re)affirming the place and even the destiny of creation within God's plan does not come at the expense of God's distinctive work for and in the midst of a lapsed humankind, and the role of the church as the primary instrument of God's salvific work for humankind, whose distinct status is preserved. Indeed, for Johnson, humankind is the "species in which matter has become conscious of itself."[174] For Gregersen, "human persons should here be accorded a special status in nature, not just by being distinctive natural beings among other beings in the inventory of our universe, but by being *doorways* to our cosmos, and even intimating realms of transcendence."[175] Maintaining human distinctiveness is also an ethical imperative as "erasing the distinction between human persons and other animals that relate to their more immediate surroundings, is fruitful neither for understanding our ecological situation nor for understanding the particular burdens of global ethical care allotted to humanity (and not to elephants and dolphins)."[176]

In the previous section, Matthew Hall invited us to expand the horizon of our concern and care to the plant realm. Deep incarnation and the kinship model do just that, and perhaps go even further than Hall by inviting humans to consider the whole of the material world, including the inanimate world, as not only part of creation but as grace-filled and sharing their own destiny in God. While this cosmic understanding of the Incarnation (and of incorporation) may seem at odds with the mainstream Christian tradition as we have received it, one may suggest that it flows from the expansive strategy already at work in the early Christian community and tradition as it discerned that God's covenant had been extended to the Gentiles. Moreover, the idea of deep belonging underpinning deep incarnation is also already implicitly

[174] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos", 138.

[175] Gregersen, "*Cur deus caro*", 377.

[176] Ibid.

at work in the story of the flood, where humans and animals, literally "on the same boat", are sharing the same fate,[177] or in the Canticle of Creation in which all things under and below the sky praise and glorify God forever.[178] This same idea of an expansive or "deep" community is also found in the doctrine of the communion of the saints. Indeed, if the two first examples show respectively a community of destiny and a community of worship expanding beyond species, with the communion of saints, the community expands not only beyond space and kind, but also beyond time and even death.[179]

In the last two sections, I have articulated what I have called theocentric belonging. While participation and incorporation do not give us extra knowledge about the inner life of the Triune God, they provide us vital information about who God is *not*—another creature—as well as who God is—the source and sustainer of all things in whom all find their completion and are joined in Christ through the Spirit. As a result, they also tell us who we are in relation to God, that is the kind of identity and belonging that such a God bestows upon us. Therefore, practically they tell us how we should relate to God as Creator and as Christ but also to all creation.

The ontological distinction between the Creator and creatures is also important because it is the condition for a non-competitive understanding of belonging fully realised in Christ in whom divine nature and human nature are perfectly united without confusion. As a result, theocentric belonging is a non-competitive mode of belonging. Thus, just as God is not an obstacle to our freedom but its condition, theocentric belonging doesn't preclude but is on the contrary the condition for any other kind of belonging including deep belonging.[180] This is important because this means that this theocentric belonging is not a political strategy of escapism from the world but on the contrary the condition for any, and especially an adequate,

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[177] However, as remarked by Hall, plants are not counted among the "living creatures" that Noah rescues. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 59.

[178] For more on the scriptural and patristic roots of the concept see Gregersen "The Idea of Deep Incarnation: Biblical and Patristic Resources," in *To Discern Creation in a Scattering World*, Frederic Depoortere and Jacques Haers (eds.), Leuven: Peeters, 2013, 319-41.

[179] For an exploration of the idea of deep resurrection see Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015, 207-210.

[180] see Kilby, "Evil and the limits of theology" in Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020,74.

engagement with, and even rootedness in the world. If theocentric belonging is understood as a covenant between the Creator and the Creator's creation, one in which the latter is radically dependent on the former, then this redefines the intersubjectivity of belonging in two ways. Firstly, as we learn about our radical dependence on God the Creator, the sort of belonging that emerges from that relationship is fundamentally egalitarian, for all creatures depend on their Creator. Indeed, despite their diversity of appearance, and cognitive and social capacities, despite the uniqueness of humankind, all creatures, including humans have more in common than not in relation to God who is utterly Other, for *all* participate in God as creatures, that is in in the same way. [181] Secondly, to belong to God in a non-competitive way, might also help us to learn to belong to each other and to creation as we become more aware of the radical dependence of all creatures upon God but also, or secondarily, of the interdependence, connectivity, mutuality and solidarity of all things and of Christ with all things.[182] However, creaturely belonging cannot be entirely non-competitive in the way that Theocentric belonging is for the ontological discontinuity which characterises the relationship between creator and creature and does not characterise relations between finite creatures. Nevertheless, it can teach us at the very least that belonging is a gift to be received rather than a token to be seized, possessed, and jealously guarded.

Another significant potential of theocentric belonging is that in contexts where belonging has weakened, or at least become more transient, fluid, unstable, challenged by increased chosen or imposed mobility, the collapse or marginalisation of traditional providers of belonging, but also new challenges to belonging such as the digital world, theocentric belonging can offer a foundational and unshakable mode and sense of belonging.[183] This foundational sense of belonging and the security that it grants will in turn provide the basis for engaging and critiquing particular forms of (exclusive) belonging and promoting political

[181]See Walker and Fouéré, *Strategies of belonging in Indian Ocean societies*, 9: "Those who belong share a sense of commonality, points of reference, as well as more tangible things such as language, religion, clothing, and food, and there is an understanding that those who belong are somehow alike."

[182] This should not be misunderstood in terms of the romantic fallacy of a pacified, benevolent, and harmonious nature, or that in its current (dis)ordering nature relies on violence and death.

[183] Here one should not underestimate the danger of spiritualising away problems. The uncovering or rediscovering of this foundational mode and sense of belonging does not dispense us to work for justice and to repair wounded forms of belonging due to forced migration, exclusion, and abuse. On the contrary, this foundational belonging obliges us to work toward its realisation with consolation hope and perseverance, for the kingdom is already in our midst. I am grateful to Kilby for pointing out this danger of spiritualisation.

change. Finally, it can also offer consolation and hope to those facing rejection and exclusion, that is those to whom belonging is denied, for in God all belong.

Chapter 4:

Belonging as apophasis and eschatology

If it is the case that the sort of belonging discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 is theocentric, then the limitations and failures that necessarily characterise our language about God will also apply to, or at least affect our language about belonging christianly. What kind of theology can do justice to the centrality of mystery as well as the expansive scope of belonging christianly?

In section 1, I will explore Kilby's proposal for a kind of apophatic Trinitarianism. This will lead me to identify another way in which the trinity plays a role in constructing theocentric belonging. In section 2, I explore another possible objection to what is proposed in Part 1, and indeed in the whole thesis, namely that in proposing a mode of belonging that is christocentric, this thesis neglects the Spirit. Resorting to Yves Congar I will argue that christology is intrinsically pneumatic and vice versa. Finally, in the last section, I will argue that apophaticism and eschatology are the marks of theocentric belonging and indeed belonging christianly, which will be explored in Part 2.

1. Kilby's "kind of" apophatic trinitarianism:

Kilby's contribution does not stop with her critical assessment of social trinitarianism, and it will prove decisive here. Kilby's rejection of social trinitarianism is rooted in an epistemological concern regarding the scope of theology and the role of the theologian and indeed the lack of 'epistemic humility' to be found in modern theology.[184]. Thus, Kilby invites

[184] This intuition colours the rest of her work, whether her (very) critical assessment of the work of Hans Urs Von Balthasar or her more recent work on suffering. For instance, see Kilby, *Balthasar, A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Grand Rapids: MICH, W.B. Eerdmans Publishers, 112: "What is striking in Balthasar's Trinitarian discussions, however, is that in a great many cases, they are *not* marked by […] the sense of precariousness, that ought to follow both from the way such notions as absolute distance are derived and from the questions surrounding what they might mean. Instead, we find confidence, ease, expansiveness, and fluency—a sense that Balthasar knows very well what he is describing and is quite happy to fill out the picture. We find in him, not someone driven to stutter uncertainly, somehow, in light of the Cross, about the Trinity, but rather a theologian who seems very well to know his way around, to have a view—sometimes something that seems like an insider's view—of what happens in the inner life of the Trinity." I will discuss more extensively her work on suffering in chapter 8. The issue of epistemic hubris is also clearly identified by Lewis Ayres: "Our attempts at understanding fail us if they become a sense that we have understood. The theologian considering the Trinity is above all being invited to hone

us to rethink the task of the theologian and the scope (and limits) of theology 'not […] to explain God a bit more than others have managed to, but to make it more clear that God is inexplicable'… and completely Other.[185] If one of the most attractive features of social trinitarianism is precisely its epistemological maximalism, in a constructive move, Kilby advocates for a less confident and arguably more arid " programme of Trinitarian theological modesty" which she describes as "*a kind* of apophaticism".[186]

Kilby's "kind of apophaticism", however, does not share social trinitarianism's optimism.[187] As a result, it cannot be expected to provide clear and robust guidelines, let alone a definitive map for human living. At first glance, Kilby's kind of apophaticism seems like bad news, leaving us with a seemingly poorer, disappointing, disorienting, unsettled, and unpractical theological understanding of belonging. Indeed, following Kilby's and Tanner's cautious line of argument about the political usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity, it may seem that the *doctrine* of the Trinity has nothing to contribute to political theology in general and a theology of belonging in particular. Here the emphasis is on the word "doctrine" because there is a difference between the significance of the doctrine and that of the Trinity itself since I have now argued that the fundamental contribution of the Trinity to a theology of belonging does not lie in the doctrine, but in the Trinity itself, which is both the source and completion of belonging.

Nonetheless, here I want to uncover what I will argue is another trinitarian contribution to a theology of belonging christianly. One may think that since the doctrine of the Trinity cannot provide any clear prescriptive guideline or orientation about how community life should

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her sense of mystery to realise what may and may not be said about the source of all." Lewis Ayres, "The Trinity and the life of the Christian: a liturgical catechism", *New Blackfriars*, 2011 92(1037), 14-15. For a more ancient source, see for instance Hilary of Poitiers: "Begetting is the secret of the Father and the Son. If anyone is convinced of the weakness of [their] intelligence through failing to understand this mystery… [they] will undoubtedly be even more downcast to learn that I am in the same state of ignorance." Hilary of Poitiers, "On the Trinity", Book 2 section 9, 55, in Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 222. Tanner uses the translation from Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, 174. I changed the pronouns.

[185] Kilby, "Seeking clarity", in Mike Higton and Jim Fodor, *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian theology,* New York and London: Routledge, 2015, 61-71, 69.

[186] Kilby, "Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?", Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology,* London: T&T Clark, 2020, 33. My emphasis.

[187] I will argue that apophaticism is rooted in hope rather than optimism. For an interesting account of the distinction between the two see Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*,Yale University Press, 2017. 1-90.

be organised, unity and diversity reconciled, and relationships conducted, one should look for such clear guidance elsewhere, in other doctrines. It might be the case that other Christian doctrines, like the Incarnation, are better equipped to help us reflect positively or cataphatically on belonging. To a large extent, this is also what emerged in the last two chapters.

As Kilby remarks in her essay on "The Trinity and Politics", her approach differs slightly from Tanner's. She identifies "two differences between what are structurally similar positions."[188] Such differences, she claims, are "worth mentioning." Although Tanner is critical of social trinitarianism's claims about the Trinity, her main issue with it is not so much its lack of epistemic humility, but its misplacement/orientation. Thus, Tanner writes:

> Figuring out the socio-political lessons of the trinity is a fraught task […] it would be better to steer attention away from trinitarian relations when making judgments about the proper character of human ones in Christian terns. Christology (specifically, a discussion of the character of Jesus' relationships with other people) is the better avenue for making such judgments: it is less misleading, far simpler and much more direct.[189]

As a result, her resolutely Christocentric approach remains largely cataphatic: "Tanner lays less emphasis on unknowing than me", Kilby writes. From this follows that "[Tanner] fills out the notion of 'incorporation into the Trinity' with a slightly different, and more christocentric, emphasis than" Kilby does.[190] While Kilby insists that she is "not inclined to disagree with anything [Tanner] proposes", she nonetheless "fear[s] that [Tanner's] account is open to being taken as a *denial* of political significance to the doctrine of the Trinity: everything of political import seems to lie in Christology alone."[191] After all, as announced in the title of Tanner's book—Christ is the Key. Kilby, however, wishes to affirm the disruptive political significance of the doctrine of the Trinity which can serve as a guidance for a less robust political theology. This significance does not lie in any particular theological insight into the doctrine but precisely in the opposite.

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[188] Kilby, "The Trinity and Politics", in Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, 55n25.

[189] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 207-8.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid.

As a result, Kilby proposes a "kind of" *apophatic* trinitarianism which can provide a helpful hermeneutical contribution to political theology in general and to our theology of belonging christianly in particular. This apophatic hermeneutics simultaneously invites us to reconsider our expectations, especially for clarity and guidance, to redefine and even refine them. As such it provides us with a tool to critically assess all the forms of belonging in the light of our theology of belonging christianly. To the extent that I identify the incarnation as one of the two foundations for belonging christianly, I adopt Tanner's christocentrism, although I will soon argue that, properly understood, this christocentrism is also pneumatic and therefore Trinitarian or theocentric. Yet, I also wish to take on board Kilby's "emphasis on unknowing" as the appropriate way to articulate a theocentric constructive theology of belonging. To understand how these two approaches can be held simultaneously, one needs to understand what Kilby means by "a kind of apophaticism".

Strictly speaking, Christian apophaticism is concerned with negative statements about God.[192] As such, it destabilises our discourse about the divine, but also about ourselves, for when we profess with Augustine that "if you understand it is not God", we simultaneously make statements about God's incomprehensibility and human limitation to comprehend.[193] Kilby argues that albeit *sensu stricto* cataphatic, traditional orthodox Trinitarian formulae can be read as *de facto* apophatic. While they give us a grammar to avoid the pitfalls of the heresies

[192] Far from being a marginal strand in the Christian tradition, Christian apophaticism goes back to Pseudo-Dionysus and is associated with mystical figures such as Master Eckart. It can arguably be found in the writing of mainstream theological giants such as Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure. More recently, major modern and contemporary thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. S. Lewis, Karl Rahner, Grammatical Thomists of the like of David Burrell, Herbert McCabe, Brian Davies, Nicholas Lash, and Denys Turner, but also Janet Soskice, Kilby and more recently Susannah Ticciati have all contributed to the resurgence of apophaticism in mainstream Christian theology. For a brief genealogy of the idea see Marie-Anne Vannier, "Aux sources de la voie négative' *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, 72 (4), 1998. Vannier gives us a non-exhaustive bibliography: Gershom Scholem, *Les grands courants de la mystique juive*, Paris: Payot, 1973; *La mystique juive*, Paris, Cerf, 1985, p. 37-72. Deirdre Carabine, *The unknown God. Negative theology in the platonic tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain, Peeters, 1995, 191-221. Christian Guérard, « La théologie négative dans l'apophatisme grec », *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 68, 1984, 183 et 199. Eric Geoffroy, "L'apophatisme chez les mystiques de l'Islam", *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 1998, 72-4 and 394-402. ON negativity in Augustine's theology see Vladimir Lossky, « Les éléments de théologie négative dans la pensée de S. Augustin», *Augustinus Magister* I, Paris, 1958, p. 575-581; Deirdre Carabine, « Negative theology in the thought of S. Augustine », *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 59 (1992), 5-22. For negativity in Aquinas see Kilby, "Aquinas, The Trinity and the limits of understanding", in *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 17-30.

[193] See Jean Girondin, "Augustine's 'Si comprehendis, non est Deus': to what extent is God incomprehensible?", *Analecta Hermeneutica* 9, 2017, 1-13.

of the first centuries, the formulae do *not* clarify God. If anything, they render God more obscure:

> if at issue in the negations of apophatic theology is the acknowledgment that God is beyond the grasp of our concepts, then *I will be suggesting that Trinitarian language, though on the surface a language of affirmation, does just this same work.* It proceeds, not by direct negation, but instead by the presentation of patterns of affirmation which immediately defeat us. [194]

This is why Kilby speaks of "*something like* an apophatic Trinitarianism".[195] In other words, Kilby tells us, that what is central to apophasis is not negativity *per se*, but the affirmation of God's incomprehensibility and the destabilisation of our discourse about God. Furthermore, if this kind of apophaticism applies to the doctrine of the Trinity, it also applies to the doctrine of the Incarnation and therefore to Christology. If terms like "perichoresis" and "persons" in trinitarian theology ultimately defeat our understanding, assuredly, terms like hypostatic union achieve the same result in Christology. As a result, our theology of belonging christianly can be simultaneously christocentric with Tanner, and apophatic with Kilby, thus giving justice to the epistemic humility willed by Kilby and acknowledging our location *within* this Christian drama, as participants rather than observers, in the life of this ungraspable God to whom we belong.[196]

2. Belonging christianly and the Spirit

Nonetheless, another of Kilby's concerns remain. Does a christocentric theology of belonging necessarily come at the expense of an equally appropriate attention to the Spirit? This is a serious question, for if "belonging christianly" is to be Christian, it must be Trinitarian, and therefore pneumatic. Therefore, it must not neglect the Spirit. Toward the end of his career,

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[194] Kilby, "Is an apophatic trinitarianism possible?", *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, 34n7. My emphasis. Also, on the disruptive potential of doctrine see Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020. For instance: "I will suggest that doctrinal theology can sometimes serve other purposes in this divided body: it can *destabilise* entrenched positions enough to make movement possible even when reconciliation remains unavailable, *it can make boundaries just porous enough to enable certain kinds of learning to flow across them without erasing them*, or it can simply provide a means for the divided parties to understand one another more deeply" Idem, 171.

[195] My emphasis.

[196] What would it mean to read experience apophatically? Is affirming the limits or inadequacy of experience tantamount to questioning its authenticity? The openness of apophaticism to ideas such as self-reflexivity and positionality.

the French Dominican Yves Congar came to reflect extensively upon the relationship between christology and pneumatology.[197] In *La Parole et le Souffle*, he uses the words "Word" [Parole] and "Breath" [Souffle] to describe the "Son" and "Spirit". This organic analogy enables Congar to describe the relationship between the Son/Word and the Spirit/Breath in a way that is not only poetic but better integrated, both preserving their distinctiveness as well as their unity. Thus, Congar wrote: 'if I myself were to draw one conclusion from my studies on the Holy Spirit, it would concern the Spirit's bond with the Word.'[198]

In seeking to correct the defects of Western theology, more specifically an ecclesiology, overly-focused on Christ, Congar ended up recovering an understanding of the Spirit alongside the Son, rather than substituting one for the other. Therefore, a theology that would exclusively focus on the Spirit would, for the same reason, be unsatisfactory—"*no Christology without pneumatology and no pneumatology without Christology"*.[199] Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, who has produced a monograph on Congar's pneumatology,[200] remarks that by the 1980s Congar had moved from his former portrayal of the Spirit as the *animator* of the church established by Jesus Christ to the position that the Spirit is not simply the animator but also the *co-institutor* of the Church.[201] I want to suggest that in the same way that the Spirit is not merely the animator but the co-institutor of the church, the Spirit is also the co-institutor of this fundamental and radically-given form of belonging as participation and incorporation as described in this

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[197] See Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit,* 3 vols., trans. David Smith, New York: Seabury, 1983; Crossroad, 1997); *The Word and the Spirit,* trans. David Smith, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986. This shift in focus, or at least renewed interest is due in part to his attempt to address accusations of Christomonism from ecumenical partners. See Adrian Brooks, "Breathing Forth the Word: Yves Congar's Articulation of the Activity of The Holy Spirit in The Life of Christ", *New Blackfriars,* 101(1091), 5. Congar summarised the accusation of Christomonism which he attributes to the orthodox theologian Nikos Nissiotis as follows: "Everything [in Catholic theology] is seen one-sidedly as referring to Christ. The Spirit is merely added to the Church, its ministries and its sacraments, all of which are already constituted. The Spirit simply carries out a function of Christ." Yves M-J. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 113 in Brooks, "Breathing Forth", 3.

[198] Congar, "The Human Spirit and the Spirit of God" in *Short Writings on the Holy Spirit*, Susan Mader Brown, Mark E. Ginter and Joseph G. Mueller (eds.), trans. Susan Mader Brown, Mark E. Ginter, Joseph G. Mueller and Catherine E. Clifford, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2018, 25. Also see Congar, 'Theology of the Holy Spirit and Charismatic Renewal' in *Called to Life*, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1985, 84; 'Pneumatology Today' in *Short Writings*, 203-24; *The Word and the Spirit*, 1.

[199] Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, 1. My emphasis.

[200] Elisabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford University Press USA, 2004.

[201] Groppe, *Yves Congar*, 461. Groppe refers us to Joseph Famerée, *L'ecclésiologie d'Yves Congar avant Vatican II: Histoire et Église: Analyse et reprise critique*, Leuven: Leuven University, 1992, 451–52.

chapter.[202] This should come as no surprise as a trinitarian understanding of the divine implies that all the persons of the Trinity are involved in both the creation and the Incarnation which make respectively participation and incorporation possible. Therefore, a properly Christocentric understanding of belonging, as I have tried to propose must also be pneumatic. Here again, a parallel with ecclesiology might help us identify another reason why this (re)affirmation of the pneumatic nature of christocentric belonging is important. Indeed, Groppe and Lee argue that Congar's developing pneumatology had an impact on his understanding of the place of the hierarchy and the laity in the church.[203] Adrian Brooks seems to concur when he affirms that Congar's 're-examination of the tradition reveals that in Catholic ecclesiology, clericalism and legalism were often exacerbated by a concentrated use of Christic language about the church.'[204]

To conclude, if the Incarnation is central to theocentric understood as participation and incorporation, this does not have to take place, in fact, it *cannot* take place without the cooperation of the Spirit.[205] Only by the Spirit can we be attached, incorporated, and made one while remaining many in Christ.[206] Only with the assistance and guiding breath/breeze of the Spirit sent us by the Father in Christ's name (John 14: 26) can we hope to follow the example given to us by Christ. Only the Spirit can truly shape our lives after Him. Only through the Spirit, can we conform ourselves to that which we have received in the Spirit, not on our own merit, but by God's grace—membership in Christ, participation in the trinitarian life. For all this, we *depend on* the Spirit who is at once merciful and sanctifying grace, generous guide, disruptive and revivifying breath. It is only thanks to the joint action of the Word [Parole] and the Breath [Souffle] that theocentric apophatic belonging can take place, for

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[202] This should not be a surprise since I have already argued that belonging christianly constitutes a foundation, or at least the context, for rethinking ecclesial belonging.

[203] Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985; Congar, *Ministères et communion ecclésiale.* Paris: Cerf, 1971.

[204] Brooks, 'Breathing Forth', 4. See Congar, 'A Theology of the Holy Spirit', in *Short Writings*. 75-123.

[205] See in the Creed: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, *and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary* and became man."

[206] Kilby points out that "it is a classic Christian affirmation that the Holy Spirit incorporates us, in our variety and difference, into Christ." Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 58.

> There is No Word without Breath, it would remain in the throat and would address no one. There is no Breath without a Word: it would have no content and would transmit nothing to anyone.[207]

3. Apophaticism and eschatology as the marks of theocentric belonging.

3.1. Apophaticism and belonging:

We can now turn to a more thorough assessment of the potential of the apophatic approach for thinking belonging christianly. Reflecting on the prospect of negative political theology, David Newheiser contends that "although negative theology does not offer any direct prescription for modern politics it exemplifies *an ethical discipline with political implications*. By holding affirmation and critique together in tension, it models a circumspection that avoids both optimism and despair."[208] It is this ethical principle that I aim to apply to the question of belonging, arguing that it will enable us to avoid the dangers of stable tribal belonging, and dismissal of belonging *simpliciter*. As Judith Butler puts it '[my procedure] does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term [here belonging]; on the contrary, it provides the conditions to mobilise the signifier in the service of an alternative production.'[209] This apophatic approach also seems very well suited and responsive to postmodernity, which Richard Lennan calls the 'characteristic of the present age'.[210] At best, postmodernity is characterised by a "deeper awareness of "the other," that which is beyond our domination and requires respect",[211] which is promising as far as belonging is concerned. At worst, it exemplifies 'a stark division between the skepticism of those who are tempted to

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[207] Congar, "Pneumatology Today", in *Spirit of God*, 220. See also Congar, *Called to Life*, 84 in Brooks, « Breathing Forth », 7-8.

[208] David Newheiser, "Why the world needs negative political theology", *Modern Theology* 36(1) January 2020, 11.

[209] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Post-Modernism" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Judith Butler and Jean W. Scott (eds.), London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 52, in Rogers, *Blood Theology,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 10.

[210] Richard Lennan, *Risking the Church, The Challenges of Catholic Faith*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 173. In recent years, queer theory has also seen the emergence of negative queer theory, see Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies", *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 2008, 5(2), 140. Also see Kristien Justaert, 'Dancing in the Dark: Marcella Althaus-Reid and Negative Queer Theory', *Feminist Theology*, 26(3), 2018, 229–240.

[211] Lennan, *Risking the Church*, 182.

disbelieve that our words can say anything and the intolerance of those who believe that their words say it all.'[212]

Apophaticism offers a third way which is not a middle ground and reasserts the idea of meaning and truth, simultaneously rejecting nihilistic and fundamentalist approaches to truth. Despite the resemblance between postmodernism and *Christian* apophaticism, the latter, especially its ground and aim, should not be misconstrued.[213] Indeed, Christian apophaticism finds its source primarily in God's priority and complete Otherness, and only then in human limitations and finitude, a sign and the result of the ambivalent place of humans in creation—gifted with unique yet limited understanding.[214] Christian apophaticism is not pure negativity, it is not 'postmodernism's extreme apophaticism'[215], but the appropriately limited and located answer to God's unconditional and inexhaustible first utterance. Therefore, while the epistemic skepticism of postmodernity can easily give birth to a purely negative or even nihilistic understanding of mystery, as a failure to understand, or even an absence; Christian apophaticism finds in mystery God's primeval, primal, primordial and pristine, superabundant, all-encompassing and sustaining presence.[216] It is only in the light of who God is, and as an affirmation of human finitude that Christian apophaticism insists upon the limitations, the failure, and the fundamental inadequacy of human language, understanding and, one may want to add, *practice.* Yet, in doing so it does not lead to radical unbelief, silence, and nihilism. Applied to belonging understood as participation in the divine, I want to suggest that apophaticism invites us to a radical re-situating, and transforming of belonging, rather than its utter rejection. Such re-situating and transformation need to be situated within and understood in the light of the Christian telos and drama of creation, sin, grace, redemption, and eschatological fulfilment.

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[212] Idem, 172-3 My emphasis.

[213] Denys Turner, Oliver Davies, 'Introduction', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and the Incarnation,* Denys Turner, Oliver Davies (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[214] Rogers, *Blood Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 210.

[215] John Webster, "Eschatology, Anthropology and Postmodernity", *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 2(1), March 2000, 22.

[216] See Karl Rahner, 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic theology', *Theological Investigations* vol. 4, New York, NY; Crossroad, 1973. See Kilby, "Seeking Clarity", 67-8.

3.2. Eschatology:

In the previous paragraph, I argued that despite obvious similarities, Christian apophaticism is distinct from postmodernity in terms of its grounding. In doing so, I focused on the origin or ground of apophaticism in the lack of "ontological continuum" between God and created being.[217] I shall now turn to the distinctive ends of Christian apophaticism. Another, related, difference between Christian apophaticism and postmodernity is their attitude towards eschatology. Postmodernity, Webster tells us, is 'deeply hostile to teleological renderings of history, with their apparent unified trajectories and their emphasis on the preservation of identity'.[218] Yet Christian apophaticism is eschatological and authentically Christian eschatology must be apophatic. Eschatology, Webster insists, "is promissory, *not possessive*, in character."[219]

> The negative aspect of this promissory character of Christian eschatology is the hiddenness of its object, that is, its unavailability for systematic comprehension and its resistance to being used as an instrument in some project of our own devising. God's promise 'is hidden because God becomes present as himself in his own way and in his own time but remains beyond human grasp. He remains hidden even as he reveals himself.[220]

Webster also observes that 'Christian anthropology is eschatological.'[221] I have argued in similar terms that apophaticism is not only concerned with telling us what God what is not but also we are not, God, as well as what/who we are. Eschatology and apophaticism both remind us of our creatureliness, that is, among other things, our timeliness. Being in time does not merely mean being subject to duration and finitude in death. It also reminds us of the transient state of creation, as it moves towards its recapitulation in Christ. This has important implications for belonging, the first of which is to recognise that creatureliness is both a condition of and a limitation to belonging. Indeed, to go back to the distinction between belonging as participation and belonging as incorporation, creatureliness is the condition of

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[217] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 12.

[218] Webster, "Eschatology, Anthropology, and postmodernity", 17.

[219] Idem, 21. My emphasis.

[220] Ibid.

[221] Idem, 14.

belonging to God. At the same time, this same creatureliness prevents us from naturally belonging in a stronger sense to God. It is only through incorporation realised in the Incarnation, that this stronger form of belonging is realised. A second implication is the provisionality and inadequacy of present forms of belonging in the light of the eschatological vision which is our full participation in the life of God. This insistence on provisionality prevents us from turning any kind of belonging, including ecclesial belonging, but also time, whether present, past, or even future, into idols. Indeed, the eschatological hope in which belonging christianly is rooted 'is the assurance of faith, and therefore quite *different from that self-certainty which might be the basis for predictive control'* and the forms of belonging we are accustomed to.[222] Properly understood, eschatology, therefore, encourages us to humbly recognise that we are situated in time and in Christian time, *within* the Christian telos and drama. This means that belonging christianly, rather than a state to achieve or a stable form of belonging to gain or maintain, is a process to undergo. Such a process can only start from or in the midst of the dysfunctional or imperfect forms of belonging that God's encounter in Christ come to disrupt and transform. This will lead us to explore the current state of things in Part 2, but first, as Part 1 comes to an end, I wish to briefly sum up what has been discussed so far.

[222] Idem, 21. My emphasis.

Gathering the Fragments (1):

Chapter 1 provided a metaphysical foundation for the theology of belonging christianly, discussing the role of key Christian doctrines, especially that of the Trinity, creation *ex nihilo*, and the Incarnation. Together these doctrines helped construct theocentric belonging, at once the source of belonging christianly and the horizon which it receives in faith and hope, and against which present forms of belonging need to be critically assessed. Other formulae used to describe theocentric belonging included expansive, "over the top", and deep. In Chapter 2, the doctrine of salvation also emerged as the fourth key doctrine to understanding the depth, breadth, and purpose of theocentric belonging. In Chapters 2 and 3, salvation was understood primarily as belonging, that is through the lens of, and as the invitation to the participation of all creatures in the divine life through Christ and in the Spirit. Thus, our attention was primarily on what one is saved *for*, or what salvation is, rather than what one is saved *from*. Nonetheless, it also became clear that such an understanding of salvation as participation does not necessarily, and in fact should not come at the expense of a theology of redemption. Indeed, if understanding salvation purely or primarily in terms of redemption would impoverish a theology of belonging christianly, as it often does our Christian imagination, another myopia would consist in neglecting the need for redemption. Both would have opposed, yet equally disastrous effects. For if understanding salvation primarily as redemption would have the impoverishing and distorted effects described in the previous chapter, neglecting redemption would indeed lead to an optimistic theology of belonging uprooted from the concrete fallen and finite existence of which it seeks to speak meaningfully. Salvation as the participation in the divine life of all creatures *cannot* be conceived outside of the immediate and finite context and forms of belonging in the midst of which such salvation is gifted/granted by God, and received by creatures, which, for humans at least, is seriously distorted by sin. This last point will be the starting point of Part 2, but beforehand, it is important to recall another important argument made in Chapter 4, namely that a theocentric theology of belonging entails conceptual and linguistic limitations, and that as a result, theocentric belonging is necessarily apophatic and eschatological.

Part 2:

Belonging christianly and "the state of things"

You have come, o Evil-doer, I recognize your thoughts.

You have come, in order that you might deprive me of the light and beloved life
Ever since first you cast Adam from paradise,

A creation of God, and with evil you ambushed a wise command,

And provided bitter food to a sweet life;

How am I to flee from you? What remedy shall I find for my sufferings?[223]

It would be easy but misleading to identify the underlying or dominant theme in Part 2 as sin *per se*. Instead, the underlying aim of Part 2 is to seek to hold in tension, interrogate and (re)construct the relationship between the fundamental (and eschatological) reality or mode of theocentric belonging painted in the first chapter and the finite, transitional, performative, fragmented, and often distorted ways in which humans do effectively belong in a finite and fallen world.

In other words, Part 2 is interested in how grace appears, emerges, is received, and grows amid the mess, in unexpected places, and unexpected ways. The distorted forms of belonging will in time be called postlapsarian belonging, but for now, we can call them lived belonging. belonging christianly will emerge as the long journey or pilgrimage from

[223] Gregory of Nazianzus, Poem 2.1.54 (PG 37, 1397–9), trans. Dayna S. Kalleres, in 'Demons and Divine Illumination', 162–3 in Gabrielle Thomas, "Gregory of Nazianzus on the Role of Satan in Human Suffering", in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 51.

postlapsarian belonging into theocentric belonging, that is from the darkness of sin into the darkness of God.

To put it differently, Part 2 and 3 will seek to inhabit creatively the tension between theocentric belonging and postlapsarian belonging to reflect on how to receive and gradually inhabit/embody belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong christianly amid postlapsarian belonging. To do so, Part 2 will be divided into three chapters.

Chapter 5 will endeavour to articulate the place and role of the doctrines of sin and original sin within the theology of belonging christianly.

Chapter 6 will seek to further refine our understanding of sin and its place within the Christian story and vision, as well as the role of atonement within this vision to create room for thinking belonging christianly beyond our numb imaginations as well as beyond shame.

Expanding on this, chapter 7 will explore the dynamics and freedom of belonging christianly, as well as its challenges and even obstacles.

Chapter 5:

Reclaiming sin-talk

This chapter will seek to articulate the place and role of the doctrines of sin and original sin within the theology of belonging christianly. It will argue at once that despite its bad press, the doctrines of original sin and sin will be determinant in helping us to achieve the aim of attending to the tension between theocentric belonging and lived belonging and moving beyond the pathological forms of the latter. To achieve this aim, I will resort to a perhaps unlikely combination of voices including once again Kilby, but also and even primarily Amia Srinivasan and Alistair McFadyen.

Kilby writes that "contemporary attention to […] dehumanizing realities has something to teach the Christian theological tradition and that the Christian tradition in turn may also have something useful to bring to our struggle with them."[224] Engaging with Srinivasan—a secular feminist philosopher, and more specifically how she envisions "sex" beyond political oppression—will therefore help to show the deep resonance between the call for sexual liberation of a secular and radical feminist philosopher and our attempt to reflect critically and creatively on lived forms of belonging from within the Christian tradition as configured in this thesis.[225] However, such an engagement will also serve to show the points of dissonance between Srinivasan's secular analysis and a theological analysis from within the Western Christian tradition and its counter-cultural doctrine of original sin. To understand the specificity of "Christianese" when it speaks of such distortions, and the limits of contemporary secular analyses of which Srinivasan's essay is exemplary, I will refer to the work of Alistair McFadyen.

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[224] Kilby, "Sin and Suffering Reconsidered" in *The Human in a Dehumanizing World: Re-Examining Theological Anthropology and Its Implications*, Jessica Coblentz and Daniel P. Horan (eds.) Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022, 34. Here Kilby gives a non-exhaustive list: "colonialism, racism, sex abuse, and poverty". We could perhaps go as far as saying that denying belonging is the prerequisite to or first step of any strategies of dehumanisation.

[225] I am being cautious here because it is obviously not true of all understandings, or even perhaps the mainstream understanding of the Christian tradition which has had a tormented relationship with sex. McFadyen writes of the Christian tradition's "extensive history – and if only it were just history – of pathological bad form in relation to LGBT rights – indeed, in fact, in relation to sex, sexuality, embodiment and gender more broadly." McFadyen, "Understanding Senyonjo's ministry in the light of Christian theology", *Theology and Sexuality*, 2020, 26, (1), 12-20, 13.

In *Bound to Sin*, McFadyen argues that sin-talk is essential to talk about human distortions in their proper order of reference. Thus sin-talk does not *just* resituate human distortions within a broader framework in which God is the point of reference. Original sin-talk also helps to assess accurately the extent, depth, and indeed source of such distortions, which will in turn be essential to reflect on how to receive and gradually inhabit/embody belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to Belong in the midst of belonging. This will be the task of belonging christianly. This distinctive Christian contribution should not, however, be cause for triumphalism, as avant-garde secular liberationist thinking, despite its conceptual lacks, has often been prophetic in calling out forms of oppression that mainstream Christian theology either failed to see or was actively involved in.[226]

1. "The Politics of Desire": Exploration of an emancipatory journey and its shortcomings

In "The Right to Sex", an essay initially published in the *London Review of Books* in the aftermath of the bloodshed orchestrated by Eliott Rodgers,[227] Srinivasan explored the controversial underlying idea of an alleged (denied) right to sex. The essay received some backlash and prompted a book with the same title which it is re-published alongside four other essays. There she articulates a provocative "political critique of sex"[228] that seeks to challenge "received opinion about who gets to desire who, and why it matters."[229] As with Rowan Williams's "The Body's Grace" mentioned in the introduction, where Srinivasan writes "sex", I read "belonging." It should not come as a surprise that I should suggest that what Srinivasan says about sex can apply to, and be useful to thinking critically about, belonging as both touch on the depth of desire, identity, and the human longing for connection. If both are objects of longing and can be places of acceptance and connection, in which case they can be vehicles for

[226] On the way in which white Christianity failed to denounce racism and segregation see James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Orbis, 2013. Here again see McFadyen, "Understanding Senyonjo's ministry in the light of Christian theology".

[227] Rodgers was a self-declared "incel" who had developed a profound content and hatred of people of colour and mixed-race people, as well as women whom he saw responsible for him still being a virgin. See Amia Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 73.

[228] Idem, 102.

[229] Zing Tsjeng, "Philosopher Amia Srinivasan Will Radically Change the Way You See Feminism, The #MeToo Movement – And Sex", *British Vogue*, 25 July 2021. https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/amia-srinivasan (last accessed on 6 September 2023).

grace and growth,[230] they can also be places of frustration, dehumanisation, and rejection. Therefore, where Srinivasan is interested in "liberat[ing] sex from the distortions of oppressions", I am interested in "liberating" *belonging* "from the distortions of oppression". Although there are some important similarities or points of convergence between her radical feminist post-political proposal and the aim of this thesis, there are also some crucial divergences between the two. Drawing attention to these similarities and differences will help us reflect critically, distinctively, and creatively on lived forms of belonging from within the Christian tradition and think further about the shape of belonging christianly.

What Srinivasan's book shows is that sex, both sexual desire and sexual practices, albeit seemingly natural, are politically charged with meaning and hierarchy. As such, sex deserves both scrutiny *and* a response beyond liberal tolerance, at least from radical political thinkers whose aim is the liberation of oppressed groups. In the preface of the book, she writes:

> A famous philosopher once said to me that he objected to feminist critiques of sex because it was only during sex that he felt truly outside politics, that he felt truly free. I asked him what his wife would say to that. (I couldn't ask her myself; she hadn't been invited to the dinner.) This is not to say that sex cannot be free. Feminists have long dreamed of sexual freedom. What they refuse to accept is its simulacrum: sex that is said to be free, not because it is equal, but because it is ubiquitous. In this world, sexual freedom is not a given but something to be achieved, and it is always incomplete.[231]

What this quote shows is the presumed separation between a public political sphere, presumed corrupted, and a private, presumed apolitical, one, presumed untainted, to which sex belongs.[232] It is this very idea, of a clear distinction between a public, *political*, and an impervious, private, *apolitical* domain that Srinivasan seeks to challenge as she argues that political meaning and distortions permeate all the spheres of our life, including the most intimate and benign ones. This is important because the same impermeable dichotomy can also operate when we think

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[230] Williams, "The Body's Grace" in Rogers *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. For an analysis of Williams's theology of sexuality see Higton, *Difficult Gospel, The Theology of Rowan Williams*, London, SCM, 2004, especially chapter 6.

[231] Amia Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, xiv.

[232] Among liberal Christians, and perhaps above all liberal Catholics seeking to counter the church's attempts to regulate and control the sexual life of its members, it is not uncommon to hear formulated one way or another that the church should have nothing to say about "what happens in the bedroom", that is in private.

about belonging. Thus, we tend to presume that there are harmful and seriously distorted or pathological forms of belonging, like white supremacy or other forms of racist, nationalistic forms of belonging, and non-pathological, and therefore harmless, forms of belonging such as religious belonging, or the family, including romantic love and relationships between parents and children. We think of these two kinds of belonging as different in kind and unrelated, and the latter as impervious/to the distortions of the former. Of course, we know of dysfunctional and abusive relationships, yet we seldom think about the way the kind of distortions that Srinivasan and Kilby talk about affect our relationships with our partner, children, parents, or friends, that is the distortions of belonging.

Although all five essays in the book discuss sex at length and through the intersectionality of structural forms of oppression through gender (including transphobia), economic poverty, racism, and ableism, the fourth essay, "Coda: The Politics of Desire" explores in greater depth "how politics shape desire" and offers a "utopian feminist" proposal to 'liberate sex from the distortions of oppression'.[233] One such example of distortion, she articulates through the concept of "fuckability" which she describes in unvarnished terms as

> the supreme fuckability of "hot blonde sluts" and East Asian women, the comparative unfuckability of black women and Asian men, the fetishisation and fear of black male sexuality, [and] the sexual disgust expressed towards disabled, trans and fat bodies.[234]

Responding to her critics, Srinivasan clarifies what she means by "'fuckability' and 'unfuckability'". Importantly Srinivasan does not intend to deny the vulnerability of those at the margins of society and at the bottom of the ladder of fuckability, whose position and subjugation to power dynamics make them and their bodies "in an important sense supremely fuckable, much more so than the bodies of white women".[235] She also insists that "fuckability is not some good that should be distributed more fairly. It isn't a good at all."[236] What fuckability does, however, is to articulate how politics shape who is desirable, as well as the social prestige attached to certain desires and not to others, that is to say, that fuckability finds its roots and its applicability in distorted forms of belonging.

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[233] Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 95 and 96.

[234] Idem, 84.

[235] Idem, 104.

[236] Ibid.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strength of Srinivasan's essay resides more in the questions she raises and how she seeks to present sex under a (new) political light, rather than in providing simple, clear, definitive, and practical answers to what liberation might look like in practice. Her project is of her own admission "utopian feminist",[237] and "radical" rather than "liberal".[238] Thus she writes,

> To liberate sex from the distortions of oppression is not the same as just saying everyone can desire whatever or whomever they want. The first is a radical demand; the second is a liberal one. Like many liberal demands, the second is often fueled by an individualist suspicion of the coercive power of the community. [239]

As she seeks to articulate the shapes of this "radical demand", Srinivasan asks, "how do we engage in a political critique of sex without slipping into […] a moral authoritarianism that disciplines rather than emancipates?"[240] The danger of moral authoritarianism needs to be taken seriously and perhaps especially in theological discourse. This danger will lurk as we seek to uncover the distortions of lived belonging and how to move beyond them. Another of Srinivasan's concerns pertains to the role of discipline and emancipation within her own proposal. Thus, she asks, "must the transformation of desire be a disciplinary project (willfully altering our desires in line with our politics [as opposed to that of others?])—*or* can it be an emancipatory one (setting our desires free from politics)?".[241]

Srinivasan is eager to stress that her proposal seeks to liberate rather than police or even suppress desire. Although this can perhaps partially explain her discomfort with the strategy of discipline, we learn more from the fact that here emancipation is not merely emancipation from distorted political construct, but from politics itself. In other words, in choosing emancipation *from* rather than the disciplining *of* politics, Srinivasan seems to identify politics *itself,* rather than merely distorted politics, as the pathology from which desire needs to be purified. Such a process, she admits, requires "a kind of discipline […] *to quiet the voices that have spoken to*

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[237] Idem, 121.

[238] Idem, 96.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Idem, 102.

[241] Idem, 100. My emphasis.

us since birth, the voices that tell us which bodies and ways of being in the world are worthy and which are unworthy."[242] At this stage, one may want to question if her project is not in the end more liberal than radical. How else can we understand an attempt to move sex beyond politics, that is, it seems, beyond the sphere of human sociality, meaning, and symbols?

By attempting to move sex beyond politics, she seems to contradict her initial intuition that sex is political. At least, it now seems that she and "the famous philosopher" she mentions in the preface do not fundamentally disagree. Their disagreement seems to lie in the effort required to liberate sex from the distortions of politics. Although for her interlocutor it seems that sexual intimacy is inherently free from the constraints of politics, Srinivasan's journey of sexual freedom starts with the realisation that sex is political only to enter a purgatorial journey of emancipation of sex from politics. To be clear this is not to say that her proposal collapses into the individualistic understanding of sex which she describes as liberal, and which only reinforces the binary between the private and public spheres. She does not seem to say that freedom from politics, at least as far as sex is concerned, is achievable by individuals regardless of their social location, or even that those who have achieved such freedom should then "live happily ever after" with no concern for how destructive political forces continue to shape their society, for that would, once again restore the dichotomy between the private and public spheres. No, Srinivasan's central point here is that the distortion of sex, both desire and practices, lies primarily and solely, within the political structures which she wants to see overturned.

However, from a (Christian) theological point of view, there are reasons to be skeptical and indeed resist both the diagnosis and the strategies enunciated by Srinivasan. One such strategy which Srinivasan herself rejects albeit for different reasons, is the disciplining of one's desire by one's politics. Such a strategy seems overly optimist about the state of humankind, which leads me to finally introduce the concept of sin, which will help us to understand why, despite a general affinity with Srinivasan's project, it remains unsatisfactory from a theological perspective, and an example of what Alistair McFadyen calls "the dominant cultural mode of discourse about the pathological" rooted in a characteristically modern "understanding of moral

[242] Idem, 96. My emphasis.

rationality, based on a conception of the individual person as a free, willing subject".[243] In what follows, I rely heavily on McFadyen's *Bound to Sin* and, later, on James Alison's *The Joy of Being Wrong*.[244]

2. Rehabilitating the doctrine of sin to the service of human flourishing

2.1. The function of "sin-talk":

At the beginning of his provocative study on "sin-talk" and its role in Christian discourse, Alistair McFadyen points out that "the language of 'sin' has fallen largely into disuse in the general public (but also in much Christian and theological) discourse as a language for talking about the pathological in human affairs."[245] Thus he writes that

> it is easy to see how the idea that it yet holds descriptive, explanatory, and interpretive power in relation to the discernment and understanding of pathologies in human affairs might appear bemusing, exasperating or just plain laughable.[246]

Similarly, Sebastian Moore, in his foreword to James Alison's own systematic theology of the doctrine of original sin, noted that sin is 'a doctrine that much contemporary theology would regard as a nonstarter'.[247] An obvious reason, perhaps, for this widespread contemporary malaise, which Jose Ignacio Gonzales Faus calls the 'crisis of sin', is to be found in a distortion of what sin *means*.[248] Sin, Faus contends, is primarily (mis)understood in individualistic terms and as a 'transgression of the law' which leads it to be "reduced to the unjustifiable pure whim of the lawmaker […] an arbitrary or voluntary imposition rather than a real damage to the human being.'[249] However, in the eyes of many contemporaries, including many Christians, it is this very language of sin that is damaging, triggering, and charged with bad memories,

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[243] Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 14 and 22.

[244] I am not the first one to bring these two authors together. See Darlene Fozard Weaver, "HOW SIN WORKS: A Review Essay", *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 29 (3), 2001, 473- 501 especially 488-501. Here, however, I am more relying on them individually than bringing them into a dialogue.

[245] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 3.

[246] Ibid.

[247] Sebastian Moore, "Forewords", in Alison *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes,* New York: Crossroads, 1998, vii.

[248] Jose Ignacio Gonzalez Faus, 'Sin', in Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, 539-540.

[249] Ibid.

polluted by centuries of misuse and abuse in the service of moral authoritarianism, to stigmatise, shame, silence, condemn, imprison (metaphorically or literally), alienate, condemn (again), cure, and in last resort kill (to cure) so-called sinners.[250] In light of this sinister legacy, the temptation is strong to declare sin beyond repair and let go of the concept all together. Another path is to reclaim the doctrine of sin in the service of human flourishing, as McFadyen does:

> Deploying the language of sin as a warrant or tool for homophobic abuse pulls it out of the gravitational field of the dynamics of salvation, which its function is to serve. Christians talk of sin to understand how human reality presently contradicts human flourishing that stands in need of creative, loving transformation."[251]

At any rate, McFadyen identifies "pragmatic atheism" as another, less obvious but no less powerful, reason for the contemporary malaise with sin, which he even calls "the most viable explanation of the impotence and public irrelevance of the language of sin".[252] Later, he sums it up as "the general problematisation of God-talk in a secularised culture."[253] By pragmatic atheism, McFadyen means that the widespread assent to a secular understanding of reality with no reference to God, as the source, sustainer, and horizon of all reality, is in effect a form of atheism, even if does not involve a formal rejection of God or a commitment to atheism. Where God is maintained, God belongs to the private sphere of spirituality and personal belief, following a public-private dichotomy not dissimilar to that denounced by Srinivasan.

Thus, in a secular context where God-talk has become odd, marginal, superfluous when not undesirable, "the language of sin"—which when "properly deployed, […] carries an inbuilt reference to God, naming the pathological as the denial of and opposition to God"—has itself become redundant, incomprehensible, when not "offensive".[254] In this challenging context, two temptations present themselves to Christian theology. The first, and obvious one, is to let go of

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[250] See Linn Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, Eugene: OR, Cascade, 2018, 120-1.

[251] McFadyen, "Understanding Senyonjo's ministry", 18.

[252] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 9.

[253] Idem, 14.

[254] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 11.

sin-talk. An analogous temptation has already been addressed as the (strong) temptation to declare sin beyond repair and let go of the concept all together. Here, however, the reason for abandoning sin-talk is different as the temptation is to let go of God-talk when discussing the dehumanising realities or social pathology that have become key to contemporary debates. From a theological perspective, this sort of dis/misplaced focus can be assimilated to another form of myopia. The second temptation, which McFadyen associates with pragmatic atheism, is "post-it theology". Here, theologians "sugarcoat" the pre-existing contemporary secular analysis which is accepted as an appropriate account of the real with extra theological language or meaning. McFadyen writes:

> if God-talk merely appends itself to an analysis already in place, then renaming as sin that which secular thought identifies as pathological is no more than a rhetorical flourish. It adds precisely nothing at the level of explanation and understanding to baptise and bless conclusions arrived at by secular means for secular reasons.

This critique of "post-it theology" simultaneously challenges and reinforces my critical engagement with Srinivasan's work by affirming that despite a certain affinity with her project of emancipation from oppression, a theological analysis of the distortions or pathologies that characterise lived belonging cannot be content with merely attaching the language of sin to her analysis of the social pathologies such as "fuckability" that characterise sex. Instead, a theological analysis must critically assess itself by asking how its critique of the distortions of lived belonging is any different from secular critiques of social pathologies, and more specifically how it is distinctively Christian. Importantly, this does not mean that theology must ignore insights from non-theological analyses but that it must not surrender to them its distinctive theological voice and vision in which God is the beginning, the end, and the centre of all reality. Thus, McFadyen adds:

> Only if the Christian faith possesses a specifically theological understanding of what sin is and how it functions might it have something to offer secular diagnosis and therapy. Only then will it have its own basis for recognition and interpretation of the pathological and for engaging secular analyses in a mutually enriching and correcting conversation.

Following McFadyen's invitation, it is now time to explore further "what sin is and how it functions", as this will be of great importance to critically assess Srinivasan's "secular diagnosis and therapy", as well as construct a theological analysis *and* response to the distortions of lived belonging which we will call belonging christianly.

I have already started to answer what sin is by the negative through my brief engagement with Faus. Thus, we learned that sin ought not to be understood primarily in individualistic, arbitrary, and juridical terms, but instead in terms of its impact upon human flourishing. This was consolidated by McFadyen who condemned the instrumentalisation of sin in the service of oppression,[255] and asserted that "Christian talk of sin to understand the ways in which human reality presently contradicts human flourishing that stands in need of creative, loving transformation."[256] Elsewhere he describes the function of sin-talk in terms of relationality.

> Speaking of God and the world (in its pathological aspects) together is the core function of the language of sin. For *sin is an essentially relational language*, speaking of pathology with an inbuilt and at least implicit reference to our relation to God.[257]

Similarly, Kilby defines sin as "something which deeply distorts and *damages the fabric of creation and its relation to God*."[258] This seems to suggest that the function of the doctrine is to articulate this distortion of human flourishing and relationality to God and creation (including others, humans and non-humans, and self). Therefore, sin can be understood in terms of belonging, as a pathology that affects belonging, and especially "creaturely integrity" and its proper orientation to God as defined in the first chapter.[259]

2.2. The contribution of liberationist theologians to understanding the relationship between belonging and sin

In the second half of the twentieth century, Latin American liberationist theologians such as Faus, Sobrino, and Ellacuria helped discover or recover the social or structural dimension of sin beyond the limitations of a primarily individualistic and moralistic

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[255] McFadyen gives the example of homophobia which he describes as a sin. See McFadyen, "Understanding Senyonjo's ministry", 19: "homophobia is one of the ways in which human beings misuse sin-talk in such a way that it becomes itself, not only sinful, but sin at its most dangerous. It is all the more dangerous, precisely because it is dressed up to look like its opposite."

[256] idem, 18. Here it would be perhaps appropriate to add that this is how Christians "should" talk about sin, rather than how, more often than not, we talk about sin.

[257] Ibid, 4. My emphasis.

[258] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 89. My emphasis.

[259] McFadyen speaks of "creaturely integrity" in McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 7. See Faus, "Sin", 199.

understanding of sin.[260] Their theological development of the doctrine of sin proceeds from a wider paradigmatic shift that seeks to attend to the experience of the poor as the hermeneutic and starting point of theologising *after Christ*. Although the official Catholic theology of sin remains largely shaped by John Paul II "individualistic and moralistic account" of sin,[261] a structural or social understanding of sin as articulated by Latin American liberationists first, and other liberationist theologians in their aftermath, shows another, more complex and insidious way in which sin and belonging overlap. Indeed, if liberationists are correct, it is not just that sin affects and distorts belonging as defined in Part 1, sin can (and often does) take the shape of belonging. I will explore this further in the next chapter where I will discuss at greater length what Alison calls the pathology of belonging.

This renewed attention to the structural dimension of sin has received some backlash, especially from magisterial Roman Catholic theology,[262] with fears that "personal sin [would be] swallowed up by the concept of structural sin".[263] More, Faus adds, some critics, among whom he names Balthasar and Ratzinger, "accuse[d] this language [of structural sin]of denaturing what is most profound in sin—that is the fruit of a personal and responsible freedom."[264] However, despite an emphasis on individual confession within the Catholic tradition, the traditional doctrine of original sin as formulated by Augustine, Aquinas, and Trent, seems quite foreign to a contemporary understanding of moral responsibility in terms of personal freedom and agency.[265] In fact, this is pointed out by Faus who remarks that if "the

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[260] Here I am indebted to the doctoral work of Charlotte Bray: Bray, *Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Constructive Development of the Idea of Social Sin within the Catholic Tradition*, Durham theses, Durham University, 2022 Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14701/.

[261] Idem, 73. For her more detailed critical engagement with John Paul II's theology of sin see especially chapter 1 22-72. Also see Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, and Thomas A. Shannon, 'Commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*On Social Concern*)', in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations,* ed. by Kenneth R. Himes, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005, pp. 415-435.

[262] More recent liberationist theologies, including queer and womanist theologies, have also pointed to defects in traditional Latin American and black theologies for focusing exclusively on one particular kind of poverty, such as economic poverty or race, to the expense of other intersectional realities such as sex and gender. See for instance Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Class, Sex and the Theologian: Reflections on the Liberationist Movement in Latin America", in *Another Possible World,* Ivan Petrella, Luiz Carlos Susin and Marcella Althaus-Reid (eds.), London: SCM Press, 2007, 29-41.

[263] Kilby, *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology*, 95.

[264] Faus, "Sin", 537.

[265] More on the question of personal responsibility in a moment when discussing original sin.

concept of structural sin goes against Christian teaching […] it would also not be Christian to speak of original sin given that this cannot be defined as the fruit of a free and responsible decision by each person".[266] Thus, Faus continues, "if it is legitimate to speak of original sin, it is also legitimate to speak of structural sin."[267]

A key issue raised by liberationist theologies of structural sin, and pointed to by their critics, is that of the relationship between structural and personal sin. Kilby describes their relationship as one of "irreducible opacity" due to the "deep *entanglement* of structural and personal sin".[268] Against critiques of structural sin, Kilby argues that "to take on the notion of structural sin in its complex interweaving with personal sin is to *deepen* the notion of personal responsibility before God."[269]

At any rate, for Kilby resolving the mystery of the relationship between personal and structural sin does not constitute a priority and even appears as a subterfuge and a distraction from taking responsibility for sin.[270] Moreover, Kilby speaks of an "*irreducible* opacity", rendering such task vain and arrogant. Building upon Sobrino, who writes that "the element of God in the definition necessarily invests the very reality of sin with a certain 'indefinition'",[271] Bray points out that

> sin is not something which humans can ever completely know, although it can be manifest in concrete, visible ways in history. This analogical understanding of all the language we use to describe sin suggests that a certain flexibility and humility is needed in our theological sin-talk[272]

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[266]Faus, "Sin", 537.

[267] Idem, 538.

[268] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 95.

[269] Idem, 97.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994, 88, in Bray, *Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life*, 83.

[272] Ibid.

Not only is this congruent with McFadyen's idea that what is distinctive about sin-talk is that it includes God, or rather it analyses human distortions in relation to God, but it also echoes the apophatic orientation of this thesis as outlined in chapter 4.[273]

The language of structural sin resonates with or mirrors the increasing awareness of and attention to systemic forms of oppression such as racism, classism, misogyny, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and ablism in the wider secular political arena.[274] Although not posed in terms of *sin* in contemporary secular debates, that is with no reference to God, all these issues raise questions about the nature and origin of evil, human responsibility, and agency. Both have in common to identify sin or evil not merely at the level of the individual agent but that of larger structures, groups, and communities, that is at the mezzo level, which is the level of belonging. This raises an interesting question for this thesis. How does belonging become sinful? McFadyen writes that

> Sin is then propagated through forms of sociality distorted through a history of sinning. The social processes, structures, and institutions through which we are called into full personhood, the very processes through which we receive the conditions for autonomous and therefore responsible action, are pathologically distorted.[275]

If this is true, then perhaps we can go as far as to say that what we will soon call postlapsarian belonging is (inevitably) one the vehicle for sin or is shaped by sin. I will explore this further in the next chapter when discussing Alison's idea of the pathology of belonging, but for now let us turn to the doctrine of original sin as the proper framework for thinking pathological belonging theologically.

3. <u>The doctrine of original sin as the proper framework for thinking pathological belonging theologically</u>

Perhaps even more morally "abhorrent",[276] or at least counter-intuitive to (our) contemporary imagination than sin, is the doctrine of original sin, which "occup[ies] an

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[273] I will come back to this toward the end of the chapter where I will discuss what Kilby calls the intelligibility of sin and evil.

[274] Not unlike structural sin, the turn to systemic or structural readings of injustice and oppression has received significant backlash.

[275] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 36.

[276] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 14.

especially significant position in the history of Christian doctrine in the West, in which it has secured dominance." [277] The doctrine is so central that it "permeates all discussions of sin in the Western traditions of Christianity."[278] It is impossible to mention sin, let alone original sin, without referring to "the great theologian of sin."[279] Indeed, Augustine's influence in shaping Western Christianity beyond confessional boundaries on matters of grace, nature and sin cannot be overstressed. It is important to notice that sin itself is not the starting point of Augustine's theology of sin. Instead, sin is an "ancillary doctrine".[280] What this means is that Augustine's doctrine of sin, and especially of original sin, does not primarily come from his own experience of sin, his and that of others, although he does spend some time discussing his own sinfulness in the *Confessions*. Instead, his understanding of sin is theocentric, emerging from his understanding of Christ and grace. If all need Christ's salvific grace, it must be that all need healing and are in some way bound to sin.

Before we can explain why the doctrine of original sin is so antithetical to the modern ethos, we need to articulate what McFadyen calls the "basic coordinates" of the doctrine, namely that "sin is contingent, radical, communicable and universal."[281] Augustine's understanding of sin needs to be understood in the context of his theory of evil as privation of the good. As a result, sin, both the source and particular kind of evil, must be contingent, that is to say, that sin was not willed by God, or necessary to God's divine plan. Instead, for Augustine the origin of sin, and thus evil, remains a mystery, and even an absurdity. This is not the case however of the pervasiveness of sin among humankind, which he understood as the cosmic effect or result of the primal sin of the first humans. The consequence of this event, which is original sin, is "*an underlying, systemic and structural distortion of the conditions of human sociality*, of the most basic patterns of disposition which constitute our personal identities, and which underlie our actions."[282] Thus understood, sin is "a necessary part of fallen

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[277] idem, 15.

[278] Ibid.

[279] Jesse Couhenhoven, "Augustine", in *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (eds.), London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 181-98, 181.

[280] James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 4.

[281] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 16.

[282] Idem, 7.

human life. Even *basic human goods, such as our social nature, have been perverted*."[283] Put in even stronger terms, this means that sin "is at bottom a matter of being rather than doing, such that we are not sinners because we commit sins; rather, we commit sins because we are already sinners."[284]

To understand further the implications of the traditional doctrine of original sin for this thesis, it is helpful to contrast it with the prevalent modern understanding of morality based on agency, responsibility, and accountability. McFadyen writes that "in chafing against the 'natural', rational assumptions of morality, the doctrine of original sin is set against an absolutely fundamental (indeed, constitutive) aspect of modernity", namely subjectivity and the idea that what characterises humankind is precisely freedom and (moral) agency.[285] In contrast, the doctrine of original sin offers a much more pessimistic vision of humankind, where humanity's ability to choose freely the good is impaired by a universally shared predicament for which each individual is not responsible and yet carries the guilt and effects. Original sin shows us another way in which sin can be understood in terms of belonging. If sin is that which distorts belonging, it also, paradoxically, relies upon belonging, since all share in the guilt of Adam and Eve. This is what is sometimes called the solidarity of humankind in sin. All belong together to the postlapsarian reality, and all postlapsarian forms of belonging are affected by the social pathology of sin.

In her conceptual exploration of suffering and sin already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Kilby writes that the dehumanising realities denounced by contemporary secular critical theory

> each name sin and suffering at what can be termed an intermediate level. They do of course affect individuals, but they operate collectively, beyond the individual, both in the wrongness done, the sinfulness, and in the wrongness suffered, the devastation they cause.

[283] Couhenhoven, "Augustine", 181-98. My emphasis.

[284] McFarland, "Original Sin", in Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (eds.), *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin,* London: T&T Clark, 2016, 303-18, 303.

[285] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 22.

Reflecting on the conceptuality of these intermediate-level realities she adds, "and yet they do not have the absolutely general reach of original sin as conceived in the tradition."[286] The doctrine of original sin, Kilby contends,

> *can* be one tool, one framework, for helping us think better, see better, even see the reasons for our own blindness, as well perhaps as helping us capture and give language to the recurring patterns that we encounter in this fundamentally good and grace-filled but so very afflicted world.[287]

It is worth noticing here that if Kilby acknowledges the potential of the traditional doctrine of original sin to engage with dehumanising realities at a deeper and more fundamental level, her claim remains modest and she does not make it a matter of necessity.[288] Here, I want to go further and say that reasserting the doctrine of original sin is essential to properly diagnosing the social pathologies that affect belonging and offering an appropriate diagnosis *and remedy*. To do so, I will briefly return to Srinivasan's project, using her as an archetype/example of the opposite.

To the negative characterisation of "fuckability" that was mentioned earlier in this chapter, Srinivasan also adds that fuckability does not refer to "some pre-political, *innate* desirability",[289] but instead to "desirability as constructed by our sexual politics".[290] It is not difficult here to see how her diagnosis is at odds with the traditional Western Christian understanding of original sin according to which the distortion of sin first takes place at the ontological level, and only then affects politics.[291]

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[286] Kilby, "Sin and Suffering Reconsidered", 33.

[287] Idem. My emphasis.

[288] Idem: "Of course, one does not *need* to invoke the language of sin and suffering or the conceptuality of original sin in order to point to a path beyond an individualistic, exculpating blindness to various kinds of systemic injustice."

[289] Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex*, 103.

[290] Ibid.

[291] Here it is important to acknowledge that the concept of original sin is estranged to the Easter Orthodox tradition and that even with the Western tradition, Catholics and Reformed disagree on the extent and the implication of this corruption, leading to different understandings of nature and grace. While the catholic tradition seeks to maintain the goodness of nature, the reformed tradition has opted for a more maximalist approach leading to the idea of total depravation. Of course, this led to a radically different understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, or rather of the work of grace upon nature. This is touched upon by Kilby in Kilby, "Catholicism, Protestantism and the Theological Location of Paradox: Nature, Grace, Sin", in *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda: Renewal and Reform Beyond Polemics*, Peter de Mey and Wim Francois (eds.), Leuven: Peeters, 2020. See also Alison, ""The Gay Thing"

In the face of systemic or structural injustice, human beings face a range of questions regarding their agency, its limitations, their responsibility as well as the appropriate responses required from them. While Srinivasan can identify the corruption of the socio-political structures that shape us "from birth",[292] what in theological terms we might want to call structural or social sin, she fails to identify the extent, or rather the depth of the distortion, at the level of human nature itself. Instead, the pathologies that she denounces reside merely at the *mezzo* level of political structures. As a result, she lacks an overarching framework to name at the macro and metaphysical level the shared 'congenital perversion' *inside us*,[293] of which the corruption that she identifies is the effect rather than the cause.[294] In other words, she correctly identifies the effects without naming, and taking the measure, of the cause. For her, while humans might find themselves entangled with/in structures of iniquity such as racism or patriarchy, corruption is fundamentally *external* to them. As such, they can free themselves of their own accord and with some work and discipline "quiet the voices that have spoken to us since birth".[295] Salvation is in their hands, and nowhere else. Emancipation is the radical decision and action of the self who is properly sovereign and whose agency is only constrained by the external forces of oppressive political powers and structures from which it *can* achieve emancipation, for this is, after all, Srinivasan's proposal.

Targeting some modern reconfigurations of sin that abandon the traditional doctrine of original sin and seek to espouse the modern understanding of the radically free subject, McFadyen remarks:

> in one way this is a radical view of sin. For if the causation of one's sins ultimately rests with one's own free decision alone, then one cannot advert to other individual,

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Following the Still Small Voice" in Gerard Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 50-62, 54-56.

[292] Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex*, 103.

[293] McFarland, "Original Sin', 308.

[294] Is the language of cause and effect appropriate here? See Augustine in Kilby in "Sin, Evil and the Problem of Intelligibility", in *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, 87: "There is a certain unintelligibility to evil associated with its status as an absence, a privation. Augustine makes the point with word plays and paradoxes: 'Let no one, therefore, look for an efficient cause of the evil will; for it is not efficient, but deficient, as the will itself is not an effecting of something, but a defect.' To try to understand the cause of the deficiency is like trying to 'to see darkness or hear silence'".

[295] Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex*, 103.

> supra-individual, or natural factors which condition and constrain decision. One is isolated with total and undivided responsibility for what one has done. […] We are all, then, in the position of Adam, having fallen of our own free choice. Each human life replicates the Biblical story. Consequently, a view which on some grounds might be termed liberal, often turns into a rather severe moralism in its entire elimination of excusing conditions and the correlate intensification of blame.[296]

Of course, McFadyen's remark does not strictly apply to Srinivasan for at least two obvious reasons. Firstly, here McFadyen discusses contemporary theological reappropriations of the doctrine of original sin, whereas Srinivasan doesn't speak of sin at all. Secondly, by identifying distorted political structures, Srinivasan acknowledges that the individual is somehow entangled in said structures and thus their agency is diminished. Although this limits the comparison, McFadyen's point still stands. By identifying the source of distortion outside of the individual and by proclaiming the possibility of emancipation by one's own means, that is without grace, Srinivasan ends up in a similar position to that denounced by McFadyen where the individual's involvement and responsibility is paradoxically heightened.

To conclude this chapter, I want to begin to reflect on the function of the doctrine of original sin for the theology of belonging christianly. Sin (and original sin) enable(s) us to name the dehumanising pathologies which afflict humankind in reference to God and in terms of belonging. The purpose of sin-talk as deployed in this chapter is to serve human flourishing. The doctrine of original sin achieves two aims. Firstly, it identifies the metaphysical context for both personal and structural sin. It affirms that all sins are the manifestation or effect of a universally shared ailment that deeply affects humankind and is itself the consequence of a primal sin (somewhat confusingly also called original). However, this primal/original sin has no primary cause since it is not willed by God. Therefore, its origin remains incomprehensible.[297] Thus, while the doctrines of sin, and especially that of original sin, enable us to grasp with greater depth and clarity the origin and ramification of sin and how it affects

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[296] McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, 33. Alison adds: "One of the geniuses of the Catholic doctrine of original sin is that rather than it being a form of general accusation of how wicked we are, it is in fact a recognition of how we are all in the same boat as regards wickedness, and that it is a really terrible thing to do to judge others, because in doing so we become blind to the way we are judging ourselves." Alison, "The Gay Thing", 60.

[297] Importantly, the incomprehensibility of the origin of sin is not the same as the incomprehensibility of God, or to use different words, the mystery of God is not (even analogically) the mystery of sin. More on this in the next chapter.

and takes the shape of belonging, it does *not* solve the problem of the unintelligibility of sin. If Kilby speaks of "an intensified problem of evil", we can speak of an intensified problem of sin that remains unintelligible, without origin,[298] and radically pervasive. This should lead theologians, and Christians more broadly, to greater humility and prudence when using sin-talk. This last point leads us to another function of the doctrine i.e., setting the parameters and limitations of the Christian response to sin. Indeed, sin's unintelligibility is threefold.

We have already mentioned that sin remains a mystery because sin-talk is part of God-talk and its "origin" remains a mystery. However, there is another way in which sin is unintelligible, sin is unintelligible to the sinner. Linked to Srinivasan's failure to identify original sin as the radical and universal condition of postlapsarian humankind is a misconceived trust in the ability of the self to look critically at itself and its own involvement in the structures from which it seeks to free itself as if it existed independently from them. This contrasts with Srinivasan's journey of emancipation, where change of heart is not initiated by and *does not* require a radically external, unaffected mediator. One may still need the eye-opening and disruptive presence and testimony of challenging voices that are not implicated, or less implicated, in the same structures, but no *radically* different encounter is required. Humans can, or so it seems, attend to the real faithfully and of their own accord, that is without the need of God's grace.

In contrast, in Christianese, social pathologies or distortions are spoken of in sin-talk, and metanoia is the fruit of God's transformative grace, inspired by the example of Christ, and vivified by the breath of the Spirit. If it is to speak Christianese properly, a theology of sin cannot stand independently or prior to the experience of God in our midst.[299] Indeed, the unintelligibility of the sinner requires the revelatory and transformative presence of the radically external mediator *par excellence*—God in our midst. In the next chapter, engaging with Alison's reconfiguration of the theologies of sin and atonement, we will see that this is precisely the purpose of atonement, which will lead us to speak of belonging christianly as the eschatological journey beyond postlapsarian belonging into post-atonement belonging.

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[298] By this, I mean that the origin of evil and sin is not in God, who is the origin of all things, and that therefore properly speaking sin and evil do not have an origin. The origin of sin, by which we mean how it came to be, remains a mystery. Here even the use of "be" is problematic since sin and evil do not have being and are only parasitic.

[299] This is further explored in the next chapter. Here I want to suggest an analogy with an error of syntax or grammar, where a complement was used as the subject and/or verb in the sentence.

Chapter 6:

(Re)situating sin within the Christian story: A journey from belonging to the dead to belonging to the Living

The present chapter will seek to further refine our understanding of sin already begun in the previous chapter and further clarify its place within the Christian story and vision. To do so I will primarily engage with the work of James Alison. Engagement with Alison will serve a twofold purpose. First, it will serve to maintain the importance of the doctrine of sin to articulate and respond adequately and theologically to the distortion of reality and belonging that it seeks to name. Alison's reconfiguration of the theologies of sin and atonement will allow us to hold to that belief/instinct while at the same time asserting that the doctrine of original sin is *only* an ancillary doctrine that does not belong at the centre of the Christian story. The second purpose of my engagement with Alison will be that through his reconfiguration of the aforementioned doctrines, new room is created for thinking belonging christianly beyond our numb imaginations and shame.

1. <u>(Briefly) introducing James Alison and René Girard:</u>

Prior to beginning to dive into Alison's refreshing take on belonging, atonement, and sin, it is necessary to briefly sketch Alison's distinctive theological landscape. Jason A. Fout succinctly and effectively introduces Alison as

> a Roman Catholic priest and theologian known primarily for two preoccupations. First, he appropriates theologically the insights of René Girard on violence and mimetic rivalry, making them available to a broader, non-specialist audience. Second, he is gay and has worked for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in Catholicism, a move which has been rather costly for him.[300]

Alison was raised in a conservative upper-middle-class English Evangelical Protestant household. He converted to Catholicism in his early twenties, before encountering the thought of René Girard. Michael Kirwan writes that Alison "owes an immense personal and intellectual

[300] Jason A. Fout, "Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in", *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, 15:(4), 2008, 549.

debt to Girard who is prominent in all his own writings."[301] Reflecting on this intellectual and visceral encounter with Girard, Alison writes:

> I found myself being read like an open book, feeling like the woman at the well of Samaria, as she returned to her compatriots to say: "Come and meet someone who has told me everything I ever did." […] I am still struggling to put into words the fecundity of what continues to be a completely unexpected and extraordinary access to Christ that is absolutely concentric with, and illuminating of, the central tenets of the Catholic faith.[302]

It is therefore necessary to briefly introduce Girard too. René Girard was a prolific polymath writer who started his career as a literary critic in France and became internationally renowned for two linked concepts, mimetic desire and the victimage mechanism.[303] From reading the *a priori* unrelated works of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and Proust, as well as the great myths of the ancient world, Girard drew attention to certain patterns hidden underneath the surface or between the lines which, he asserted, link human desire and the origins of culture, as well as the great mythic texts and historical instances of violence. Sacrifice,[304] or sacred violence,[305] represents the origin of all social institutions.

According to Girard's mimetic theory, and in contrast with what he calls the romantic myth of the modern period, humans exist as being-in-relation for which he coined the term "interdividuality".[306] From the very beginning, they are shaped into (social) existence by desire, and the shape that this desire takes is imitation. Imitation is therefore crucial to the process of

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[301] Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, Lanham, Chicago, New York, Toronto, and Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 115.

[302] James Alison, "Girard's Breakthrough," *The Tablet* (June 29, 1996): 848–9. See Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, 115.

[303] For a helpful introduction to Girard see again Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*. See also Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*. London: T&T Clark, 2009. I am grateful to Liam Kelly for his kind rereading of this succinct presentation of Girard and for suggesting several useful additions.

[304] Girard's understanding of sacrifice evolved through time. See Alison, "Eucharist and Sacrifice: The Transformation of the Meaning of Sacrifice Through Revelation" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (eds.), Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, 201-7.

[305] By sacred, Girard means all acts of generative violence which become institutionalised as "sacrifice". Sacred produces a false transcendence and is distinct from what we may call "holy" which for Girard is fundamentally non-violent.

[306] See Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stéphane Bank and Michael Metteer, Stanford University Press, 1987.

hominisation. Because mimetic desire tends towards rivalry and conflict, Girard posits a catastrophic event, a foundational act of violence/murder as the key to our origins as social beings. The (distorted) mimetic structure of human desire which produces society, also puts that very society in danger. With imitation comes rivalry, tending always towards conflicts that are temporarily resolved through a victimage or scapegoat mechanism. All are reconciled against – and therefore through – the scapegoat who is mistakenly blamed for the rivalries, tensions, and conflicts that threaten to destroy the group. The scapegoat is also credited for the sudden unanimity that delivers the group from destruction (generative violence). This, Girard asserts controversially, is a universal feature of humankind. Also controversially, his engagement with biblical texts led him to see a distinctive pattern slowly emerging throughout the Old Testament and culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, leading to the subversion of the notion of the "sacred" and sacrifice. For Girard, the Gospels expose the victimage mechanism as ungodly, while God is discovered and affirmed as fundamentally and uncompromisingly non-violent.

In the first book-length systematic study of Alison's theology, John P. Edwards, whose focus is on Alison's distinctive methodology, writes that

> Alison sees in Girard's insights the possibility of creatively reworking Christian themes such as creation and salvation, eschatology, natural law, sin and forgiveness, and religious integrity, in a way that is Catholic and liberating"[307]

Edwards also adds that

> Alison's theological method is inductive in this sense because it identifies the activity of theological reflection among those actions and practices that "stretch" the subject out of an old form of belonging and into a new one.[308]

Building on Girard's work, Alison offers creative and compelling accounts of the Cross, atonement, sin, sacrifice, the Eucharist, the church, but also of the dangers of clericalism, victimhood, and what it means to be queer and Catholic.[309]

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[307] John P. Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology: Conversion, Theological Reflection, and Induction,* London: T&T Clark, *2020, 9*.

[308] Ibid.

[309] What follows is a non-exhaustive and purely informative shortlist on some of these themes. On sin see Alison, James, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroads, 1998. On the notion of sacrifice and the eucharist as sacrifice see: Alison, "Eucharist and Sacrifice: The Transformation of the Meaning of Sacrifice Through Revelation" in James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, 201-7.On

2. The "significance" of sin

In the previous chapter, I discussed the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for belonging christianly. In the previous section, I argued about the significance of sin-talk for a theology of belonging christianly. I also claimed that in Christianese, sin-talk and God-talk are connected. Here I want to say a bit more about this relationship and about how these two forms of speech and the realities they describe are significant for belonging christianly. To this end, I will use an analogy between the way in which the doctrines of the Trinity and sin on the one hand, and the ways in which God and evil can be both called mystery on the other hand. I will then engage with Alison who calls sin an "ancillary doctrine" that only becomes available through and in the light of Christ.

Kilby suggests that the difference between the two acceptations of the word mystery can be better understood by contrasting the mathematical concepts of positive infinity and zero (rather than negative infinity). Thus, she writes that "we cannot understand the [positive infinity] because there is too much meaning, and the [zero] because there is too little?"[310] Although Kilby is not entirely satisfied with the analogy,[311] it is useful to the extent that it suggests that God's and evil's respective mysteriousness can be understood in ontological and epistemological terms, that is in terms of God's superabundant Being and Meaning, and evil's lack of either. Similarly, I want to suggest that neither the Trinity's nor sin's significance for belonging christianly can be understood as "another extra thing" added on top of the *pre-existing* reality of belonging. Rather, as seen in Part 1, it is the Triune God who makes

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the church and on clericalism see "The Portal and the Half-Way House: Spacious Imagination and aristocratic belonging" in *Jesus, the Forgiving Victim*, Session 10; DOERS Publishing, LLC, 2013 and "Clericalism and the Violent Sacred: dipping a Girardian toe in troubled waters", Presentation for a conference on "Clericalism" at the Von Hügel Institute, Cambridge University, 18th -20th September 2019. Accessible on Alison's website: https://jamesalison.com/clericalism-and-the-violent-sacred/ (last accessed on 7 September 2023). On what it means to be gay and Catholic and on victimhood see Alison, 'Is it Ethical to be Catholic? – Queer Perspectives', Presentation given in in Most Holy Redeemer Parish Church, San Francisco, 12 February 2006, accessible on Alison's website:https://jamesalison.com/is-it-ethical-to-be-catholic/ (last accessed on 7 September 2023); *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001; *On Being Liked*, Herder & Herder, 2004; and "Like being dragged through a bush backwards: Hints of the Shape of Conversions's Adventure", talk given at Charles Stuart University, Canberra, 14th September 2010.

[310] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 83.

[311] Idem. She then points out (again) the importance of acknowledging the limits of theology.

theocentric belonging possible. Sin, on the other hand, is not adding anything to belonging because ontologically sin is *nothing at all*. On the contrary, sin is parasitic and pathological. Thus, sin's significance for belonging is that of a disease or parasite that diminishes or weakens the body of its host.

However, another way in which the doctrine of sin and the reality it describes, that is sin itself, are significant for a theology of belonging christianly, is that if such a theology is to speak meaningfully in Christian terms about (*and be faithful to*) the real, it needs to attend to the distorting force of sin that disrupts, weakens, and deform belonging while refusing to put sin at the centre of the theology. To do so, we need to (re)consider the appropriate place of sin within the Christian drama and the relationship between sin and belonging in the Incarnation and salvation. That is to say, that to start thinking about what an appropriate theological response is to sin and postlapsarian belonging, we need to look at God's own response to sin in Christ.

At the beginning of his provocative and rich study on the doctrine of original sin, James Alison denounces a widespread and powerful (mis)understanding of sin within the Christian tradition that locates sin at the centre:

> the controlling factor in the story of salvation is the sin and what Christ did fits in with that, just as the controlling factor on your trip to the hardware store is the size of the frame, and the door fits in with that.[312]

Alison's attempt to resituate sin within the Christian story is the starting point of his own systematic theology of original sin, which he describes as a "shift in the story line".[313] That is to say that this recalibration of the doctrine does not constitute a dismissal or a relegation of the doctrine to a mere option or an antique. Indeed, on the very first page of *The Joy of Being Wrong*, Alison resists the idea that "sin is a left-over from the palaeontology of yesteryear."[314]

Following in Alison's steps, this thesis seeks to articulate a Christocentric theology, that is a theology where *Christ*, rather than sin, is the controlling factor. As Rogers points out,

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[312] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 7.

[313] Ibid.

[314] Idem, 1.

"theology knows a protology before sin and an eschatology after it, the sin-story receives a frame and cannot stand in for the whole."[315] The doctrine of sin "is an ancillary doctrine which is comprehensible only as part of the installation among us of Christ's salvation".[316] This means that only Christ's presence is radically revelatory. Only such a disruptive presence has the revelatory power to unmask the distortions of pathological forms of belonging to which we are, of ourselves, largely ignorant.[317]

Thinking about the relationship between sin and belonging in the light of the Incarnation and salvation brings us back to the question of the purpose or *primary* function of the Incarnation which I have already treated in Part 1 in which I departed from the powerful mainstream, but not unique, Western Christian tradition that sees atonement, understood as payment of a debt or penal substitution, as the fundamental purpose of the Incarnation.[318] Instead, I sought to articulate a supralapsarian understanding of the incarnation and of salvation as Participation in the divine life as guiding principles of this thesis, offering an expansive, properly theocentric, "over the top" and "deep" understanding of belonging. As this chapter and indeed the rest of the thesis will explore postlapsarian or pathological forms of belonging and the way they relate to theocentric belonging, I shall recall and expand on some of the things already discussed in Part 1 and see how it affects our understanding of sin, and in time, of belonging christianly understood as the eschatological journey of transition or conversion from postlapsarian and pathological forms of belonging into post-atonement and theocentric belonging. Even as they contradict theocentric belonging, pathological forms of belonging *cannot* completely suppress theocentric belonging,[319] for the latter is rooted in or flows from

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[315] Eugene Rogers Jr, *Blood Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 5.

[316] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 4.

[317] One practical and significant example of this ignorance will be explored in chapter 10 with the problem raised by whiteness.

[318] The fact that here atonement is understood as repayment for sin is of the utmost importance. In the next section, we will see how Alison is reconstructing atonement in such a way that it becomes possible to reaffirm the link between atonement and the incarnation without running into the sort of problems described here and in the previous chapter.

[319] As a result, terms such as transition and creation, from one state into another, are not entirely satisfactory. Another useful image is that of the return from exile, although it is also unsatisfactory as it implies a return to a previous state, rather than an eschatological journey.

a non-negotiable love, as unavoidable as a blood relationship, and so by a love which we can neither secure nor avoid: a love in the face of which our manoeuvring and bargaining are irrelevances. [320]

The misconstruction of sin denounced by Alison seems to find its most solemn articulation in the *Exultet*, the prayer of the Easter proclamation, which presents the Incarnation as God's undeserved, unexpected, and superabundant response to sin. Here sin is described as a necessity and a happy fault:

> O *truly necessary sin* of Adam,
> destroyed completely by the Death of Christ!
> O *happy fault*
> that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!

Similarly, when they sing the famous hymn "A debt to Mercy Alone", Christians proclaim that:

> The terrors of law and of God
> With me can have nothing to do;
> My Saviour's obedience and blood
> Hide all my transgressions from view*' [321]*

It is worth noticing that these two quotes come from the liturgy itself and a popular hymn. As such they have contributed to shaping the religious imagination of Christians, their understanding of God, and Christ, the Incarnate Word, *and God's response to sin*. In the first quote, sin, this so-called Felix Culpa,[322] is the "controlling factor in the story of salvation".[323] The Incarnation becomes the response, but also the consequence of sin. In theological terms, Christ's predestination is not absolute but conditional to human sin. Thus understood, the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Christian story are not Christocentric but anthropocentric and sin-centric, and God's greatest gift to creation is a reactionary gift, prompted by human mischief and cosmic disorder, *not* God's loving primordial intent to glorify or deify God's

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[320] Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel, The Theology of Rowan Williams*, London: SCM, 2004, 16.

[321] Augustus Montague Toplady, "A debtor to Mercy Alone", https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/292. (last accessed on 7 September 2023).

[322] The issue is not with "Felix Culpa" as such, as long as it means rejoicing and being grateful that God's superabundant love could not be stopped even by sin and death. It becomes problematic, however, when it gives a certain *gravitas* and density to sin. See Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa" in, *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, Peter van Inwagen (ed.), Eerdmanns, 2004, 1-25.

[323] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 7.

creation. In the words of McCord Adams already quoted in the previous chapter, we may want to add:

> How metaphysically preposterous [we may want to add presumptuous] to suppose that creatable substance natures acquire their most dignifying capacity for union with God as a consequence of Adam's fall [the so-called Felix culpa].[324]

In the second quote, the last two verses present Christ's coming, and more specifically his Passion, as a work of deception, arguably hiding our transgressions from a terrifying God whose description recalls that of an abusive power master. If this picture of God were correct, then salvation would consist in salvation from God, from whom Christ would rescue sinners, rather than salvation for, toward, or in God. As we will now see, Alison's understanding of atonement stands in sharp contrast with these "terrors of law and of God", as well as deceptive forms of atonement that seem to trick God into forgiving sinful humankind. In fact, according to Alison, Christ does precisely the opposite. Far from hiding our transactions from God's view, Christ's sacrifice discloses them fully to ourselves. Far from appeasing God's wrath, it is human's wrath that Christ is extinguishing on the cross. Christ's Passion is not transactional or duplicitous, it is revelatory, revealing to us who we are—loved sinners invited to Belong.

3. How atonement helps us define belonging christianly

3.1. From payment to God's unfathomable generosity and solidarity

From early on, Christians have attempted to make sense of the death of the Messiah, that is to understand the meaning of the Cross and the role Christ's sacrifice and death play(ed) in the central act of the unfolding drama of salvation.[325] Eleonore Stump writes that

> The doctrine that Christ has saved human beings from their sins, with all that salvation entails, is the distinctive doctrine of Christianity. Over the course of many centuries of reflection on the doctrine, highly diverse understandings have been proposed, many of which have also raised strong positive or negative emotions in those who have contemplated them.[326]

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[324] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 176 in Ronald Cole-Turner, "Incarnation Deep and Wide: A Response to Niels Gregersen", *Theology and Science,* 11 (4), 2013, 424-35, 433.

[325] Here we may want to ask if the Cross is indeed the central act of the unfolding drama of salvation, or if it might be better understood as its acme or paroxysm, *provided* it is understood in the light of the resurrection.

[326] Eleonore Stump, "*Atonement*: an overview", *Religious Studies* 57, 2021, 136.

It would take us beyond the purpose of this chapter to look in great detail at the various theories of atonement that the Western Christian tradition has articulated.[327] Yet, a disturbing theme in the most popular accounts of atonement is redemptive violence. Christ is the two-fold victim of human *and* divine violence. Human violence and sin therefore seem to become the instrument of that divine violence, which is either the fruit of divine justice or wrath. Here again, Christ does not just save humans from sin, but also from God's wrath and justice. Christ, so it seems, is the last and only chance for sinful humans of "befriending a vengeful God".[328]

However, "while it is a matter of faith that Christ worked our salvation, there is no fixed understanding of *how* he worked our salvation".[329] There are other ways of thinking about this *how*, what Christianese calls atonement.[330] In *Blood Theology,* Gene Rogers envisions atonement as solidarity:[331] "Atonement is not only the cure for sin. It is first of all solidarity in and companionship in growth."[332] Aside from the ethical issues raised by some of the classical atonement theories, Rogers points to the cosmic limitations of an understanding of atonement exclusively or even primarily focused on sin and debt.[333] This understanding of atonement as solidarity offers a threefold opportunity for thinking. As shown by Dan Horan, solidarity requires belonging. Understanding atonement as solidarity or as generating solidarity means understanding atonement as generating a new kind of belonging, what we can call post-atonement belonging.[334] Secondly, this also opens the possibility of understanding atonement

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[327] For an overview see Ben Pugh *Atonement theories: A way through the maze*. London: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, 159.

[328] Alison, "Befriending a Vengeful God", Interview on atonement for the Australian broadcaster RN, 24 March 2005. For the transcript see Alison's website: https://jamesalison.com/befriending-a-vengeful-god/ (last accessed on 7 September 2023).

[329] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 1.

[330] For instance, Stump claims to offer a "relatively novel interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement" rejecting Anselmian satisfaction theory and rooted in Aquinas instead. Stump, "*Atonement*: an overview",136.

[331] Earlier I suggested that solidarity requires belonging. If this is true, and if atonement can and perhaps ought to be understood as generating solidarity, then atonement generates belonging.

[332] Rogers, *Blood Theology*, 143.

[333] I already discussed this in the first chapter when I made the case for a supralapsarian understanding of the Incarnation.

[334] This post-atonement belonging flows directly from Christ and is in fact what I called theocentric belonging in Part 1. This means that we might be able to speak of a third pillar of theocentric belonging after creation and incarnation—atonement.

in cosmic terms, as God-Christ standing in solidarity with the whole creation.[335] Finally, it enables us to speak of atonement and redemption in non-violent terms, as God's radical refusal to involve God-self in human violence and standing in solidarity amidst all the victims of violence.

This opportunity, especially the last part, is seized by Alison, in whom we find "a theological imagination powerful enough to reawaken and invigorate many in our present age who have grown weary of or indifferent to the Christian faith".[336] Alison's work can also help us attend to the pathologies of some Christian doctrines, which in their popular or current instantiation, no longer function as the signposts to the God who frees the captives, exalts the lowly, cures the sick, forgives the sinners and brings back the dead to life.[337] Finally, Alison's theology of atonement and sin, which will be soon articulated further, helps us discover belonging beyond sacrifice, what we can perhaps call post-sacrificial belonging, or again post-atonement belonging, which for Alison means belonging beyond death. Alison's theology enables us to account for the centrality of the Cross in our theology of belonging christianly while at the same time resisting the dangerous and even macabre temptation of sacralising the Cross, that is of making it a sacred space and a sacred event for the wrong *reasons*.[338]

3.2. <u>The pathology of postlapsarian belonging:</u>

To sum up and make more explicit the link with belonging, we can say that for Girard and Alison, desire emerges from within belonging, and that rivalry threatens and distorts belonging while the victimage mechanism constitutes an attempt at preserving or restoring belonging. In a true sense, we can therefore speak of sacrificial and/or sacred belonging. Although it is not possible to find one particular book in Alison's work dedicated to belonging, the question of belonging is a recurring, indeed a central theme throughout his work.

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[335] I already touched upon this in chapter 3 with the ideas of kinship, deep incarnation, and deep belonging.

[336] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology,* 6.

[337] Arguably his understanding of atonement remains anthropocentric, or at least primarily concerned with humans but since the purpose of atonement is "to learn to inhabit creation in its fulness", this does not mean that it cannot be expanded, although this will not be explored in this thesis.

[338] See Alison, *On Being Liked*, 3. This will become clearer as we explore his theology of atonement.

In an address to the Root and Branch Synod,[339] Alison referred to "the pathology of belonging"'.[340] Although Alison's reflection started from or was prompted by a reflection on ecclesial belonging, the pathology to which Alison referred goes way beyond the church, to the very fabric of postlapsarian humankind, and results in the desperate, broken, sometimes tragic, often misguided, attempt to find meaning, identity, relationship, *security*, self-worth, and *home*. With the idea of "the pathology of belonging", Alison invites us to engage in a fruitful reflection on the fruit*less*ness of our postlapsarian modes of being and belonging.

In his address, Alison explores the relationship between what he calls "strong belonging", risk, and truth. Strong belonging is characterised by a logic of survival rooted in evolution, a sense of imminent threat, risk, or danger, ultimately a fear of loss and death, both socially and biologically, and the necessity to secure or preserve one's place within the group, one's "belongingness", sometimes to the cost of truth, personal integrity and even life.[341] As a result, it is deeply subjective, rather than objective, and unstable rather than stable.[342] It is no wonder therefore that defensiveness and restlessness are the two driving forces of strong belonging. To take it seriously, it is however important to acknowledge that strong belonging *does* provide some kind of short-term security. Alison also speaks of "*the sense* of belonging",[343] for belonging as it is commonly experienced is based on the perception of the self through others. Following the same logic of survival, the group builds what Alison calls

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[339] A group working for reform and inclusivity in the Catholic Church. See their presentation on their website: https://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/about-us (last accessed on 7 September 2023).

[340] Alison borrows the phrase from a friend and does not provide a systematic account for it. James Alison, "Belonging and Being Church: What's Catholicism all about?" Presentation for Root & Branch Synod, 10 September 2021. See Alison's website for the recorded presentation: http://jamesalison.com/belonging-and-being-church/?fbclid=IwAR0lBB4AYyo2JFAaLM-jEXilKxT-yFQ_ruTxkoz_Ug5jVX1ZW6Hpm4-ftDg. (Last accessed 21st September 2023).

[341] I will come back to this in the next chapter.

[342] Not all forms of belonging enjoy the same (in)stability. Certain bounds may seem and indeed be more stable. One quickly thinks of family bonds, especially those between parents and children, or between spouses, or siblings. Yet even those are not immune to instability and distortions as shown by the frequency of dysfunctional families. Crucially family and the bonds and solidarity it provides can easily become a tacit *exclusive* commitment. Other criteria can seem objective or stable, such as ethnicity, place of birth, blood, language, and maybe even religion, but even those are not completely immune to exclusion. Moreover, they tend to foster strong belonging, that is build a divide between a "us" and a "them".

[343] Alison, "Belonging and Being Church". My emphasis.

'the sense of shared grievance against […] "another"'.[344] In doing so, it fulfils 'the necessity to maintain or even strengthen the bonds of belonging in creating cultures of solidarity' *and exclusion.*[345]

To sum up these two points, strong belonging is pretty weak and frequently under threat. As a result, in periods of perceived or real crisis, one's allegiance to the group needs reassertion or authentication. What matters the most, and therefore needs to be preserved *at all* costs, which means that all threats or risks must be eradicated, is *belonging*. Strong belonging is therefore a dangerous and blinding force that trumps reality:

> The sense of belonging that comes along with that has always been stronger than truth. Contrary to what our individualism and our rationalism suppose, it is our relationality that determines our rationality, not the other way around. It is not that we understand first and then decide to belong. Rather, our form of belonging determines what we understand to be true. Whether facts are "fake news" or not depends not on logic, but on whether they share your belonging.[346]

Having looked at what Alison calls the pathology of strong belonging, I now wish to turn to his theology of atonement which will help us discover another, radical, weaker (but in fact stronger) and non-pathological mode of belonging which I will call belonging christianly.

4. Undergoing atonement

Alison rightly points out that the "*how*" of atonement matters. Indeed, I will argue that his theology of atonement opens the possibility to think belonging christianly as a radically new non-violent, non-sacred, non-rivalrous, non-coercive, non-exclusive, and non-death-fearing way.[347]Atonement and its implications for thinking christianly is an ongoing theme in

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[344] Ibid. This is also at work in groups whose aim is precisely to be inclusive but who still need a non-inclusive other. See Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others", *Theology & Sexuality*, 21(1), 1-19.

[345] Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele, and Steven Windisch, "Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists", *American Sociological Review* 82(6), 2017, 1167-1187, 1174. From now on referred as Simi et al.

[346] Alison, "Belonging and Being Church".

[347] A brief and helpful introduction to the problem of atonement theories and articulation of Alison's theology of atonement can be found in Alison, *On Being Liked* , chapters 2, 3, and 4. In what follows, I primarily rely on Alison, "An Atonement Update". *Australian eJournal of Theology* 8, October 2006, 1-11. An earlier version of this paper was given under the title "Atonement and Redemption: A Theology of Resurrection" at the Australian Catholic University, Brisbane in 2004. It also appears in this present

Alison's thought.[348] Rereading the Biblical tradition through a Girardian lens, Alison seeks to offer "a richer and deeper understanding of the atonement" against "the substitutionary theory of atonement" which he describes as follows:

> God created the universe, including humanity, and it was good. Then somehow or other humankind fell. This fall was a sin against God's infinite goodness mercy and justice. So there was a problem. Humans could not off our own bat restore the order which had been disordered, let alone make up for having dishonoured God's infinite goodness. No finite making-up could make up for an offence with infinite ramifications. God would have been perfectly within his rights to have destroyed the whole of humanity. But God was merciful as well as being just, so he pondered what to do to sort out the mess. Could he simply have let the matter lie in his infinite mercy? Well, maybe he would have liked to, but he was beholden to his infinite justice as well. Only an infinite payment would do; something that humans couldn't come up with; but God could. And yet the payment had to be from the human side, or else it wouldn't be a real payment for the outrage to be appeased. So God came up with the idea of sending his Son into the world as a human, so that his Son could pay the price as a human, which, since he was also God, would be infinite and thus would effect the necessary satisfaction. Thus, the whole sorry saga could be brought to a convenient close. Those humans who agreed to cover over their sins by holding on to, or being covered by, the precious blood of the Saviour whom the Father has sacrificed to himself would be saved from their sins and given the Holy Spirit by which they would be able to behave according to the original order of creation. In this way, when they died, they at least would be able to inherit heaven, which had been the original plan all along, before the fall had mucked everything up.[349]

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state in Alison, *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break*, Continuum, 2006. In what follows, I quote from the journal version.

[348] For recent examples, see Alison, "Belonging and being church"; "Synodality and Truthfulness: The workings of a sideway God", in the "What Next?" series for Aquinas Center, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA given on 24 August 2022, https://jamesalison.com/synodality-and-truthfulness/ (last accessed on 8 September 2023); "James Alison On Christianity" in The Dish Catch with Andrew Sullivan, 17 March 2023, https://andrewsullivan.substack.com/p/james-alison-on-christianity (last accessed on 8 September 2023). At my invitation Alison also gave a talk at Durham University in January 2023 under the title "Are Christian discussions of LGBT issues a proxy for other theological conflicts" where he argued that issues of atonement are often central yet unnamed in Christian debates on homosexuality. For a way in which conservative Evangelicals relate homosexuality and atonement see Rogers, *Blood Theology,* 117-19.

[349] Alison, "An Atonement Update", 2.

Although Alison's sketching of penal substitution may not do full justice to the complexity, nuances, sophistication, and richness of the various theories of atonement that have emerged within Western Christianity, his aim lies elsewhere. Indeed, it is not to provide an exhaustive and rigorous academic analysis of the various theories of atonement of the like of Anselm or Calvin,[350] but instead to capture "the most common story underlying our salvation",[351] its distinctive ambiance and intoxicating atmosphere are all too familiar to many Christians.[352] That is to say that he intends to sketch a very powerful and popular account of atonement that has been shaping (and distorting) Christian imagination and leading to a deep misapprehension of what atonement is.[353]

Alison is quite clear that conceiving of atonement as a theory is part of the problem. Thus, he writes that "it's very odd indeed to have a theory about something which is a liturgical act."[354] Atonement is not something external to be conceived or thought of by Christian theologians in ever more sophisticated and detached terms, often disconnected from the gruesome reality it talks about. Discussing the Girardian contribution to the theology of atonement and more specifically its challenge to atonement *theories*, Ben Pugh writes:

> A case in point has been the way atonement theory by its very nature is "theory." It abstracts from the horrific violence of the trials and crucifixion of Jesus a transcendent divine plan and purpose. In the end, the transcendent divine purpose receives so much priority that we fail to connect it back again to the events themselves. The result is that we become blind to the obvious. It is obvious, for instance, to an outsider that penal substitution impugns God as sadistic and demanding, while an insider to the notion has got so caught up with the abstractions of exchange between debts and penalties and immutable divine justice that they cannot see how unattractive the thing is that they

[350] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 18.

[351] Idem, 17.

[352] This is perhaps truer, or at least more obvious among Christians of the Reformed tradition, especially Evangelicals. Alison was raised an Evangelical.

[353] An account that Eleonore Stump describes, perhaps condescendingly, as "the version which tends to be promulgated by unreflective believers who are more to be admired for devotion than for philosophical expertise." Stump, *Aquinas*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, 427. For her own similar sketching of the narrative see ibid.

[354] Alison, "Befriending a Vengeful God". Also see Alison, "An Atonement Update", 8.

> are so ardently defending. Girardian views refuse to let us move too quickly beyond the events surrounding the crucifixion itself[355]

This, however, is not the main reason why Alison is so wary of theory. Atonement is not something external to be conceived or thought of by Christian theologians, but "something that we undergo over time as part of a benign divine initiative towards us."[356]

Seeking to recover the liturgical (undergone) root of atonement, Alison endeavours to describe the strange rite of atonement in the First Temple in which the high priest, after a purification rite, would penetrate the Holy of Holies and would come out to purify the temple with the blood of a sacrificed goat. From this fascinating picture, it emerges that "even at that time it was understood that [atonement] was not about humans trying desperately to satisfy God, but God taking the initiative of breaking through towards us. In other words, atonement was something of which we were the beneficiaries."[357] This results in a twofold subversion of the sacrificial system from what Alison calls "the Aztec or pagan imagination".[358]

Firstly, the subversion is liturgical. While the pagan economy of sacrifice consists of sacrificing something (or someone) on one's behalf to obtain something in return, here the forgiveness of sins,[359] in the Temple's economy, the high priest was acting "in the person of Yahweh", and it was the Lord's blood that was being sprinkled in a divine movement to set people free.[360] In other words, atonement is not something done to an ominous God, but something a benevolent God does to us. The second subversion is ethical. The "ethical consequences" of this subversive understanding of the atonement are fully and definitively developed in Christ's Passion,[361] understood as Jesus' enactment and subversion of the old liturgy which becomes "an extraordinary *anthropological* breakthrough" by which Jesus, far from hiding away our sin, reveals to us the fullness and the extent of our sin, overcomes it, *and*

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[355] Ben Pugh, *Atonement theories*, 159.

[356] Alison, "An Atonement Update", 4.

[357] Ibid.

[358] Idem, 1 and 8.

[359] Idem, 3.

[360] Ibid.

[361] Idem, 9.

forgives it. Audre Lorde asked the important question "How do we address our desires without fear [..] of the distortions we may find within ourselves?"[362] It seems that for Alison, the answer to that question is Christ, whom he calls "the Forgiving Victim".

Alison's understanding of atonement as non-violent and revelatory,[363] as liberation, solidarity, and perhaps above all as a gift, and the "opening up of creation" to the God-given fullness of life has profound and outstanding consequences for our understanding of sin and belonging christianly. Thus, Alison gives a powerful yet unusual definition of sin:

> in this picture "sin", rather than being a block that has to be dealt with, is discovered in its being forgiven. The definition of sin becomes *that which can be forgiven*.[364]

This "picture" also has profound and outstanding implications for atonement understood as a restoration of and an invitation to the fullness of belonging as described in Part 1. It fills us with creativity, as we only begin to envision belonging christianly, beyond mere human imagination, as a radically new *fraternal*,[365] non-violent, non-sacred, non-rivalrous, non-coercive, non-exclusive, and non-death fearing way to belong, that is as the practice of "learn[ing] to inhabit creation with fullness".[366] Concluding his reflection on atonement Alison writes,

> That is the really difficult thing for us to imagine. We can imagine retaliation, we can imagine protection; but we find it awfully difficult to imagine someone we despised, and were awfully glad not to be like – whom we would rather cast out so as to keep ourselves going – we find it awfully difficult to imagine that person generously irrupting into our midst so as to set us free to enable something quite new to open up for us. But being empowered to imagine all that generosity is what atonement is all about; and that is what we are asked to live liturgically as Christians.[367]

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[362] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider*, Berkeley CA: Crossing Press, 1984, 53-9, 57-8.

[363] Alison does not neglect or deny the violence of the Cross. On the contrary, he reveals it but does not assign it a redemptive function *per se*.

[364] Alison, "An Atonement Update", 10.

[365] This particular point will be further explored in chapter 11.

[366] Alison, "An Atonement Update", 10.

[367] Idem, 11.

In this chapter, I have argued that Alison's theology offers a helpful diagnosis of the pathology of postlapsarian belonging, as well as an eschatological horizon beyond it, where water is thicker than blood, that is where all belong through being forgiven and washed in the living water flowing from the side of Christ rather than the blood of kinship and human sacrifice. Atonement as understood by Alison is not a theory to get right or a transaction from the Son to the Father, but a radical transformation undergone *after* and with the Son, the opening of an until-then inaccessible reality. In the next chapter, I want to conclude Part 2 by exploring the limits of radicality itself, or rather how this radical transformation takes time and requires us to reconsider what is meant by radical and authentic transformation and belonging, but also success and indeed failure. This will lead me to consider appropriate ways of naming radical yet less-than-perfect belonging christianly as a journey in the dark on which one is limping with grace as they discover God, the world, and themselves anew.

Chapter 7:

Being set free

In this seventh chapter, I will explore the dynamics and freedom of belonging christianly, as well as its challenges and even obstacles. As a result, I with offer some considerations on the meaning of discipleship as understood by James Alison. I will then reflect on the ideas of authenticity, success, failure, agency, and the role of Christ in the transformative process of belonging christianly.

1. When Christ crashes the party: Christian discipleship is a disruptive force

All forms of discipleship entail a costly transformation, a reshaping, or even an alteration of the self, and Christian discipleship is no exception. Alison describes this as the simultaneously perfectly ordinary process of transformation and imitation leading to the reshaping of the self according to an "other". As such, discipleship follows a triangular pattern of imitation with a subject, a model or mediator, and a mediated desire/object of desire.[368] Discipleship is therefore key in building and securing belonging, which can be and often is the object desired. Alison proposes that discipleship is not an exclusively Christian or even religious concept or practice, but that instead all engage in one way or another, and often unconsciously, in forms of discipleship, as a banal, inherent part of human socialisation. It is only in this broader context of discipleship as a pattern of human identity- and belonging-making that the disruptive force and strangeness of belonging christianly can be properly envisioned.

Why do we seek and accept to undergo such a costly transformation? What is it that we hope to achieve or obtain, in return? To put it bluntly, is discipleship overrated? An obvious answer is that as social and vulnerable animals, humans, like many other species, need each other in order to survive. In a very practical sense, belonging is therefore a matter of survival for vulnerable creatures in an often inhospitable environment. For many animals still, and pre-

[368] Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, Lanham, Chicago, New York, Toronto, and Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 17. This is distinctive of the Girardian understanding of desire as mediated by a model.

historic humans too, being exiled is/was a death sentence. Therefore, it would be tempting to see belonging as the price for survival and growth, a price paid at the expense of the authenticity or the integrity of the self. This is where Alison's Girardian anthropology and its counter-intuitive/counter-cultural understanding of the self takes a distinctive turn. For Alison, following Girard, the self is constituted through the encounter with others, rather than pre-existing stable independent selves who would subsequently be altered as they enter into contact with others in a group. Alison goes as far as speaking of humans existing "as a created subsistent relation", which he clarifies as meaning "that it can never conceive of God from the analogate of one human person, but rather it conceives the human person as being brought into, and maintained in, being by another anterior to it, to whom it is constantly related."[369] This means that in some sense, discipleship and belonging are not only inescapable, but also, in more positive terms, we can say that discipleship, understood very loosely is the very condition of existence and development of the self as a self-reflexive and social entity, not against or in competition with others, but through others.[370] Yet, as we discussed in the previous chapter, mimetic desire in its current form is distorted or degraded by sin and results in rivalry, and if not kept at bay, deadly violence. As a result, ordinary forms of discipleship and belonging, and often also include ecclesial belonging, exhibit the symptoms of what after Alison I called the pathology of belonging to the old postlapsarian pattern. As such, they are fundamentally insecure and rely on defensive mechanisms of exclusion and violence, whether explicitly or implicitly,[371] as a means of masking their intrinsic vulnerability and weakness. In this context, what kind of security does postlapsarian belonging provide? What is it then that is fundamentally different about *authentic* Christian discipleship? The fundamental difference is the model--Christ, from which follows the sort of transformation Christ demands and the kind of belonging and the (lack of) security He offers.

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[369] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroads, 1998, 50.

[370] This means that Christ does not come to abrogate desire or imitation but to redeem them and put them at the service of salvation understood as participation in the divine life.

[371] See Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, Eugene: OR, Cascade, 2018, 16-47; also Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others", *Theology & Sexuality*, 21 (1), 2015, 1-19.

Reciprocity, Alison argues, is the "golden rule of [ordinary] belonging" and discipleship,[372] acting simultaneously as a pacifier and source of tension in what Girard calls "internal mediation".[373] It provides a certain level of expectation, protection, and, to some degree, security, that is a "world of relative stability, of mostly controlled imitation and rivalry, hospitality and vengeance."[374] Yet, it is precisely *this world* into which, to use Alison's vivid image, "Christ comes crashing like a comet which has strayed out of some distant galaxy […] forever ruining the relative stability of the party."[375] *This* is how odd, peculiar, strange Christian discipleship is— 'its key feature is that it undoes the central rule of logic *which governs all induction into belonging: it undoes reciprocity*.[376]

Judith Butler provides us with useful, if perhaps unexpected, language to describe the sort of creative process at work here. Inviting her reader to rethink what bodies are, she argues that:

> If a deconstruction of the materiality of bodies suspends and problematizes the traditional ontological referent of the term, *it does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term; on the contrary, it provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative production.*[377]

Here I am not interested in Butler's argument about the ontological reality of bodies *per se*, but the kind of creative, rather than destructive, epistemological disruption that she suggests, what Gene Rogers calls "Butlerian irony".[378] Rogers argues that Butlerian irony is chiefly performed by and realised in Jesus: "He takes a structure of violent oppression—death by crucifixion—

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[372] Alison, "Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging", Talk for Conference on Discipleship and the City, Villanova University, 3-5 October 2006. Accessible on Alison's website: https://jamesalison.com/discipleship-and-the-shape-of-belonging/ (Last accessed on 8 September 2023).

[373] Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, 29.

[374] Alison, "Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging".

[375] Idem. My emphasis.

[376] Idem.

[377] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Post-Modernism" in Judith Butler and Jean W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 168.

[378] Rogers, *Blood Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 42.

and turns it into another invitation to the eschatological wedding.'[379] This, I contend is also true of what Christ does to belonging. Jesus does *not* abolish belonging but through creative disruption, subverts and transforms it, and invites us to follow in his steps, "in the service of an alternative production". In other words, *with* Christ and indeed *in* Christ, the very thing that needed mending or healing is not only redeemed but is turned upside down and becomes the very channel or vessel of grace, in fact, it becomes salvation itself, as I argued in Part 1. Grace does not destroy or replace nature but fulfills and transcends it. Jesus is not content with simply restoring belonging to a prelapsarian "natural" state of purity, but 'provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative production'—-our participation in the divine life in a fundamentally new way, bridging, without collapsing, the fundamental gap between Creator and creature, allowing them to be perfectly united while remaining themselves, something first and perfectly realised in Christ through what Christianese calls the hypostatic union.

In Christ, belonging is no longer characterised by reciprocity but by gratuity. Thus, Alison writes:

> One of the things revealed by the doctrine of original sin is that it is our capacity to receive gratuitously that was damaged in the fall: *not our capacity to receive, because we have to receive in order to exist, but our capacity to receive gratuitously*, which is the only way in which we can share in divine life, *because that life can never be other than gratuitous*.[380]

One way of understanding this is to once again resort to the doctrines of creation and Christ. With the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo,* Christianity proclaims that God created everything *out of nothing,* and thus reasserts the radical asymmetry between God and creation, that is God's total sovereignty over creation and creation's total or radical dependence on God. Thus, in the *Summa,* Aquinas writes

> Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and *all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifested that creatures are really related*

[379] Or again "Under conditions of sin, God's goodness repurposes the evils of human death and Roman violence for an alternative production" Ibid, 71-2.

[380] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroads, 1998, 45.

> *to God Himself: whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures*, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to him.[381]

Aquinas adopts an Aristotelian understanding of relationships that sees relatedness in terms of dependency. While creation enjoys a transformative relationship with God, that is to say, that created beings are *related to* God in receiving their life from and being transformed by God; God, on the other hand, is not changed, transformed, or improved by creation, but remains immutable, that is beyond change and creation. It is in that sense that Aquinas can claim that the relationship, while conceptual on God's side, is only real on the side of the creature, for only God lacks in nothing and is therefore totally gratuitous.[382] Here, however, one may be forgiven for asking how this ineffable, self-subsistent, and all-mighty God can be a model for belonging. This question was already addressed in Part 1, in relation to belonging and the Trinity. There we concluded with Tanner that "Christ is the Key." Therefore, unsurprisingly, here again, we go back to Christology and indeed the person of Christ.

The formula of Chalcedon provides the basis for how Christianese speaks of the Incarnation, and more specifically *who* Christ is, and what this means for creation. Thus, the insistence on the radical asymmetry between God and creation discussed in the previous paragraph enables us to begin to see more clearly why Christ is the perfect and indeed only adequate model which can offer the alternative production discussed earlier. Unlike other models, Christ's identity, fully divine as He is, does not depend on us or our response to His calling. In that sense, it can be said that his relationship with us is entirely gratuitous and therefore non-rivalrous.[383] Thus, Alison says, "He makes no demands from us until he has created something for us first, and it is only then that he asks us to imitate him".[384] He alone can be said to be in a full sense Creator. He alone can "*provides the conditions to mobilise the signifier in the service of an alternative production."* Speaking in more recognisably Christian terms we can say that He alone can be said to make all things new and bring about salvation.

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[381] Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Ia.13.7 in Simon Oliver, *Creation, A Guide for the perplexed*, London: T&T Clark, 2017, chapter 2 fn 37. Also, see Aquinas *Summa Theologia*, Ia. 45.3 responsio.

[382] For a rejection and a defence of this claim see respectively William Craig Lane, "Timelessness, creation and God's real Relation to the World", *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 56 (910), 2000, 93-112 and Matthew R. McWhorther, "Aquinas on God's Relation to the World", *New Blackfriars* 94, January 2013, 3-19.

[383] Alison, "Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging".

[384] Idem.

Stressing this soteriological distinction, Tanner writes: "because he is divine, Jesus has a superior position in relating to other people — he saves them, for example — and we do not."[385] *Yet*, as fully human, Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity incarnate dwells among us, *is us*, and thus becomes also accessible, relatable, recognisable, *and imitable*.

Christ's divine and human natures mean that while Christ's divine nature remains unchanged, Christ in His humanity undergoes growth, suffering, and death on the Cross.[386] For Aquinas, the unbridgeable gulf, the infinite distance between Creator and creation, amplified by sin, is overcome by Christ's indwelling in and among us first, and then, and only then, us in Him. Thus, what distinguishes our relationship with Christ from our other relationships is not merely infinite distance, but precisely that in Christ the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity are gathered and joined in perfection. Thus, Christ is at once totally independent, radically different and distant from us *and* closer to us, indeed infinitely more so, than we are to ourselves or than another (non-divine) human could ever be.[387] Therefore, the hypostatic union renders imitation possible while avoiding risks of rivalry. To sum up and conclude this section, we can say that Christ constitutes the external-internal mediation necessary to disrupt belonging forever, that Christ is the sacrament of this new mode of belonging, and that it is only through Christ and in Christ that one can both learn about and be transformed in such a way that one is propelled radically and *gratuitously* into the life of God.

2.*Totus tuus* or nothing at all? The pitfall of perfect or unrealistic belonging

Earlier in Part 2, I objected to Srinivasan's proposal of emancipation on the account that it didn't take into consideration original sin, that is the depth and extent of human woundedness. I offered that the doctrine of original sin offers a much more extensive understanding of human social distortions. In the face of the extent and depth of the distortions

[385] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 246.

[386] See Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2000. Also, see Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?" *First Things*, November 2001. https://www.firstthings.com/article/2001/11/does-god-suffer (Last accessed on 8 September 2023). Also, See Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", *Anglican Theological Review* 104(2), 2022, 134–147.

[387] I am grateful to Catherine Wallis-Hughes for pointing this challenge to me and for her precious knowledge of Aquinas.

of human desire, my counterproposal is christo-pneumatocentric. That is to say that Christ is the source, the centre, and the end, as well as the means toward this human transformation towards the fullness of life and belonging.

This is not to say that political transformation has no value, or that humans are utterly incapable of change and/or growth, but that such change and growth must be understood in the wider context of the salvific action of God in Christ and through the Spirit. Thus, 'politics may remain significant so long as we bear in mind its fragility and limits and its proper telos: to help us to look more clearly at the love of Jesus.'[388] It is after Christ, in Christ, and in the Spirit, and therefore through them that humans can however fallibly and gradually reorientate their minds, hearts, and imagination toward Life and Belonging, that is toward a form of living and belonging that is not shaped by death and fear, but according to Christ, as they learn *from* Him and *through* Him to desire and live in full, as He does. Thus, James Cone wrote about Jesus:

> He is God himself coming into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God [one may want to add 'and with others and self'].[389]

Belonging christianly thus understood, as belonging after Christ, in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ is at once as an act of radical *dis*-obedience—the refusal to be driven by fear,[390] defined by forms of belonging rooted in insidiously competitive, oppressive, exclusive, and violent systems, the confronting of these systems— *and* the desire to conform (obedience) to God's revelation of who God is in Christ. In that sense, and *only* in that sense, belonging can

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[388] See John Swinton "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness", *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16, 2012, 172–190, 187. I am grateful to Sue Price for mentioning this essay to me.

[389] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989, 35.

[390] See again Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Berkeley CA: Crossing Press, 1984, 53-9, 57-8. Here I am quoting her more extensively: "We have been trained to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those that do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined."

be understood as empowerment, not *over* or *against* others, but empowered by Christ, who sets us free from the bondage of sin and destructive belonging.

All this being said, one important question remains—to what extent can this transformation be achieved in this life, and to the degree that it can, albeit partially, can be secured once and for all? The bloodstained history of the Christian churches,[391] their sinfulness, their divisions, and their failure to live out their radical calling ought to be a crushing reminder of the power and obstinacy of postlapsarian belonging even among those who dare to invoke the name of Christ.

In his prayer of consecration to Mary, St Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort captured the radical venture of giving oneself *entirely* to another. Thus, he writes: *Totus tuus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt. Accipio te in mea omnia* [I belong entirely to you, and all that I have is yours. I take you for my all].[392] Paul before him wrote to the Galatians saying, 'it is no longer me that lives but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20). Christ himself told his disciples: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matt 10: 37-9), or again "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life[f] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matt 16: 24-5)[393] Through these quotes, from a popular saint, the apostle to the Gentiles, and the Lord himself, it seems inevitable to identify belonging christianly with the kind of radicality exclusive of all the lesser forms of commitments that fall short of exhibiting the signs or effects of an entire devotion to Christ. Yet, the problem of identifying belonging christianly with this perfect or total commitment is that it suggests that belonging christianly is only a destination, the eschatological realisation of belonging in Christ, rather than the schooling or transformative and enduring process into that Reality.

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[391] Kirwan, *Girard and Theology*. London: T&T Clark, 2009, 134. Also see Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 2010, 4.

[392] Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, *A Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, Amherst: NY, Aeterna Press, 2015, 266.

[393] These two passages can be particularly triggering for LGBT Christians.

If belonging christianly requires total or perfect commitment *now*, then we are facing a series of problems.[394] Firstly, it fails to take into account the ambiguity, the messiness, and the variety of shapes, degrees, and layers of commitment and agency of which one is capable or exhibits at any given moment,[395] as well as the value of a less-than-perfect commitment as one of many steps toward a deeper yet unknown transformation. Related to this is the issue of authenticity, which Charles Taylor has identified as the defining concern of our time.[396] How does one assess the authenticity of one's own, let alone someone else's, commitment? Are total and authentic commitments the same thing? Can partial commitment be nonetheless authentic if it is all one is capable of at a given point in time? At any rate, total and authentic commitments can only be proven in circumstances of extreme adversity: "In the ordinary course of affairs, I can never be sure of the purity of my motives, the depth of my commitment."[397] Thus, for most of us, and for most of our lives, it is impossible to evaluate the degree of authenticity or seriousness of our commitment, even less so that of others.

If risk and situations of threat are a test of the depth of one's commitment, should we therefore put ourselves at risk, or even enjoin others to do so, to authenticate our or their commitment? If the lack of transparency to self and others than renders the ability to evaluate belonging according to the degree of commitment problematic, then seeking "the confirmation of one's authenticity, […] would in itself point to something gone wrong",[398] that one's belonging still exhibits the signs of old postlapsarian belonging, rooted in one's own achievements rather than in Christ's liberating and gratuitous gift, thus perpetuating the illusion of control, mastery, and success upon which postlapsarian belonging relies. This leads us to a second important issue. In the previous section, we identified that belonging christianly was characterised by gratuity and the subversion of reciprocity. Presenting perfect commitment

[394] My own ecclesial dis-location, as a gay Catholic theologian, has made me acutely aware of, and painfully sensitive to, questions related to exclusion and radicality or more precisely the accusation of failing to embody the radicality and demandingness of the Gospel.

[395] This is true of victims of trauma for whom engagement with the institutional church and/or church attendance is rendered impossible by their own disastrous and sorrowful experience of the church and its ministers.

[396] See Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018.

[397] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 137.

[398] Ibid.

and/or conformity to Christ as a prerequisite to belonging christianly would once again turn it into a destination rather than a journey, but it would also abolish the gratuity upon which it has been defined by re-establishing a form of reciprocity.

Disability theologian John Swinton argues that belonging, *not inclusion*, is the opposite and indeed the alternative to exclusion.[399]

> To be included *you often have to conform or have your context conformed to some kind of relational, social, or legal norm*. To belong you simply have to be noticed as yourself. To be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed. [400]

If this is true, "the fundamental principle, which lies behind authentic Christian community for *all* people", [401] it must not only apply to but be even truer of our belonging to Christ which is not the result of our merits or achievements, but "is a gift of the Spirit of Jesus that is experienced within the community that Jesus gathers to himself through himself, and which seeks to model God's continuing redemption of creation in and through Christ."[402] Therefore, belonging christianly requires us to revisit what we consider to be successes and failures as well as the value we attach to them. After all, in Christ all categories are reversed or subverted, to be king is to be a servant, the mighty are cast down from their thrones, the poor are rich, the weak is stronger and to lose one's life is to find it, to die is to live.[403] If belonging christianly is to become, somehow,[404] a part of, or to be transformed into, the body of Christ, then one is incorporated into a Glorious Body that still exhibits the signs of a failed body, at least in the eyes of the world who saw him suffer and tragically hang on a tree. As Christ's glory and

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[399] See John Swinton "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness", *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16(2), May 2012, 172–190.

[400] Idem, 184. The first emphasis is mine.

[401] Ibid. Also see idem, 187: "if the weak and vulnerable are excluded from Christian community. It may look and feel like community, *but it is no community at all* because people are not looking to Jesus. In other words, n*o one can belong unless we all belong*.'

[402] Idem, 184.

[403] Matt 10:39; 16:25 and John 12:25. The glorification of vulnerability raises serious pastoral concerns which will be discussed in Chapter 9.

[404] Here "somehow" is important. This leads us into the territory of ecclesiology and sacramentology which this thesis intentionally put on hold. Different ecclesiologies and sacramental theologies may want to say very different things about this "somehow".

victory remain hidden but to the eyes of faith, similarly, belonging christianly cannot be anything but an apparent failure to the world, but often to us too, since it is conforming oneself, following, imitating, identifying with the one whose blood was shed in the supreme scandal of the Cross.

Therefore, it might be that in line with the apophatic orientation of this thesis, we cannot, properly speaking, evaluate or indeed judge the authenticity of one's own, let alone someone else's belonging to Christ; that doing so is not only illusory but also utterly inappropriate.[405] It can also mean that we need to truly humanise belonging, to preserve or restore its humanness, to avoid speaking of discipleship and belonging in idealised or triumphalist ways that are completely disconnected from the actual, enfleshed, messy and imperfect reality in which God encounters us. In other words, a series of propositions need to be held together, in tension. Firstly, the idea that, most of the time, we fall short of living out the lives of those who are of Christ. Secondly, belonging christianly, born from Christ's atonement, is a mode of belonging to be undergone, first initiated by Christ, that we receive and thus to some degree already enjoy, and yet also journey or process as we work out the undoing and reshaping of our lives according to this new received and always unfolding identity. Thirdly, during this process, as sinners, we still belong to Christ who walks with us on our journey towards Life. How can we do justice to all these demands?

3. Belonging christianly, a limping with grace whilst waiting for eschatological fulfilment.

In this last (lengthy) section, I will propose a way forward that does justice to the series of claims aforementioned. As a result, it will focus on the failure to fully or consistently disengage from pathological or sinful forms of belonging and inhabit the new mode of belonging given us by Christ. To put it in more theological terms, it will reflect on the persistence of sin *despite* grace, or the apparent inefficacy of grace, its failure even, to eradicate sin, and what this tells us about belonging christianly. To do so, I will first engage with the collective work of Simi et al, as well Heather DuBois's essay "There is still a lot of pollution in there".[406] Finally, this section will end on C.S. Lewis's description of the 'undragoning' of

[405] One may want to challenge or balance this claim by saying that this is precisely what the church does when it declares an individual "saint".

[406] Heather M. DuBois, ""There is still a lot of pollution in there: Undoing violent ideologies, Undoing

Eustace Scrubb in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a powerful literary description of the sort of transformation discussed in this chapter.

The value of Simi et al's sociological work is to draw our attention to the ways in which extremist social behaviours,[407] identities and forms of belonging can leave stains that continue to affect our reformed or healing selves and day-to-day forms of belonging, which they describe as addiction. DuBois's strength and originality is to build from this finding and explore the process of disengagement in terms of purgation. This, she does through 'the metaphor of undoing the self' which she develops through a selective reading of the works of John of the Cross and Judith Butler. From this unusual pairing, she develops constructive tools for understanding (and guiding) the process of 'conversion of destructive politics' and 'the formation of new identities and the loss of old identities'.[408] This kind of transformation can be understood as salvation or redemption *from* broken, sinful, and pathological forms of belonging, as well as salvation *for* a new, non-violent, non-rivalrous, non-sacrificial, post-atonement, yet-to-be fully experienced, way of belonging which was first shown and revealed to us *by* and *in* Christ, its perfect and definitive instantiation.[409] This salvific and redemptive journey is, therefore, best described as the lifelong process of liberation from captivity, rather than a single event, or a "quick-fix", even when such a journey is initiated by a single identifiable ground-breaking Damascus-like conversion moment.

3.1 The analogy of addiction to understand the ongoing influence of the pathology of postlapsarian belonging.

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the self', in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), *Suffering and the Christian Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 105-12.
Although my main focus will be on this chapter. I will also refer to DuBois' doctoral thesis: DuBois, Heather M., "TO BE MORE FULLY ALIVE: JOHN OF THE CROSS AND JUDITH BUTLER ON TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2018.

[407] For an incursion in one such territory see Simi and Robert Futrell, *American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement's Hidden Spaces of Hate*, London: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, 2010. Especially chapter 3 on how the family, an a priori benevolent belonging, can become the channel of induction into hateful belonging.

[408] DuBois, "There is still a lot of pollution in there", 105.

[409] I will come back to this when discussing imitation of and identification with Christ in chapters 10 and 11.

In "Addicted to Hate",[410] a study of identity residuals amongst former far-right extremists,[411] Simi et al explore the concept of addiction as a way of accounting for the ways in which 'social experiences can become so engraved in our interactions, psyche, and body that the parallels between identity residual and addiction become an interesting point of exploration.'[412] According to Simi et al, the salience of the particular identity within the individual's broader sense of themselves, as well as hatred as a powerful emotion, seem to play a seminal role in generating identity residuals. This is useful to point to several differences between, on the one hand, Simi et al's study and DuBois' work and, on the other hand, the kind of appropriation of their works that I suggest. Indeed, their respective research focuses on disengagement and identity residuals among former far rights extremists (white supremacists, neo-Nazis, etc), asking what happens when people leave and sever themselves from *marginal*, radical, overtly hate-based, openly violent identities and forms of belonging.

This thesis, however, is interested in the undoing or collapse of broken *mainstream* belonging and the gradual discovery of a radical, intensive, and marginal, *yet non-sectarian* i.e, lived in the midst of the old defective forms, mode of belonging. Simi et al show that former white supremacists usually sever themselves from their past and that when they don't, this might increase the risk of relapse.[413] By contrast, for belonging christianly, full removal from the former/current defective forms of belonging is not an option, for it is in the midst of these defective forms that the process of transformation takes place.

To be clear, I am not saying that is not possible, desirable, or even necessary to reject and/or escape certain kinds of belonging, such as the ones discussed by Simi et al. My point is that if what I have previously argued about original sin is true, *all* forms of postlapsarian belonging are to one degree or another defective. Moreover, if although not *of* the world, belonging christianly is lived in the midst of the world and not severed from it, then this kind of retreat is not possible. This raises two important questions: What would it look like to reinvest and

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[410] Simi Pete, Blee Kathleen, DeMichele Matthew, and Windisch Steven, "Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists", *American Sociological Review*, 82(6), 2017, 1167-87.

[411] "Residual" or "hangover identity" attests to the fact that disengagement is not really the end of that identity. Instead, a whole other layer of unwanted and involuntary thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, and behaviors may persist and continue to shape a person's life, Simi et al, "Addicted to Hate", 1168.

[412] Ibid.

[413] Idem, 1600. Also see Bryan F. Bubolz and Pete Simi, "Leaving the World of Hate: Life-Course Transitions and Self-Change", *American Behavioral Scientist*, June 2015: 1-21.

inhabit anew old forms of belonging according to this new mode of belonging? How does being caught up in the wrongness of a world we cannot escape and from which we cannot help but be complicit affect our learning to live differently?[414]

To add to this, "addiction" itself is an ambivalent and complex notion that intermingles environmental, both social and biological, and neurological factors, and should be handled cautiously. If used lightly, as a negative shorthand for a pathological attachment, it can contribute to propagating a stigmatising or moralising narrative of those living with addiction.[415] Nevertheless, what makes the use of the category of addiction particularly attractive is *precisely* the potential to dissociate the kind of lapse or lack of agency that we are talking about from sin. More precisely, it enables us to relocate sin elsewhere than in the individual—in this instance the person suffering from addiction—into the wider social structures and other factors that, at the very least, contributed to that person's addiction.[416] Considering all this, does the analogy remain pertinent? Is it appropriate to presume that what can be said from former extremists should be equated with the experience of people living with addiction, and if so, is it really applicable to the whole human race *without exception*?[417] While Simi et al's work appeals to neuroscience, what ground is there to support my bolder claim? Here again, the answer must be, as I hope it has now become, original sin.

The only way that the analogy can apply to the whole of humankind is if one admits that *all* postlapsarian humans are affected by sin, that human sociality is generally affected by this deficiency,[418] and that instead of looking for marginal pockets of pathological belonging

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[414] An interesting question that will not be addressed here pertains to the role of a sinful church in accompanying its sinful members into a transformative journey of disengagement that is not escapism.

[415] I am very grateful to Florence Taylor for this precious insight.

[416] Here I refer to the mezzo-level of structural distortions discussed earlier.

[417] Of course, Roman Catholic theology will want to maintain that there are two exceptions—Christ and His Mother. On the dogma of the immaculate conception, See Pius IX's ex cathedra proclamation in the apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, 4 December 1854.

[418] This portrait of postlapsarian belonging may seem needlessly bleak and severe and lacking in the nuances or asperities that characterise daily-life belonging as experienced in one's loving relationships, family, loving partner, friendship group, or ecclesial community. Here I want to briefly suggest that three Renaissance painting techniques, *chiaroscuro*, *sfumato*, and *unione* might help us approach the complex reality of postlapsarian belonging with more nuance while maintaining my assessment. What distinguishes these three techniques seems to be the way in which colours, but also light, and obscurity are contrasted and negotiated. While in *sfumato*, "harmony and unity among the parts, rather than contrast, are achieved by restricting value", *chiaroscuro* refers to "the exploitation of the contrast

in the midst of a non-pathological wider context, we are in fact looking for marginal pockets or rather buds of alternative non-pathological belonging amidst pathological human sociality. If addiction proves to be a useful category to describe the painful and costly process of identity transformation, there is at least one other major caveat: the kind of addiction that I am discussing here, unlike addiction to substances or ideologies, is arguably an addiction of a different kind. In this case, it is human nature *per se* that is stained, and as such human agency alone is not sufficient to enable the kind of transformation needed.

Because of the kind of thing that original sin is and how widespread its effects are, the kind of disengagement required here does not solely or even primarily emerge from within the individual or agent, or indeed their environment. Instead, it is received as a revelatory divine gift from Christ, through the Spirit, although the Spirit works in, and Christ is *received* through, the mediation of less-than-perfect local communities and relationships (church, family, friends, romantic partner, etc). I now turn to DuBois' own theological appropriation of the work of Simi et al.

3.2. Pollution, purgation, and social critique

> Getting rid of pollution is not a straightforward process because toxins intermingle with the body (whether a body of water, a human body or the body of Christ). To be rid of toxins is different from emptying a vessel; it requires transformation. If the toxins in question are ideological, they are integrated into human identity. In such cases, one

between the highlights and shadows for theatrical effect". As a sort of via media, *unione* favours "balance and dynamism in colour". See Marcia B. Hall, *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 94. Postlapsarian belonging can and indeed ought to be seen through something like the techniques of *chiaroscuro*, *sfumato* and *unione*. Any attempt to privilege one over the other will fail to account for the variety of ways in which belonging is experienced, but also how it can be affected by the pathology of sin. All present forms of belonging are indeed postlapsarian—all *are* affected by the repercussions of the cataclysmic event of the Fall and therefore require healing. Not all actual forms of belonging, however, manifest the same degree of brokenness or violence. In other words, some forms of belonging will be more severely or overtly affected by the pathology, while others will seem untouched. Yet it is important to insist that despite these differences, whether brokenness is striking, subtle, or even intractable, *all* forms of pathological belonging follow the same pattern and proceed from the same vulnerable or diminished ontological state of insecurity and vulnerability that is postlapsarian existence. This, we need to affirm if we wish to maintain that no part of existence and no existence is beyond *but also above* Christ and redemption. Herbert McCabe says something very similar when discussing the unity, or lack of, of humankind. Thus, he writes: "I do not think we should foster the illusion that there is a unity of mankind. To do that is to pretend that there is no sin, that the kingdom is fully established, that there already is a brotherhood of the human race." McCabe, "A Long Sermon for Holy Week: Chapter 1, Holy Thursday : The Mystery of Unity", *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 67(788) February 1986, 58.

must purge the body and psyche of unwanted ideologies. The challenge is to do so without triggering existential defence mechanisms and without committing violence, understood as cruelty or intense harm, towards one's self.[419]

Through the analogy of pollution and toxins, DuBois creatively articulates the challenge of a Catholic understanding of fallen nature and restorative grace— "to be rid of toxins is different from emptying a vessel; it requires transformation". Such a Catholic understanding of grace forbids the seemingly easier, more straightforward, and radical, but also violent option of substituting grace for nature. Instead, the catholic path requires a seemingly less radical, yet more demanding transformation, as grace is operating with, and therefore is constrained by, pre-existing dysfunctional material, an idea captured, strangely perhaps, by Butler's idea of performativity.[420] How does this transformation take place when one's milieu is still exposed to the pathogen agent, that is when one is facing an impasse?[421] To describe this change, DuBois favours the concept of purgation, an idea she borrows from John of the Cross.[422]

"purgation" is preferable to the word "purification" because it expresses the pain often involved in identity transformation. It also suggests that the process of transformation may not be consciously intentional. Even if the process is embraced, the person purging may find that they have little control over and little foreknowledge of what is to come.[423]

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[419] DuBois, "There is still a lot of pollution in there", 107.

[420] Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 184: "Performativity describes the relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a transcendence of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure."

[421] Although it does not appear in this chapter, the idea of impasse is developed in DuBois's doctoral thesis, especially in chapter 6. DuBois, "TO BE MORE FULLY ALIVE: JOHN OF THE CROSS AND JUDITH BUTLER ON TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2018. she borrows the idea of impasse from the work of Constance Fitzgerald. See Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night." in *Living with Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, Tilden Edwards (ed.), San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984. 93–116. Also Fitzgerald, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory." *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 64, 20 May 2013, 21–42. I am grateful to Tina Beattie for first mentioning Fitzgerald's work to me.

[422] DuBois, "To Be More Fully Alive", chapter 4. Analogous to the idea of purgation is the theme of refinement in the Bible. The following is a non-exhaustive list: Zechariah 13:9; Isaiah 48:10; Jeremiah 9:7; Malachi 3:3; Job 23:10; Proverbs 17:3 Psalm 66:10, 1 Peter 1:7.

[423] DuBois, "There is still a lot of pollution in there", 107.

Moreover, purgation 'connotes dramatic visceral change, such as vomiting and evacuation of the bowels.' As a result, the first, and perhaps most obvious benefit of the use of purgation is its symbolic power, that is its ability to convey the malaise, the cost, and even the suffering involved in such a transformation.[424] Paired with the idea of addiction, purgation describes an ongoing process rather than a final or definitive state to be reached, thus avoiding the dangers linked to a language of purity that easily becomes binary, elitist, harmful, and inevitably exclusive if not moralising, as one is pure or one is not.[425]

The physicality attached to the idea of purgation also enables DuBois to reject the modern dichotomy between the mind and reason on the one hand, and the body and emotions on the other hand, in favour of a holistic approach to the transformation of the self.[426] While purity is a movement against or away from the flesh, purgation is a journey undergone by the self that includes both mind *and* body. Even if not strictly physical, the kind of transformation discussed here reshapes one's way of being in the world and existing within the social body, and the potentially violent reaction of the social body itself to what it sees as a foreign body/agent. Finally, DuBois' use of purgation also points to the ambivalence regarding the cognition of such a transformation, both in terms of its mechanism and its outcome. Citing John of the Cross, DuBois notices the ambivalent nature, at once apophatic and cataphatic, of such a transformation: 'If they refuse to lay aside their former knowledge, they will never make any further progress. The soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing.'[427]

Central to DuBois's use of purgation as a necessary and provisional painful diminishment is the rejection of self-harm or 'overzealous asceticism',[428] as well as the fruitful outcome of the purgation—'for the negative intervention of asceticism to be experienced as ultimately positive, the undoing of the self must occur in tandem with being done again

[424] DuBois quotes John of the Cross: "Since these imperfections are deeply rooted in the substance of the soul, in addition to this poverty, this natural and spiritual emptiness, it usually suffers an oppressive undoing and an inner torment." DuBois, "To Be More Fully Alive", 215.

[425] See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo,* London and New York: Routledge, 1984. I am grateful to Gene Rogers and Douglas Davies for introducing me to Mary Douglas.

[426] This is particularly important if, as I asserted earlier after Alison, rationality follows belonging rather than the other way around. I am grateful to Mike Higton for an interesting conversation on the limited role played by rationality in the transformation of the self.

[427]DuBois, "To Be More Fully Alive", 213.

[428] DuBois, "There is still a lot of pollution in there", 106.

anew'[429] Thus, the purpose of purgation is not, to use a slightly different metaphor, to disrobe human bodies to leave them alone, naked, shivering, to their own tragic fate of misery and despair. Rather, the point is to face our nakedness and the incongruity of our bodies, to be dressed *in time* with fresh, *new* clothes, clothes our bodies have never worn before, clothes that are not meant to hide, expose, oppress, impress, and exclude, clothes that are not clothes at all—Christ himself.[430]

3.3. The Boy and the Lion:

I wish to conclude this chapter, with a powerful literary example of a positive purgative process in C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. In this passage, a metamorphosed Eustace describes his purgatorial encounter with Aslan to his cousin Edmund:

> I want to tell you how I stopped being one [dragon]." […] I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly toward me. […] So, it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. […] I wasn't afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of *it*—if you can understand. Well, it came close up to me and looked straight into my eyes And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn't any good because it told me to follow it."
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> "You mean it spoke?" "I don't know. Now that you mention it, I don't think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I'd have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went.
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> […] The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. […] So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. […]

[429] Idem, 110.

[430] Rm 13, 14. Also See Aquinas on the idea of Christ as clothe in Alberto Fabio Ambrosi, *Théologie de la mode: Dieu trois fois tailleur*, Paris, Editions Hermann, 2021.

But just as I was going to put my feet into the water I looked down and saw that they were all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as they had been before. Oh, that's all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I'll have to get out of it too. So, I scratched and tore again and this under-skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe.

"Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, however many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water, I knew it had been no good.

"Then the lion said—but I don't know if it spoke—'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So, I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you've ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it *is* such fun to see it coming away." "I know exactly what you mean," said Edmund.

"Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. […] After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing, I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. […]

"After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me—" "Dressed you. With his paws?" "Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes—the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream."[431]

[431] C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Harper Collins, 1994, 79-82.

Aside from being a poignant literary example of transformation through purgation, this unusually lengthy excerpt describes "a kind of apophatic" experience, to use Kilby's expression, that is an experience which words and human understanding ultimately fail to account for, or at least grasp exhaustively or even *master*. Eustace describes to Edmund a reality beyond words or rather a reality that is not exhausted by language and yet requires it to be shared,[432] patterns of affirmation which immediately defeat us.[433] Moreover, and more apropos, Lewis' narrative description of Eustace's life after his transformative encounter with Aslan uses the language of relapse:

> It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." *To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.*[434]

Although he does not mention the overlapping between Eustace's metamorphosis and John of the Cross's metaphorical use of the skin,[435] Rowan Williams establishes a parallel between Lewis's work and that of John of the Cross: 'Once again, this has echoes – intentional or not – of St John of the Cross and the acceptance of the night of the spirit and its stripping of the self down to its naked truth.'[436]Through the depiction of this transformation, arguably an allegory for baptism, Lewis offers a particularly salient image of the kind of transformation, the *apophatic* discipline that belonging christianly entails. Eustace Scrubb stands for all fallen humans experiencing a complex intermingling of desire, hope, frustration, suffering, pain, joy, and healing. Aslan is the, at first ominous, Christ-like figure who comes to open up new possibilities.[437] In the process, the agency of Eustace is contested, or rather it is acknowledged

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[432] Ibid: "'You mean it spoke?' 'I don't know. Now that you mention it, I don't think it did. But it told me all the same.' […] 'Then the lion said—but I don't know if it spoke'".

[433] Kilby, 'Is an apophatic trinitarianism possible?', *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 34n7. In one of our conversations, Kilby pointed out that one weakness of this illustration is that the character of Eustace is not one one wishes to identify with, at least up to this point.

[434] idem, 83. My emphasis.

[435] In DuBois, "To Be More Fully Alive", 219. I am grateful to Waldemar Nion for fascinating conversations on the theological meaning of skin and its metaphorical and/or analogical role in the sort of process described by John of the Cross and DuBois.

[436] Williams, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 86.

[437] On the theological significance of Aslan in The Chronicles of Narnia see Williams, *The Lion's World*, especially chapter 3: 49-74: "The orderliness of a world focused on the self is doomed to be disrupted by

and brought to its limits, at which point it is supplemented by Aslan's external intervention which alone, enables Eustace's deeper transformation. Although Eustace's action is not sufficient, it nonetheless seems to be a pre-requisite to the lion's involvement in a purgatorial process, in this case, debridement, far deeper, reaching unknown depths and ailments.[438]

In this chapter, I have attempted to hold in tension, interrogate, and (re)construct the relationship between the fundamental and yet eschatological reality or mode of belonging painted in Part 1, what I called theocentric belonging and the finite, transitional, performative, fragmented, and distorted ways in which humans do effectively belong in a finite and fallen world., which I called postlapsarian belonging. Belonging christianly has emerged as the life-long journey or pilgrimage from postlapsarian belonging into and/or toward eschatological theocentric belonging, or perhaps more accurately as the process of receiving from Christ, and gradually inhabiting or embodying, theocentric belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong christianly in the midst of postlapsarian belonging.

grace; and we can't appreciate quite what Aslan is about unless and until we see him in action against this kind of order." Idem, 52.

[438] Eustace's transformation can also be understood in terms of belonging. Readers of *The Dawn Treader* will remember Eustace unintentional arrival to Narnia on the Dawn Treader, his estrangement from his cousins and Narnians, which led to his metamorphosis in the dragon, and the loneliness he experienced as a dragon. Finally, Eustace's purgatorial process leads to a new sense of belonging with his cousins but also Narnians.

Gathering the Fragments (2):

In the fifth chapter, I endeavoured to articulate further the place and role of sin-talk and more specifically the doctrine of original sin within the theology of belonging christianly. It argued that sin-talk and the doctrine of original sin are determinant in helping us to achieve the aim of attending to the tensions and contradictions between postlapsarian belonging and theocentric belonging and moving beyond the pathological forms of the former into the latter.

To develop this argument, I resorted to an unlikely combination of voices including Amia Srinivasan and Alistair McFadyen. The engagement with Srinivasan and more specifically the way in which she envisions "sex" beyond political oppression showed the points of contrast or tension between Srinivasan's secular analysis and a theological analysis from within the Western Christian tradition and its counter-cultural doctrine of original sin. To understand the specificity of "Christianese" when it speaks of such distortions, and the limits of contemporary secular analyses of which Srinivasan's essay is an exemplar, I referred to the work of Alistair McFadyen. This led me to conclude to the necessity of sin-talk as it achieves two purposes. Firstly, sin-talk resituates human distortions within a broader framework in which God is the point of reference. Secondly, the doctrine of original sin helps us to assess more accurately the extent, depth, and indeed source of such distortions. Both, I contended are necessary if we wish to reflect on how to receive and gradually inhabit/embody belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong in the midst of belonging.

That task was carried out in chapter 6. There I endeavoured to further refine our understanding of sin and its place within the Christian story and vision, as well as the role of atonement within this vision to create room for thinking belonging christianly beyond our numb imaginations, as well as beyond shame and violence. A first key finding was that while the doctrine of sin remains necessary to articulate and respond adequately and theologically to the distortion of reality and belonging that it seeks to name, the doctrine of original sin is *only* an ancillary doctrine that does not belong at the centre of the Christian story. I also argued that Alison's theology offers a helpful diagnosis of the pathology of postlapsarian belonging, as well as an eschatological horizon beyond it, where water is thicker than blood, that is where all belong through being forgiven and washed in the living water flowing from the side of Christ rather than the blood of kinship and human sacrifice.

The other key finding from engaging with Alison's reconfiguration of the doctrine of atonement is that atonement is not a theory to get right, or a transaction between the Son and the Father, but a radical transformation undergone *after* the Son, the opening of an until-then inaccessible reality. Belonging christianly can therefore be called post-atonement belonging and is the process of learning to be part of and inhabit this new reality that is the risen Christ. Expanding on the previous two chapters, chapter 7 explored what I called the dynamics and freedom of belonging christianly, as well as its challenges and even obstacles. This led me to exploring the limits of radicality, the meaning of success and failure, as well as considering appropriate ways of naming radical yet less-than-perfect belonging christianly as a journey in the dark on which one is limping with grace as one discovers God, the world and oneself anew.

Part 3: Belonging christianly and Christology in practice: The pitfalls to avoid

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Philippians, 2: 5)

Jesus is proposed as the model to follow, the one to imitate, the one to identify with; to be a Christian is to become another Christ. In following Jesus, we are invited to be like him, to be what he was, in the gift of self for love... self-giving for love... The Christian ideal is to love, to love one another as he, Jesus, loved us; how can we hear this invitation, this call to imitate him?

There could be many more avenues worse pursuing as we continue to develop this theology of belonging christianly. One of them, which is the one I have chosen to explore in this third and last Part is to reflect further on what belonging christianly might look like through the themes of imitation of and identification with Christ. Although the link between belonging and identification with Christ might not appear obvious at first, the "call" to imitate Christ seems to be a central tenet of Christianity, confirmed by scripture, tradition, mystics, and the daily-life piety of many Christians who strive to walk in Christ's footsteps.

Furthermore, in Part 2, I argued that Christ is the perfect and ultimate model who allows for non-rivalrous and therefore pacific, deathless, and even truly life-giving imitation. More specifically, I contended that the hypostatic union, the perfect unity without confusion of the divine and human natures in Christ, enables both transcendence and immanence, thus rendering authentic imitation possible while avoiding the risk of rivalry and violence. The term "authentic" here is important, as history shows that violence has been performed repeatedly in the name of Christ by Christians against other Christians and non-Christians. Indeed, while it is true that Christ is the perfect and indeed *ultimate* model for humans, another question emerges: are sinful humans appropriate imitators?

At the very least, we can therefore say that imitation and identification are central aspects of the Christian life and of belonging christianly. What remains to be said, however, is what constitutes authentic imitation of and/or identification with Christ, what we can call Christology in practice.[439]

To discern how to imitate and identify with Christ, the first three chapters of Part 3 will focus on what I suggest are ways of *mis*identifying with Christ. This will also mirror the "kind of" apophatic orientation of this thesis.

Thus chapter 8 will explore the role suffering should (not) play in our imitating and identifying with Christ.

Chapter 9 will seek to reflect on vulnerability and more specifically the idea of self-emptying or kenosis. and the two ways in which this can lead to misidentification with Christ, which in turn can have dire consequences on how we conceive belonging christianly.

Chapter 10 will discuss another, potentially more controversial, misidentification with Christ. Here we will talk about the "Black" Christ and the conundrum of following and identifying with the "Black" Christ as "white" in the racially tainted social context of whiteness. As a result, this chapter will reflect critically on identification as well as on the replacement strategy of disidentification with Christ suggested by Harvey and Teel.

Expanding on chapter 10, chapter 11 will propose what I will call apophatic and Eucharistic identification with Christ as the orientation of belonging christianly.

[439] Another way of looking at this third part is as an attempt to develop what might be called an ethics of belonging Christianly through the light of christology.

Chapter 8:

Suffering and the shape of belonging christianly

> For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
> *he suffered* death and was buried,
> and rose again on the third day
> in accordance with the Scriptures. (The Nicene Creed)

At the heart of the Christian faith is the radical and even scandalous claim that God took flesh and that this God-made-flesh suffered and died in the humanity of Jesus Christ at a particular time (under Pontius Pilate) and that *somehow* this suffering and dying is life-changing and the incipit of the life everlasting. "*Somehow*" is important here. From early on, Christians have attempted to make sense of the death of the Messiah, that is to understand the meaning of the Cross and the role that suffering and death play(ed) in the central act of the unfolding drama of salvation. They have tried to understand how what seemed *prima facie* a pathetic failure became, or rather, was, in fact, the definitive victory over death, and how life can lie beyond death.

Following Kilby, in this first chapter, I come to the conclusion that suffering and loss "are not part of God, or grounded in God's Being, or desired by God" which in turn had implications for what I call the shape of belonging christianly.[440] Although anxiety can be paralysing, it seems appropriate to be (reasonably) nervous about the way in which Christianese speaks about suffering and its implications and applications for one's journey towards and relationship with Christ. This salutary angst originates from the fact that, on the one hand, suffering is rooted in human vulnerability and is emotionally charged. On the other hand, there are what L. Ann Jervis calls "the preventative reasons".[441] Suffering, and particularly the meaning and function attributed to it, have been so often and tragically distorted. Indeed,

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[440] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), *Suffering and the Christian Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 163-74, 163.

[441] Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message*, William. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 5.

although one should be wary of injunctions to "get things right", the Christian tradition, at least in the West, has often got suffering really wrong, with dire consequences. In her book on Paul and suffering, Jervis remarks that "the texts on suffering in the New Testament have the potential to harm and distort human health—physical, spiritual, and mental."[442] How many times has the Good News been turned into a poison at the service of our frantic drive for dominion and destruction of others and ourselves, thus turning the Christian life—at its best "the service of the deployment of existence, of trust, of friendship with God"—into oppression and even self-hatred,"a work of death, of desolation."[443] The stakes are very high indeed.

> Unless such ideas are heard as well as we possibly can, a shallow understanding of them may justify precisely the kind of suffering that it is our role as Christians to alleviate. And, unless these texts are heard well, our misreading may encourage us to avoid precisely the kind of suffering he [Paul] is calling us to embrace.[444]

What I am interested in is therefore the sort of theology of suffering and vulnerability that underpins belonging christianly and what might need to be reconsidered or further clarified to avoid as much as possible the risk of falling into the kind of destructive path sketched by Jervis. This leads me to ask two related questions that will prove important for thinking belonging christianly: What role ought suffering to play (or not) in the life of the one who seeks to follow Christ, and how is it (or not) related to belonging christianly?

In Part 1, I argued that what I called theocentric belonging, the source as well as the end of belonging christianly, ought to be understood as participation in the divine life. Must suffering be a pre-requisite to such participation in Christ, as a quick or superficial reading of 8 Romans seems to imply?[445] Is participation in Christ better understood as taking place through the Incarnation in a wide sense, or more specifically through the event(s) of Christ's

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[442] Ibid.

[443] Véronique Margron's Address to the members of the Ciase, an independent and multidisciplinary group commissioned by the French Bishops' Conference to investigate the abuse crisis in the French church. https://www.la-croix.com/Sr-Veronique-Margron-sadressant-membres-Ciase-nous-vous-sommes-redevables-2021-10-05-1201179008 My translation. (Last accessed on 11 September 2023).

[444] Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel,* 6.

[445] Consider for instance Rom 8 17-8: "if, in fact, *we suffer with him* so that we may also be *glorified with him*. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us."

Passion, death on the Cross, and resurrection from the dead? Crucially, these two options are not necessarily exclusionary. The Incarnation comprehends the Passion and resurrection of Christ for only the Word made flesh could die on the Cross and rise again.[446]

More to the point, do Christians *need* to undergo their own *via crucis* to participate in Christ? Is suffering the measure of authentic and radical belonging christianly—the greater the suffering … the greater the participation? In the remainder of this chapter, I explore in greater details these questions and more generally the theological meaning attributed to suffering and its relation to belonging christianly,[447] thus addressing a series of pathologies, as Murray puts it,[448] that need to be addressed and require careful recalibration. In the first section, I briefly engage with two authors with very different credentials who nonetheless articulate the sort of approach that I will reject. John Paul II, a pope and personalist philosopher whose theological significance upon official Catholic theology cannot be understated, and Alvin Plantinga, a major North American Calvinist analytic philosopher. Each in their own way makes inflated claims about human suffering, its meaning, and co-redemptive function. In the second section, I explore why such inflated claims are theologically problematic. In the third section I suggest another path for thinking and responding to suffering christianly. In the final section, I discuss what belonging christianly has to say about suffering.

1. Co-Suffering as participation in Christ?

It is a truism to say that modern technological and medical progress has rendered suffering largely avoidable…or at least invisible. John Swinton points out that "as well as enhancing our lives, successes in medicine have significantly altered our expectations about the inevitability of suffering. (…) We no longer see suffering as inevitable."[449] Indeed, confidence in the unstoppability of such progress has led to modernity's malaise vis-à-vis the persistence of suffering, an intolerable failure and a scandalous anomaly to be hidden, ignored,

[446] I will say more about our participation in Christ's passion death and resurrection and Christ's own participation in ours towards the end of this chapter.

[447] In the next chapter, I will explore this in relation to vulnerability and loss.

[448] Murray, "Living sacrifice: Is there a non-pathological way of living suffering as sacrifice?" In *Suffering and the Christian Life*, 189-206.

[449] Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, London: William B. Eedrmans, 2007, 38.

and ultimately eradicated by technique. Against this trend, some Christian theologians have reaffirmed that suffering possesses metaphysical and even redemptive meaning. It is to them that I shall now turn, arguing that, although they are right to try and grapple with suffering theologically, attributing an inherently positive or even redemptive meaning to suffering is highly problematic. At first sight, this may seem to have little to do, if anything at all, with belonging christianly. Yet, as Kilby and Davies point out, "implicit construals of the nature and value of suffering and loss may already be shaping theological positions in significant and unacknowledged ways."[450] Echoing them, I will therefore argue that underlying theologies of suffering have an implicit yet significant impact on our understanding of a life shaped by Christ, and therefore of the nature and actualisation of the concept of belonging christianly offered in this thesis.

In 'Supralapsarianism, or "O Felix Culpa", Alvin Plantinga makes inflated claims regarding the co-redemptive nature or function of human suffering, curiously implying the insufficiency of Christ's own suffering.[451] Plantinga's treatment of suffering is paired with an odd, yet powerful and in one form or another widespread, justification of suffering and evil, which by his own admission bears a striking resemblance to the theodicies he has forcibly rejected.[452] Plantinga's daunting and entirely hypothetical arguments enable him, or so he claims, to simultaneously defend supralapsarianism,[453] and give an answer or a Christian theodicy,[454] to the modern conundrum of sin and suffering.[455] In the analytic fashion, Plantinga

[450] Kilby and Davies, "Introduction" in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, 1.

[451] Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'", in Peter van Inwagen (ed.), *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, London: William B. Eerdmanns, 2004, 1-25. From now on referred to as "Felix Culpa". For a critique of Plantinga's essay see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Plantinga on "Felix Culpa", *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2), 2008, 123-140. I wrote my own critique of Plantinga before finding McCord Adams' article.

[452] Plantinga, "Felix Culpa", 5.

[453] For a very quick summary of the distinction between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism in the context of the discussion of predestination in Calvinist theology see McCord Adams, "Plantinga on "Felix Culpa", 127-28. My own use of the term supralapsarianism referred to the eternal predestination of Christ, which is the fundamental purpose of the incarnation. See Horan, "How Original was Scotus on the Incarnation?", 381.

[454] Plantinga, "Felix Culpa", 11. See McCord Adams, "Plantinga on "Felix Culpa", 127

[455] I say modern because the issue is posed differently with modernity. See Kilby, "Sin and Suffering Reconsidered", in Jessica Coblentz and Daniel P. Horan (eds.), *The Human in a Dehumanizing World: Re-Examining Theological Anthropology and Its Implications*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022, 33-48.

considers what would be the best possible world and concludes that such a world would be one where God exists and which contains the Incarnation and Atonement:

> God's fundamental and first intention is to actualize an extremely good possible world […]; but all those worlds contain Incarnation and Atonement and hence also sin and evil; so the decree to provide incarnation and atonement and hence salvation is prior to the decree to permit fall into sin.[456]

Plantinga does not explain *why* a world that contains the Incarnation and especially atonement would be inherently superior. Crucially, he argues 'that no matter how much evil, how much sin and suffering a world contains, the aggregated badness would be outweighed by the goodness of incarnation and atonement, outweighed in such a way that the world in question is very good."[457] Suffering becomes simultaneously "a necessary condition of the goodness of the world in question", as well as insignificant in the face of such goodness. In contrast, David Bentley Hart, with his usual vitriolic rhetoric, forcefully rejects this sort of reasoning as "quite monstrous", arguing instead that "every evil that time comprises, natural or moral—a worthless distinction since human nature is a natural phenomenon—is an arraignment of God's goodness."[458] Considering atonement and more specifically Christ's sacrifice, Plantinga argues that human suffering is co-redemptive:

> In suffering, then, we creatures can be like Christ. We get to take part and *participate* in his redemptive activity. So, for a highly eligible world to be actualized, *more is needed than just the suffering of Christ.*[459]

However, Plantinga does not explain *why* that is the case.[460] Just as he takes for granted that the best possible world contains the incarnation and atonement and that this justifies and

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[456] Plantinga, "Felix Culpa", 11

[457] Idem.

[458] David Bentley Hart, "God, Creation, and Evil: The Moral Meaning of creatio ex nihilo", *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, 3(1), September, 2015, 1-17, 12 and 5.

[459] Plantinga, "Felix Culpa", 17.

[460] I agree with him that such a world would indeed be superior, but with a *very* different understanding of the purpose and function of both the Incarnation and the atonement as I demonstrated respectively in Part 1 and 2.

outweighs the suffering experienced by creatures, so does he take it as a given that human suffering, and not just Christ's suffering, is required for the best possible world to be actualised, even after the resurrection.[461] To support his claim, Plantinga invokes Paul (Colossians, 1:24), 'whose credentials here are certainly beyond question'.[462] Paul cannot be brushed away, but Plantinga's and (as we shall see) John Paul's reading of Paul are not the only way of reading Paul's theology of suffering and should therefore not be accepted unquestioned.[463] Moreover, are we not allowed to, in fact, *should we not*, worry that Plantinga's claim seems to downplay the redemptive power, efficacy, and gratuitousness of Christ, and focus disproportionately on suffering, Christ's and *ours*, giving it the highest meaning and role in the drama of salvation? To explore this further, I shall now turn to John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* to which Plantinga also refers.[464]

John Paul II makes a series of strong claims similar to Plantinga's about suffering, as he unpacks suffering's so-called "salvific meaning" and "power".[465] Describing Christ's suffering as "substitutive" and "above all […] redemptive",[466] John Paul also uses transactional language to describe an economy of suffering, with Christ's suffering at the centre and ours adjacent to it, which is characteristic of some theologies of atonement.[467] Thus, Christ's suffering is "the *price* of redemption" and this transactional language is also applied to human suffering:[468] "Through their sufferings, in a certain sense they *repay* the *infinite price* of the

[461] Interestingly Plantinga only talks about human suffering, seemingly leaving the suffering of the rest of creation (theologically) meaningless.

[462] Idem, 18.

[463] For a nuanced assessment of Paul's theology of suffering see the work of Dorothea Bertschmann. "Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul" in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, 3-22. I am grateful to Karen Kilby and John Barclay for mentioning her work to me.

[464] John Paul II, "Salvifici Doloris", 11 February 1984, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html (last accessed on 13 September 2023).

[465] Idem, §1 and §16.

[466] Idem, §17.

[467] It is worth noticing however that there is no mention of God's wrath or judgment. Rather, the focus is on Christ's redemptive sacrifice and action through suffering, suffering in which we are called to partake through our own suffering.

[468] Idem, §19. My emphasis.

Passion and death of Christ, which became the *price* of our Redemption."[469] Suffering, that of Christ and then ours, rather than God's gratuitous love, seems to become the centre of the mechanism of salvation.[470] Even when not purely transactional, "redeemed suffering" is understood as the pedagogy of God—"through suffering those surrounded by the mystery of Christ's redemption become mature enough to enter this kingdom",[471] thus establishing a direct link between suffering on the one hand, and maturity, growth, and salvation as participation in the kingdom, on the other. To suffer is to make oneself available, "to become particularly susceptible, particularly open to the working of the salvific powers of God, offered to humanity in Christ."[472]

Suffering therefore is an essential condition, the proper landscape, or so it seems, of authentic Christian living … and therefore of belonging christianly. Thus, John Paul quotes Paul's Letter to the Romans: "We are […] fellow heirs with Christ, *provided* we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."[473] The Christian is therefore, or here again, so it seems, the one who does not shy away from suffering but rather *embraces* it joyfully or eagerly, as the (unavoidable) condition of their participation in Christ. However, redeeming human suffering is not just a way of sharing in Christ's glory, what John Paul calls the "supernatural" meaning or end of suffering. It is also properly "human" or natural, as "*in it* the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission."[474]

At this stage, Plantinga and John Paul's theological proposals may seem overwhelming and (almost) impossible to resist, apparently bearing the seal of approval of weighty voices of the Christian tradition: Scripture, especially Paul, but also Christ himself; (early) Christian martyrs; saints such as Teresa of Avila, who was able to say "I desire to suffer for thou didst

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[469] Idem, §21. My emphasis.

[470] Although proponents of this approach would certainly see such undeserved and consented suffering as a sign of God's gratuitous love.

[471] Ibid.

[472] Idem, §23. John Paul does not explain how this pedagogy of suffering accounts for what McCord Adams calls "horrors". Thus, she writes that "horrors are *prima facie* life ruinous, person destroying because they threaten to swallow up the positive meaning of the participant's life. Horrendous evils positively litter the actual world. See McCord Adams, "Plantinga on "Felix Culpa", 136.

[473] Rom. 8, 17-18 in John Paul, *Salifici Doloris,* §22. My emphasis.

[474] Idem, §31.

suffer";[475] mystics experiencing Christ's passion; the practice of corporeal mortification in some religious orders until relatively recently; and even magisterial approval with John Paul, both through his writing and in his own life, with the witness of his long and debilitating illness.[476] Although Catholicism does not have a monopoly on dolorist spirituality, as shown in Plantinga's essay, there nonetheless seems to be something distinctively Catholic about it. Moreover, it seems to suggest that the authentic Christian/Catholic way of life ought to be a way of actively choosing (and even seeking) suffering every time it presents itself to us.[477]

2. What is wrong with suffering

The remainder of this chapter will aim to do three things. It will reflect on why this 'family of ideas" which, "despite their strong pedigree in Christian spirituality and theology—particularly Western Christian spirituality and theology" we want to "reject[..] as profoundly problematic".[478] It will then ask what an authentically Christian 'non-pathological' understanding of suffering might look like, and how it might affect the way we talk about belonging christianly. This will lead us to think about related concepts of kenosis and vulnerability in the next chapter.

On the surface, Plantinga's and John Paul's accounts of suffering as co-redemptive seem promising, resolving in *a tour de force* the 'cognitive dissonance' experienced by the

[475] On this see Noelia Bueno-Gómez, ""I Desire to Suffer, Lord, because Thou didst Suffer": Teresa of Avila on Suffering", *Hypatia* 34(4), 2019 Fall, 755-776.

[476] More recently, such an understanding of suffering is exemplified in the life of the children of Fatima or in Paul VI's offering of his suffering for the success of the Second Vatican Council. See John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, trans. Dorothy White, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1965, xxviii.

[477] As also demonstrated by popular devotions such as some prayers for the stations of the Cross such as: "My Jesus, Who by Thine own will didst take on Thee the most heavy cross I made for Thee by my sins, oh, make me feel their heavy weight, and weep for them ever while I live." Or "Pardon me, my God, and permit me to accompany You on this journey. You go to die for the love of me; I want, my beloved Redeemer, to die for the love of You. My Jesus, I will live and die always united to You." Or again "O Jesus who for love of me didst bear Thy Cross to Calvary. In Thy sweet Mercy grant to me to suffer and to die with Thee." See Saint Alphonsus de Liguori. https://mycatholic.life/catholic-prayers/stations-of-the-cross/ (last accessed on 13 September 2023). Richard Furey, Mary's Way of the Cross, Blackwell, 1984. The prayer is quoted in *The Mission Book: a Manual of Instructions and Prayers* published by James Duffy of Dublin in 1857. The Mission Book says that its contents are drawn "chiefly from the works of St Alphonsus de Liguori." His dates were 1696 to 1787. I am grateful to Andy Doyle for this bibliographic information.

[478] Murray, "Living Sacrifice", 191.

sufferer.[479] This, however, raises at least several significant issues. The first obvious issue is ethical and epistemological. As they seek to grant suffering redemptive meaning, they run the risk of justifying suffering, in the same manner that theodicists justify evil.[480] This, however, is not the only issue. Indeed, it is not *just* that the sufferer *can* discover sustaining meaning in suffering, or that suffering *can* be a school for growth in virtues such as humility, empathy, or attentiveness to the needs of others, all good in themselves. Instead, it seems that the suffering Christian must discover sustaining meaning in suffering. More, suffering itself seems to be meaningful and the pre-requisite to authentic human discovery and Christian discipleship as seen in *Salvifici Doloris.* A third, and perhaps even more concerning issue, is that not only is agency upon their life given to the ones who suffer, but they are also given the capacity to transform what seemed sterile and dead into the very means of their salvation and connection to God.

Suffering thus understood possesses mystical, metaphysical, and soteriological meaning and purpose as a connection between Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, and our tribulations, death, and resurrection is established. This allows the sufferer to participate in their redemption, and that of others. Through their sharing in Christ's redemptive suffering and death, their suffering becomes restorative, purgatorial, and even redemptive, thereby establishing a disturbing economy of redemptive suffering. While this may seem pastorally helpful as a way to strengthen the faith and give hope and consolation to the afflicted, it implies on the one hand that it is Christ's suffering per se that is redemptive and on the other hand that Christ's redemptive work is insufficient. In suffering and dying, sufferers imitate their Saviour, the Word made flesh who suffered in his humanity and died on the Cross. It is almost like it is now suffering itself that conveys the *imago dei,* as if the face deformed by suffering is the one that best represents Christ, not because God stands in solidarity among, with, and as the afflicted, a point which I will come back to at the end of the chapter, but because suffering itself has become God-like or Godly, thus giving suffering a quasi-sacramental quality. It is no

[479] Bertschmann, ""What Does not Kill Me Makes Me Stronger" – Paul and Epictetus on the Correlation of Virtues and Suffering", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 82(2), 2020, 256-275, 267.

[480] On how theodicists justify evil see Kilby, ——, *God, Evil and the Limits of the Theology*, London: T&T Clark, 2020, 67-84. Plantinga explicitly justifies suffering: "*No matter* how much evil, how much sin and suffering a world contains, the aggregated badness would be outweighed by the goodness of incarnation and atonement, outweighed in such a way that the world in question is very good." Plantinga, "Felix Culpa", X.

longer the God made flesh that suffers in his humanity as the Suffering Servant, but suffering itself which is imported in the Godhead.[481]

Kilby also stresses the importance of what she calls "the position of the onlooker to suffering".[482] She establishes a crucial ethical and epistemological "grammatical distinction" between "first", "second" and "third persons" accounts of suffering.[483] She insists that "we can act to alleviate suffering, we can pray for those who suffer, we can sorrow for those who suffer, but there is no justification in finding meaning in that which damages and destroys the lives of others."[484] Thus, not only is granting suffering itself meaning ethically problematic as it seeks to render suffering acceptable and even desirable, it is also epistemologically inappropriate because it grants the onlooker, especially theologians or church leaders, with an unbalanced hermeneutical power upon, and therefore a misconstrued relationship with the sufferer as they seek to determine the meaning of their suffering.[485] Kilby's attitude towards suffering echoes her critique of social trinitarianism. Kilby herself suggests the comparison.[486] She goes as far as proposing "something like an 'apophatic' moment in our response to some kinds of suffering [as] both necessary and difficult to sustain."[487] Like her "kind of 'apophatic' Trinitarianism", its theological and pastoral prudence are rooted in epistemic humility, as she "warns us against the danger of making sense of suffering when one ought not to."[488]

However, tempting it may seem to be able to say *more* about the Trinity or evil and suffering,[489] one must resist the temptation and acknowledge the limits of theology, that is

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[481] Kilby finds this exemplified in the theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar. See Kilby, *Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012.

[482] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, 169.

[483] Kilby, "Eschatology, suffering and the limits of theology" in *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler, Mariel Mazzocco and Ghislain Waterlot (eds.), Berlin: De Gruyter., 2017, 279-92, 288.

[484] Idem, 289.

[485] See the book of Job.

[486] Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering", *Modern Theology* 36 (1), 2020, 92-104, 92.

[487] Idem 99.

[488] Idem, 103.

[489] Ibid.

one's limitation in front of the Mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of evil to which she associates suffering. Kilby acknowledges that "it is difficult to maintain an *apophatic* unreconciled stance towards suffering, and even when one does, there seems to be a final temptation once again—but on a higher level—quietly to come to terms with suffering, by somehow merging what might call the 'darkness of suffering' into the 'darkness of God.'"[490] Is there anything left for the theologian, and more broadly the Christian, to say about suffering? What does it mean to respond to suffering christianly, and what does it have to do with belonging christianly?

3. What can we say about suffering?

If suffering cannot be given the depth and density of redemptive meaning, what is there to say about it, and what can suffering tell us about belonging? The point here is not to deny the possibility of a positive outcome *in the midst* of suffering but to challenge the attribution of a positive value to suffering *as such*. Indeed, as Kilby points out,

> there is, it seems to me at least, no formula, no algorithm, by which one can take suffering, and add in a dose of prayer or piety or attentiveness or love and know that something transformatively meaningful and valuable will appear – this side of the eschaton, anyways.[491]

In another essay, Kilby offers to re-examine the relationship between sin and suffering in the Christian tradition, as well as in contemporary discourse. She notices "the complex entanglement, an interweaving, of sin and suffering" in "dehumanising realities such as racism, colonialism, poverty, and sex abuse."[492] Consequently, she is wary of "tendencies to sacralize or valorize suffering, to associate suffering first of all with a pure, intensified form of love."[493] Instead, she argues that "above all we should associate suffering with sin, with being afflicted and damaged by a larger system of sin and likely drawn into its webs.'[494] Kilby's central

[490] Ibid.

[491] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", 168.

[492] Kilby, "Sin and Suffering Reconsidered", 36.

[493] Ibid.

[494] Ibid.

premise is that "suffering and loss are not good'.[495] This seemingly unproblematic and "platitudinous" statement is in fact theologically ambitious as it requires:

> to show that holding firm to such a hypothesis is compatible with a fully formed Christian vision of things, a vision that can do justice to the centrality of the cross, to the significance of martyrs, to Gospel verses about taking up one's cross, and losing one's life to find it, to various themes from Paul, and even perhaps to something in the mystical dereliction tradition.[496]

Kilby develops this elsewhere, as she seeks to identify how this ontologically negative vision of suffering can be compatible with a religious tradition that places the Cross at its centre. More specifically, there she attempts to answer why it is that the lives of martyrs seem to echo Christ so profoundly in the Christian imagination. Kilby contends that what makes the life of martyrs Christ-like is *not* "some dimly perceived and mysterious ultimate value in suffering and loss, so much as that in them we see worked out an ultimate indifference to suffering and loss, a refusal to be moved by suffering and loss."[497] Put differently it is not death that make martyrs Christ's like but their lives, or more specifically way they conducted their lives, following in his steps, living as if death were no longer. Such sacrificed lives, that of Christ and that of martyrs, are therefore characterised by an "ultimate" rather than an emotional or immediate indifference to suffering. Instead of being defined by suffering, Christ and the martyrs are characterised by precisely their refusal to grant suffering a defining character—and indeed the ultimate word—over their lives—*death does not have the last word*. Although Kilby does not draw the parallel herself, one can also think of the ultimate indifference to fear. Here, one is reminded of Psalm 23, especially verse 4:

> Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

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[495] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", 167.

[496] Idem, 163.

[497] Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*, 136.

In doing so, Christ, and martyrs after him, break the logic of death in which suffering and/or fear threatens to imprison us, what Kilby calls "enacted *privatio boni*". [498] This brings us far beyond an embrace of suffering, and its adjacent cult of death, fear and loss, into life lived "as if the Kingdom of God had already come".[499] Thus,

> If sometimes, by God's grace people manage to resist the wider webs even as they are afflicted by and suffer under them, then *it is the resistance, the refusal to be drawn in and to cease to love even as one suffers, rather than the suffering itself, that speaks to us of the cross of Christ, of the sacred and redemptive.*[500]

Following this change of paradigm, the inflection is no longer on suffering or death themselves. Instead of embracing suffering, the follower of Christ is invited to resist suffering's *de*humanising rather than humanising tendency. This is crucially important because if this is true, the condition for participation in Christ is not suffering but love, love *always*, even in the midst of unavoidable suffering. The Christ-like lives of martyrs therefore constitute examples not of redemptive suffering, but of freedom and love, that is of lives no longer *driven* by fear of death and loss, but guided by love, love lived amid hostility, love rooted in a deep sense, awareness and fidelity to the theocentric belonging, even to the point of death.

This indifference to suffering is not, however, a call to inaction or passivity vis-a-vis suffering. On the contrary, it is a call to resistance. Indeed, ultimate indifference is not mere indifference. It is the ultimate response to unavoidable suffering, that is the sort of suffering upon which the sufferer has no agency,[501] or that the sufferer consents to suffering for the greater good.[502]. As a result, ultimate indifference is not the primary response to suffering, which is resistance. Distinguishing between avoidable and unavoidable suffering on the one

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[498] Ibid.

[499] Gregersen, The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World", 40 (3), Fall 2001, 192-207, 203.

[500] Kilby, "Sin and Suffering Reconsidered", 33. My emphasis.

[501] It would be better to say that the agent does not have the agency to avoid suffering, but still possesses the agency of responding to suffering in a variety of ways. Here one would need to reflect upon the interpenetrative roles of the agent's agency and God's grace.

[502] Although Kilby does not specify, presumably this ultimate indifference to suffering and loss only applies to suffering and loss affecting oneself.

hand, and ultimate and emotional indifference on the other hand, allows us to account for the reality and necessity of a healthy fear of death and loss as an evolutionary skill that protects us, among other sentient animals, from avoidable harm and danger,[503] while rejecting the idea that death and loss have an intrinsic positive value. If death and loss are chosen, it is despite their lack of meaning, in favour of a meaningful purpose. Therefore, ultimate indifference is not a rejection of or an escape from the world, but on the contrary a greater and deeper engagement with a complex world in which sin and suffering are entangled and unavoidable aspects of human life.

4. <u>What belonging christianly has to say about suffering:</u>

To conclude this chapter, it is important to sum up our findings and articulate more explicitly what this has to do with what I called in the shape of belonging christianly. If Kilby's theological proposal is correct, suffering has no intrinsic meaning or positive value or significance whatsoever.[504] Therefore, what characterises the Christian's response to suffering is *not* embrace or passive/submissive resignation in the face of suffering, but love. In Christ's life and death, what is revealed is not a suffering God, but "God's participation in the suffering world", that is a God who establishes a relation of solidarity with the whole of the suffering creation. In other words, in Christ it is not suffering that is divinised but love, and through love the sufferer alongside whom Christ suffers. In "The Cross of Christ and Evolutionary World", Gregersen writes:

> the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or 'deep' incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature. Understood this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition.[505]

The proposal made in this chapter differs from that defended by Gregersen in that Gregersen seems to grant suffering itself, rather than the divine act of solidarity, with redemptive power, and to renounce divine impassibility.[506] Where Gregersen and I are in agreement however, is

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[503] Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World", 198.

[504] Here one may wish to nuance this claim slightly. For instance, Gregersen reflects upon the evolutionary value of suffering. Idem, 196-99.

[505] Idem, 205.

[506] For a strong defense of divine impassibility see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*. For a critique of Weinandy's theology of suffering see Kilby. Kilby does not challenge Weinandy's defense of divine impassibility, which she describes as "the definitive critical examination and rebuttal of modern

that it is not primarily *we* who are co-suffering with Christ, that is who are standing in solidarity with Christ in Christ's suffering, but Christ who stands in solidarity with us and all of the suffering creation. To speak the language of participation, it is not so much we that are participating in Christ's suffering but Christ that is participating in ours, and in doing so offers us to participate in the divine Life which is beyond suffering. In other words, this turns the relationship between participation and suffering upside down and questions the very idea of participative suffering understood as our participation in Christ's suffering, whilst offering the possibility to redeem the concept of "co-suffering", used by Plantinga and John Paul II, by turning it around.

Accordingly, suffering is not a pre-condition to belonging christianly.[507] Suffering remains empty of meaning, but is counter-balanced by the hope of '"vindication and restoration" and the trust in Christ' solidarity—God with us—signified by belonging christianly.[508] Suffering is not necessary, nor is it to be actively pursued to be united to Christ, but Christ is united to us in our suffering and in being united to us in our suffering promises and offers life and healing. In Christ, God's sustaining and vindicating solidarity breaks the logic of death in which suffering threatens to imprison us. This, however, does not provide us with a privileged epistemological position vis-à-vis suffering. On the contrary, it proclaims the incomprehensibility and meaninglessness of suffering and evil. Therefore, rephrasing slightly the goal of this chapter we can say that the call to imitate Christ is not fundamentally or primarily a call to suffer, but a call to love. Belonging christianly is therefore the process of being reshaped according to that primordial love, to 'become the precentors and *cantores* of creation in its song of lament and longing, with the Spirit leading the way.'[509] Although what belonging christianly has to say about suffering is important; what it does not or cannot say about suffering is also of great importance.

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passibilism", but his strong claims upon the meaning of suffering. Thus she writes concerning the last chapter of *Does God Suffer?*: "What is missing in this chapter, then, is any sense of bafflement before suffering, of being silenced by it, brought to the end of what can be explained; there is no attention to the limits of the applicability of the explanations of purpose and meaning that are set out." Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering", 93-5.

[507] This is not to say that a particular experience of suffering cannot lead with God's grace, to a deeper sense and awareness of belonging, through a deeper sense of connection with God and with others.

[508] Bertschmann, "Suffering, Sin and Death in Paul", 18.

[509] Idem, 20.

Chapter 9:

Misidentification with Christ's condescension and the dangers of self-emptying: Rejecting kenotic belonging

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,

he *humbled himself*
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
(Philippians, 2: 5-8. My emphases)

1. A misguided *celebration* of vulnerability

It is easy to (mis)understand imitation of Christ as a call toward self-emptying, or *kenosis* in Christianese. After all, in the Incarnation God the *Most High* became the *Lowest.*[510]

[510] see Christian Bobin, *Le Très-bas*, Gallimard, 1992. Also see Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (ii, 7) which provides the basis for the doctrine of kenosis.

In Christ, the Word's journey is one of *kenosis*, that is of self-*emptying*, of surrendering to the Father, and of self-*giving* to the Father. Christ's path is one of relinquishing the security of impassibility to embrace the abysmal depth of human, and more broadly creaturely, experience, from creaturely (inter)dependency,[511] fragility, instability, suffering, and even a violent death. However, is *this* what is *really* needed? Isn't this call to relinquish security and agency, to *embrace* vulnerability, and powerlessness dangerous, pastorally, theologically inadequate,[512] and even "corrosive'".[513] Aren't such theologies uttered from a place of privilege, security, and power, by those who already enjoy them and therefore feel free or able to renounce them? Aren't such theologies inattentive to the reality of the suffering and diminishment which affect the lives of so many, and upon which it seems to add even more burdens? Is the celebration of diminishment, a call to becoming less, what most of us—especially the most vulnerable—really need to hear? Has not Christ become less so that we could become *more*? Can Christ's condescension—Him who nonetheless retained His divine nature—even be properly understood in terms of human diminishment? Is it therefore at all appropriate to present human diminishment as Christ-like and as a desirable aim, let alone as an absolute imperative of Christian living *for all*, indiscriminately, including those stripped of everything, devoid of the tokens of privilege that such a kenotic belong invites us to *condescend* to surrender? Is it compatible with what such vulnerable Christians may need—rest, healing, growth, and affirmation? At the risk of being insistent and perhaps platitudinous, what I want to stress in this chapter is that a call to become *less* is *not* what most of us, especially the most vulnerable in a *de*humanising world,[514] need to hear.[515] A similar point is made by Cathy Cohen about

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[511] See Mike Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", *Anglican Theological Review* 104(2), 2022, 134–147. I will come back to this article in the next chapter.

[512] Although they can sometimes be in tension, the two are intrinsically linked. Indeed, a balanced theology is rooted in the pastoral care of the church. Conversely, an appropriate pastoral attitude is also deeply theological.

[513] David Newheiser, "Why the world needs negative political theology", *Modern Theology* 36(1), January 2020, 5-12, 8.

[514] Although we are all finite mortal beings, and therefore all are ultimately vulnerable, some are more vulnerable and/or made more vulnerable, be it through disability, illness, age, race, sexuality, gender, poverty etc. Also see Tonstad——, "On Vulnerability" in *Suffering and the Christian Life*, in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.) *Suffering and the Christian Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 175-188, 179. Here Tonstad also introduces a distinction between vulnerability as potentiality and vulnerability as experience.

[515] As we shall see, even when such a call might need to be heard, the doctrine of kenosis, which articulates Christ's condescension, might be an inappropriate way of articulating it.

queer theory in her landmark essay "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens". There, she remarks:

> Queer theorising which calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore how some traditional social identities and communal ties *can, in fact, be important to one's survival.*'[516]

Confiding in her readers, she continues:

> I am still not interested in disassociating politically from those communities, *for queerness, as it is currently constructed, offers no viable political alternative,* since it invites us to put forth a political agenda that makes invisible the prominence of race, class, and to varying degrees gender in determining the life chances of those on both sides of the hetero/queer divide.[517]

More digging is required if one is to speak Christianese in a pastorally responsible way.

Although kenosis has become fashionable in contemporary theological discourse, this chapter will *not* be exploring in depth the numerous applications in contemporary theology in fields as varied as christology, ethics, ecclesiology, or spirituality. In fact, rather like my treatment of social trinitarianism after Kilby in chapter 1, it will focus on one important issue identified by her in the contemporary theological use of kenosis: the valorisation of loss and vulnerability. Another significant issue, (mis)identification with the divine, which Kilby also hints at but leaves unexplored, will be addressed in the next section. This will prove critical to thinking belonging christianly in a way that is theologically, politically, and pastorally responsible and sensitive.

As for her critique of social trinitarianism, Kilby wishes to understand what is seductive about kenosis that it enjoys such popularity in contemporary theological discourse. She presents the rise in popularity of kenosis as "the churchgoing cousin of a more widespread appeal of notions of "vulnerability" and "fragility'' which emerged in response to the modern

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[516] Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies,* 3(4), 1997, 437-465, 450. My emphasis.

[517] Ibid. My emphasis.

hubris of self-realisation, self-sufficiency, and full potential, the cult of performance."[518] Although she falls short of calling it corrective projectionism, the contemporary enthusiasm for kenosis can be seen as such: "We can fall into thinking that it is a unique contribution of the Christian faith to provide a corrective, to go in exactly the opposite direction, reacting against the flight from suffering by instead undertaking an embrace of suffering."[519] In the same way that (some) social theories of the Trinity can be better understood in reaction to the rise of individualism, contemporary theological use of kenosis can therefore be understood in reaction to "the wider [contemporary] Western culture […] excessive fear and denial of suffering, of diminishment and loss, of vulnerability and fragility, an excessive fear of finitude."[520]

Similarly, Tonstad remarks that "the need to affirm vulnerability has become very nearly a theological and theoretical truism, insistently prescribed as a remedy for any number of contemporary ills."[521] She adds that "the affirmation of vulnerability for human beings is intended to have salutary social, economic and political effects."[522] Roger Mitchell's essay on sovereignty, a theme also discussed by Tonstad, is one of many examples of this therapeutic kenotic turn.[523] Understanding "sovereignty and empire [as] secular political forms that have deeply penetrated the Western perception of power but are incompatible with the divine nature as revealed in the testimony of Jesus", Mitchell argues that:

> it appears to be necessary to initiate *a recovery of the kenotic understanding of authority*, not as a nuance or qualification to sovereignty but as a completely different alternative configuration of divine power.[524]

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[518] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), *Suffering and the Christian Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 163-74, 165.

[519]Idem, 173.

[520] Idem, 172.

[521] Tonstad, "On Vulnerability", 175.

[522] Idem, 181.

[523] Roger Mitchel, "Authority Without Sovereignty: Toward a Reassessment of Divine Power" in *Toward a Kenotic Vision of Authority* in the Catholic Church, Anthony J. Carroll, Marthe Kerkwijk, Michael Kirwan, James Sweeney (eds.), The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington DC, USA, 2013, 41-52, 42.

[524] Idem, 41-3. My emphasis.

Yet, if kenosis is a deliberate self-emptying, a call to *embrace* vulnerability and fragility respectively the capacities "to be wounded" and "to be broken",[525] then it seems that appeals to kenosis encourage wounded-ness and brokenness or at least presents the possibility to be wounded or broken as a cause for celebration.[526] Yet, for Kilby, if the capacity to become less is something to reckon with and, on some occasions, accepted as an unavoidable part of existing as contingent, finite, and fallen beings living in a no less contingent, finite, and fallen world; diminishment and loss *per se* should *not* be celebrated and embraced. Here, it is not hard to see the underlying connection between Kilby's refusal to attribute positive meaning to suffering and her wariness vis-à-vis appeals to kenosis. Both promote suffering and diminishment as the path toward identification with and/or imitation of Christ.

I will explore further and even interrogate identification with Christ in the next two chapters, but first I want to look at another reason to call into question affirmative strategies of vulnerability. Tonstad tells us that "the affirmation of vulnerability is intended to have political effects, to provide the basis for a new political solidarity of the vulnerable",[527] and that is meant to be achieved by calling into question Modernity's myths of self-sufficiency and denial of vulnerability. However, Tonstad points out, "the contemporary socioeconomic and political order doesn't necessarily work by denying vulnerability, but by intensifying it."[528] Indeed denial strategies do not come out of a lack of awareness of vulnerability but on the contrary an acute awareness of human fragility, which leads in turn to "self-securization" as a doomed yet (almost) irresistible survival strategy.[529] This is precisely what characterises postlapsarian belonging as I have described it repeatedly. If this is true, then affirmative strategies may not be so different from denial strategies, and like them, they are incompatible with the sort of

[525] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", 172.

[526] Ibid: "It is possible to go beyond an *acceptance* of limitation and the inescapability of some suffering in the order of things, to its *embrace*. It is possible, that is to say, to go beyond the recognition that vulnerability and fragility are part of the whole that makes up our lives, and that the experience of diminishment is part of the experience of life, to the *celebration* of vulnerability and fragility – to the celebration, under the title of *kenosis,* of diminishment."

[527] Tonstad, "On Vulnerability", 177.

[528] Idem, 178.

[529] Idem, 177.

belonging articulated in this thesis. How is it that denial and affirmation of vulnerability might be two sides of the same coin, or two twin responses to the "problem" of vulnerability?

Tonstad is interested in “the variety of self-images that can be negotiated by way of a relation to vulnerability.”[530] Thus, she identifies what she calls “the affirmation of vulnerability as a practice of mastery.”[531] Indeed, she writes,

> to insist not only on one's vulnerability but to make a project of the affirmation of vulnerability in both practical and theoretical terms can become a way to steel oneself against the discovery of unexpected vulnerabilities. Paradoxically, then, the ‘maximalist’ affirmation of vulnerability can, as a strategy for negotiating life, be transformed into a management strategy of the very vulnerability by which one sought to be undone.[532]

A similar point is made by Noelia Bueno-Gómez about Theresa of Avila's desire to suffer: "By desiring suffering in order to imitate or to serve God[…] she actively managed her suffering, transforming it into something she was able to control instead of passively endure."[533] Thus, instead of letting go of security and stability, affirmative/ing strategies can, in fact, reintroduce and reinforce "self-securization” in more subtle (or pernicious) and possibly intensified ways. For Tonstad, *affirming* vulnerability can easily become an “inverting” strategy by which the terms are reconfigured but ultimately reinforced.[534] Indeed, what distinguishes kenotic strategies is not merely the translation into God-talk of affirmations of vulnerability, although they are also that. More importantly for us here is that what distinguishes kenotic strategies from other strategies of affirmation of vulnerability is that here affirmation of vulnerability is understood as a way of imitating and/or the condition to identify with Christ. As a result, I now

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[530] Idem, 186.

[531] Idem, 188.

[532] Idem, 186-7.

[533] Noelia Bueno-Gómez, ““I Desire to Suffer, Lord, because Thou didst Suffer": Teresa of Avila on Suffering”, *Hypatia* 34(4), 2019 Fall, 755-776, 769.

[534] Tonstad develops a similar line of argument about inclusion in her essay "The Limits of Inclusion" where she argues that inclusivist queer strategies often rely on there being an exclusive *other* which functions as a boundary and a way of reasserting one’s integrity and righteousness. This leads her to distinguish between *inverting* and *undoing* strategies. She argues that the former, with which she identifies inclusion, is only superficially subversive and a fundamentally conservative strategy: "Rather than undoing the distinction between livable and unlivable, recognizable and unrecognizable, this fantasy [] *stabilizes* the determinations that identify some as less deserving than others.” Tonstad, “The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and its Others”, *Theology & Sexuality*, 21(1), 2015, 1-19, 2.

want to turn to two forms of (mis)identification with Christ that arise from the use of kenosis in ecclesiology and/or political theology.

In chapter 8, I argued after Kilby that what ought to be imitated in Christ, and indeed in martyrs, is not suffering *per se*, although imitation *can* take the shape(lessness) of suffering, but "ultimate indifference" or freedom in the face of suffering, that is resistance to the logic of death and fear in which suffering threatens to imprison us. Therefore, although following Christ might involve diminishment and suffering in the context of a finite and fallen world, such diminishment and suffering are more like involuntary, *yet freely accepted* side effects or casualties of answering Christ's call in a lapsed world, rather than an aim or even a privileged means of Christian discipleship. Following Christ and therefore belonging christianly as understood in this thesis do *not* require one to embrace diminishment or suffering. Instead, one is invited to discern and distinguish the kind of suffering and diminishment that one might be called to consent to follow Christ in the service of creation from the kind of suffering and diminishment that are just sheer privation. While the former, although not good in themselves are unavoidable consequences of the good of responding to Christ's calling, the latter have nothing to do with Christ and everything to do with sin and fear and therefore need to be resisted.

This responsibility to care for oneself can be summed up with/by the idea that self-giving is not giving up on oneself. This may seem strange and indeed needs to be further defended as it seems to directly clash with Christ's own teaching to his disciples. Indeed, how does this "not giving up on oneself" relate to Matt 16: 24-25 where Jesus tells his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, *let them deny themselves and take up their cross* and follow me. *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it*?" (My emphasis). Interestingly, this comes straight after Peter's commission and admonition, which will be discussed in the last chapter. There, Jesus admonishes Peter: "You are a stumbling block to me; *for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*." (My emphasis) This is a challenge that we ought to take seriously. In rejecting the affirmation (and embrace) of suffering and vulnerability, are we following in Peter's steps, that is, is our "mind not on divine things but on human things."? After all, isn't Jesus here, not Paul, or Plantinga, or John Paul II, calling us to self-denial? To answer this, it may be worth looking at Matt 16:25 again. "For those who want to save their *life* will lose it, and those who lose their *life* for my sake will find it".

The chiastic structure of the verse uncovers an economy defying any human logic. According to this paradoxical logic "saving" and "losing" are overturned and have opposite effects. I want to suggest that belonging christianly, and the kind of approach to suffering and vulnerability I am articulating are compatible with this logic beyond human logic. Therefore I contend that with this enigmatic verse, Christ is not calling us to become less or to embrace death but to embody what Kilby called "ultimate indifference", that is freeing ourselves, or letting ourselves be freed by him from self-securitization, that is from the kind of security and stability based upon exclusive and rivalrous, tribal belonging on which we cling and which render love of neighbour, and therefore authentic love of God and self, harder to achieve. One cannot save one's life by clinging to those survival mechanisms. One needs to learn to let go of them to learn to live in a new, arguably more vulnerable, but also and more importantly more creative, sustainable, and life-giving way.

Before I turn to the issues raised by the (mis)identification with Christ's divinity in this call to self-emptying, I wish to take into consideration two valuable comments made by a careful reader of this chapter.[535] Firstly, despite all the qualifications given in these two questions, am I not in the end advocating for a path that will invariably lead to suffering and vulnerability? Secondly, is the distinction between the embrace or affirmation of suffering and vulnerability on the one hand, and their acceptance as part of the postlapsarian human existence too theoretical? These two comments are obviously connected and the answer to the former lies in the distinction called into question by the latter. The theoretical distinction between affirmation and acceptance might indeed seem a needlessly theoretical distinction when confronted with evil, suffering, and diminishment, a time at which one's response to these challenges is seldom theoretical. It is also true that at first sight, both approaches have the same effect, as suffering and vulnerability are consented to. Nonetheless, while not seemingly very practical, this distinction can and ought to become a practical tool of discernment to develop appropriate and therefore distinct responses to the various kinds of suffering and diminishment one might be presented with. Furthermore, this distinction may at times really matter and constitute a salutary reminder that when Christians accept suffering or diminishment, it is not

[535] I am grateful to Jake Robins for his kind yet challenging comments.

suffering or diminishment that they embrace but Christ, and that the former are only passing shadows while the latter endures forever.[536]

2. Kenosis and the dangers of (mis)identifying with the divine

In the next chapter, I will explore the question of (mis)identification with the divine through a different yet related angle. To do so, I will discuss the work of Higton, Jennifer Harvey, and Karen Teel as they will help me give Kilby's critique a more extensive (and perhaps radical) treatment and development. For now, let us first turn to Judith Gruber's call in favour of a kenotic theology/ecclesiology as she will serve as an example of a theological take on kenosis that does not fall the pitfall of valorising suffering, loss, and diminishment, but that sheds light on another problem briefly identified by Kilby: the (mis)identification with the divine. Eventually, this will take us beyond our discussion of kenosis as we will explore the (in)appropriateness of identification with the divine for belonging christianly.

In a thought-provoking essay, Gruber suggests a radical reading of *Evangelii Gaudium*.[537] She contends that Pope Francis' first (and programmatic) apostolic exhortation might be read or even ought to be read as an invitation to be, and a programme for, a kenotic church. Gruber seeks "to take the belief in the incarnation to its *unsettling* theological conclusions", a promising orientation that resonates with this thesis' own aim.[538] Indeed, the implications she finds are far-reaching, remarkably ambitious, and indeed tantamount to a change of ecclesial paradigm for modern Catholicism, a change she argues was initiated or

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[536] This is not to say that we can brush them away easily, either emotionally or theologically/this is not to reduce the tragic reality of suffering and diminishment either experienced or witnessed, or the metaphysical and theological inconsistency or challenge that they present to us. See David Bentley Hart, "God Creation, and Evil", 1-17.

[537]Pope Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium", 24 November 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (last accessed on 16 September 2023). From now on EG. On the significance of EG in Francis's pontificate see Murray, Ecclesia *et Pontifice*: On Delivering on the Ecclesiological Implications of *Evangelii Gaudium,* Ecclesiology 12, 2016, 13-33. Also see Richard R. Gaillardetz, "THE "FRANCIS MOMENT": A NEW KAIROS FOR CATHOLIC ECCLESIOLOGY", Presidential Addresss, *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 69, 2014, 63-80.

[538] Judith Gruber, ""The Lord, your God, is in your Midst" (*EG* 4) *Evangelii Gaudium* – Francis's Call for a Kenotic Theology", in *Pope Francis and the future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the papal agenda*, Gerard Mannion (ed.), New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 55-74, 58. My emphasis.

rendered possible by the Second Vatican Council.[539] Thus, she exhorts us to resist the (false) dichotomy between church and world and "the accumulation of doctrinal wealth" that constitutes "dogmatic capitalism".[540] Although Pope Francis does not use the word kenosis at any point in the letter, he envisions the church as:

> an evangelising community […] involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; […] bridg[ing] distances, [..] *willing to abase itself if necessary*, […] embrac[ing] human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. (EG 24)

Francis continues: "The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ". (Idem) This leads Gruber to argue that "when the defining mission of the church is evangelization, and when evangelization is kenotic, then *being church is practicing kenosis.*"[541] Belonging, it therefore must follow, ought to be kenotic.

The first thing to say is that this might not be *per se* incompatible with what I argued in the previous section. Indeed, kenosis is here understood primarily as relationality and service, the bridging of distances and the embracing of life, and then only '*if necessary*' as diminishment. Accordingly, following Christ is not a call to diminishment, but a call to relationality and service. While this involves verticality and therefore condescension on the part of the Creator to belong to us, that is to enter into a new horizontal or *fraternal* relation with creation,[542] this is not the case for humans since they can only appropriately enter in relation to the realm of creation to which they already belong horizontally or fraternally. One way to understand that relationality, rather than diminishment, is at the centre of kenosis is to go back to Aquinas's understanding of relationality. Indeed, while creation enjoys a transformative relationship with God, that is to say, that created beings are *related to* God in

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[539] Idem, 61.

[540] Interestingly Gruber notices that dogmatic capitalism is still present in Pope Francis' encyclical: "In Francis's call for a kenotically poor church, then, there are still undercurrents of "dogmatic capitalism" – he does not apply his critique of material capitalism to the accumulation of doctrinal wealth." Idem, 72. Gruber also points out that Francis nonetheless "brings other interpretations of church teaching into play that run counter to these images and conflict with a consistently kenotic understanding of the church.' Idem, 71. Here, I would want to suggest that apophasis rather than kenosis might be a more appropriate way of achieving these aims.

[541] Idem, 67.

[542] More on the fraternal relocation of the divine and its implications for belonging christianly in chapter 11.

receiving their life from God; God, on the other hand, is not changed, transformed, or improved by creation, but remains immutable that is beyond change and creation. Condescension in the Incarnation is, therefore, God's way to initiate "real" relationship, in this aristotelo-thomist sense, with creation in the person of Jesus Christ who enters life in our midst, dependent on others.[543] While this helps us understand Christ's kenosis, it also helps us understand why to enter in a relationship with, and serve creation and their brethren, condescension is not necessary, or *indeed possible.* If condescension is assuming the wrong kind of cosmic positionally vis-à-vis the rest of creation, but also God, humans are called into a fraternal relationship with God and one another, which is the shape of belonging christianly.[544]

Going back to Gruber's essay, she insists that 'it is this relationality that implicitly makes kenosis the key metaphor for evangelisation in *Evangelii Gaudium*.'[545] Nonetheless, if Gruber does not succumb to the danger of justifying suffering and glorifying loss, a characteristic of some theological accounts of kenosis which we addressed in the previous section, she may however not be so successful regarding the other misuse of kenosis identified by Kilby, which I have coined (mis)identification with Christ's divinity.

In offering kenosis as a tool for thinking about the nature and the practice of what she calls "ecclesial theology", Gruber aims to assert the primordial theological value of the world,[546] to challenge ecclesial triumphalism and, more ambitiously perhaps, to re-envision the relationship between the church and the world not as separate entities with their own lives, but as co-dependent and interpenetrated realities. Thus, she affirms that "the church depends on the world to perform its defining task".[547] The church Gruber envisions is a humble and serving church that "gives itself fully up to the world to relate [the gospel] to the world".[548] It is a

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[543] On the idea of Christ's dependency and receptivity see again Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", 134: "Neither Jesus's incarnate life nor the life of the church can be conceived as involving preservation from creaturely interaction and dependence."

[544] This will be further developed in chapter 11 through the notions of the fraternal relocation of the divine in Christ and the fraternal restoration that it induces.

[545] Gruber, "Francis's Call for a Kenotic Theology", 67.

[546] Idem, 56. For Gruber, "the world is the foundational *locus theologicus*". Ibid.

[547] Idem, 67.

[548] Ibid.

church that *identifies* with Christ's condescension—"the word was fully divine but didn't hold on to its divinity".[549] It is therefore ironic that by this very last move, Gruber's ecclesiology runs the risk of reinforcing the very distinction and hubris she intends to challenge. Indeed, this is precisely what Kilby warns us against about this particular (mis)use of kenosis in ecclesiology or political theology. Thus she claims that "Identifying with the divine" or "suggest[ing] an analogy between a group currently in possession of *outsized* power and privilege, on the one hand, and the divine ('Christ Jesus in the form of God')" that is between "the powerful group's relinquishing of their power with the pure, unmerited generosity – condescension, even – of the Incarnation of the Son of God."[550] Gruber's essay is a very good example of this precisely because its tone is totally devoid of ecclesial triumphalism. Indeed, Kilby suggests a better, yet arguably less seductive, approach to misplaced power or authority:

> There is a certain irony here: hoping to encourage selflessness and humility, the theologian frames the situation in a way that points in exactly the opposite direction. In a context like this, it may well be more fitting to reach for a term related to repentance than for one that evokes the self-emptying of the Son of God.[551]

I will come back to the idea and practice of repentance and its role in belonging christianly in the next chapter where I will question the appropriateness of imitation with and identification of Christ and explore the alternative offered by Jennifer Harvey and Karen Teel—misidentification with Christ. Before that, however, I will briefly sum up what was discussed in the present chapter. Here, I have argued against what I have called kenotic belonging. In the first section, I discussed the issues raised by the valorisation and indeed the celebration of vulnerability and argued that belonging christianly does not involve celebrating vulnerability but coming to terms with it. In the second section, I explored another, perhaps less evident, issue with kenosis which I named the misidentification with the divine. This last point will now be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

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[549] Idem, 66.

[550] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", 166.

[551] Ibid.

Chapter 10:

From misidentification with the divine to disidentification from "the Black Christ"

At the beginning of chapter 7, I restated that Christ is both the perfect and ultimate model to imitate and indeed to identify with. I also asked two questions. If Christ is the appropriate model, are sinful humans appropriate imitators? At the end of chapter 9, a related question emerged—what constitutes authentic imitation of or identification with Christ for fallen humans? This question will be tackled more directly in the present and next chapters. Going even further this chapter will also question the appropriateness of imitation of, and identification with, Christ. To do so, I will briefly discuss Mike Higton's essay "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church" which offers an interesting transition between the kind of critique of kenotic identification offered by Kilby and the more radical (and inflammatory) critique of identification with Christ which are proposed by Harvey and Teel. I will then explore the idea of disidentification with the "Black Christ" as proposed by Jennifer Harvey and Karen Teel. As we will see, at the heart of these issues are distorted forms of belonging.

1. Privilege and (mis)identification with the divine

In an essay on Tanner's christology, Higton warns us against similar issues beyond kenosis, but related to issues around misplaced power and (mis)identification with Christ. In this essay, Higton does not speak of kenosis or condescension, or even of vulnerability. Instead, he is interested in the concepts of dependency and receptivity applied to christology and ecclesiology— "neither Jesus' incarnate life nor the life of the church can be conceived as involving preservation from creaturely interaction and dependence."[552] This is important for christology as well as ecclesiology as it is an invitation to take seriously Christ's human nature and resist the temptation of Docetism as well as an exhortation to avoid ecclesial arrogance and auto-sufficiency.[553] While there is still, to some degree, some kind of identification with Christ

[552] Mike Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", *Anglican Theological Review*, 104 (2), 2022, 134–147, 134.

[553] An example of this kind of ecclesial triumphalism can be found in a distorted exposition of the doctrine of *societas perfecta*. I offer a radically different way of looking at the idea of the church as *societas perfecta* in a paper given at the International "Santiago Group" Permanent Seminar in Catholic Practical

going on here, it is not the purely divine act of condescension, a vertical or top-down movement, but Christ's dependent humanity, that is a horizontal movement, that is emphasised. Thus, without resorting to kenosis, Higton, like Gruber, wants to stress the connection, and indeed the interdependence between the church and the world.

However, Higton's concern is broader or deeper than Gruber's and Kilby's. Engaging with Harvey's work, Higton is preoccupied with how (privileged) Christians identify perhaps too quickly and "uncritically" with Christ on the one hand,[554] and Christ with their actions on the other hand: "When I act, Christ acts, when I act, God acts, and the divine life flows through me into the world."[555] Here, the difference with the problem of kenosis raised in the previous chapter is subtle but crucial. Indeed, this suggests that the problem might not just be with identifying with Christ in the divine condescension, but with identifying with Christ *tout simply*, or at least uncritically and without attention to one's location and privilege in our postlapsarian world.

The sort of economy or perhaps christology in action it takes issue with is powerfully captured in the following text, attributed to Theresa of Avila and turned into a popular hymn:

Christ has no body but yours,

Theology Colloquium which was held at Laval University (Quebec) in June 2023: "The gifts of LGBT Catholics to the synodal church: Retrieving the motive of *societas perfecta*". There I argued that if one is to take the idea of the church as a perfect society seriously, that is to say, in the words of Leo XIII, that the church "possess[es] in itself and by itself, *through the will and loving kindness of its Founder*, all needful provision for its maintenance and action." (Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*, The Holy See, 1 November 1885,§35.https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyc-licals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_01111885_immortale-dei.html). If my appropriation of the doctrine is correct, it suggests that LGBT Catholics and other marginalised groups in the church, that is those whose belonging is limited, conditioned, or even denied, can, be the bearers of such ecclesial gifts. Here I am reminded of Forrest Clay's song "You must Go". After having described the rejection experienced by several individuals at the hands of their local church, the song ends with God directly addressing the outcasts:

> "And He said
> Child don't you go, I want your broken heart and your beautiful soul
> I've felt your hurting, and I've seen your giving
> And I'll stay right here till you have the power to stand
> *They may not want you, but I know they need you*
> So let us go."

(Forrest Clay, "You Must Go", in "Recover EP", *Liberator Music*, 2021, My emphasis.)
In other words, if the church is to be truly a perfect society, not in a moral sense, but a society that does rely on the richness granted by its founder, the church needs to be attentive to and reckon with the variety of gifts that it receives from Christ, lest it remain the [im]perfect society that it currently is.

[554] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do? A Case for disidentifying with Jesus" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, George Yancy (ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 2012, 84-100, 93.

[555] Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", 146.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

What is wrong with identifying with Christ, or indeed being Christ to the world and each other? After all, doesn't this christic identification reflect the sacramentality of Christian life, and the presence-absence of Christ among us? Isn't the church the Body of Christ, and aren't the church and its members called to make Christ present in and to the world? Isn't this very identification a call to responsibility and action, an ethical imperative to "impact[..] the civic body for the good", and in Christianese, bring the kingdom *here* and *now*?[556]

Yet, Higton, following Jennifer Harvey to whom I shall turn shortly, is wary of such identification and indeed suggests that it has potentially 'toxic' implications.[557] Indeed, behind Higton's concern is an attempt to tackle issues around privilege, *location*, power, and vulnerability and how theology can reinforce the power and privileges of some and indeed the vulnerability and lack thereof of others. Thus, Higton argues following Harvey that

> identifying with the divine is about the last thing that a White person whose life is embedded in White-supremacist structures should be doing – *at least in contexts where the relations between differently racialized groups is at stake.*[558]

[556] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 87.

[557] Higton, "Kathryn Tanner and the Receptivity of Christ and the Church", 145.

[558] Ibid.

He goes on to apply this to other areas of human identity characterised by unbalanced or distorted power dynamics such as sexuality, disability, and gender, insisting that

> identifying with the divine is, unavoidably, a move made in the midst of the flows of power that shape our world, and it can't help but interact with those flows. And however innocent it sounds, its interactions with those flows of power can make it toxic.[559]

Here we can notice the similarity with Kilby's quote at the end of the previous chapter, only here, Higton's move is more expansive.

Prima facie, disidentification with Christ seems to go against long-established mainstream Christian practices, but also against the very assertion that Christ is both the perfect and ultimate model upon which belonging christianly can be built. Disidentification also raises a significant challenge if one wishes to maintain an Alisonian anthropology in which imitation is at the centre of things. Yet, looking more closely at Teel and Harvey's racial critique, we will realise that it strongly echoes Alison's more general critique of "structures" of sin. I will argue that the two approaches aren't strictly irreconcilable and that some middle ground can be found. Some kind of disidentification is a prerequisite or rather a stage and instrument of what I will call "apophatic" and eschatological imitation and identification of Christ. This will lead me to distinguish between identification with Christ and imitation of Christ. But for now, I will explore why identification with Christ might not be such a good idea and why disidentification with Christ might prove to be a more appropriate provisional and purgatorial step in the process of receiving belonging from Christ. For this, I will discuss two essays that seek to offer theological responses to whiteness for white (American) Christians.

Although both essays are very contextual and focus primarily on race and *white* Christians in the United States, I will contend that the basic premise at the heart of both essays can be expanded beyond race to another form of systemic injustices or social sins. To be clear, this is not to "get white people off the hook", or to deny the distinctiveness of whiteness, of which Harvey writes:

> one of the many effects of whiteness is that it always already locates white people at the center of most narratives and structures. Such positioning is mitigated by class,

[559] Ibid.

gender, and sexual orientation, but *when racial difference is present white people tend to be positioned as primary actors in whatever location we find ourselves*.[560]

Rather, my expansive strategy seeks to reflect the ambivalence and complexity of the fragmentary lives of humans, simultaneously victims of and complicit in various distorted forms of belonging rooted in or corrupted by systems of injustice which include distortions of race, but also class, gender, sexuality, religion etc. As a result, I will conclude that it is not just white Christians that should disidentify with Christ if disidentification is indeed needed, but *all* Christians as they confess their sinfulness and their complicity in postlapsarian belonging.[561] However, we first need to understand what leads Teel and Harvey to argue against identifying with Christ.

2. The conundrum of "being white" and Christian:

Harvey's and Teel's essays are partly autobiographical.[562] They tell the stories of respectively a white American lesbian theologian and a white American Catholic female theologian fighting for racial justice and grappling with the "complex and hydra-headed phenomenon" of whiteness.[563] They intend to provide a theological and ethical response and a course of action for white Christians. Both authors, and also James Cone who will be briefly discussed, speak from a context shaped by the legacy of slavery and segregation. As such, they focus on the issue of systemic racism as it is encountered, or should we say stumbled upon, in their faith contexts. Yet, while one should be mindful of these contextual particularities, unfortunately, it is also true that whiteness but also other systemic forms of oppression and injustices whether based on race, economic status and inequalities, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. are also present in their distinctive ways in our British and wider European contexts. Although Harvey and Teel tackle opposite questions, respectively "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) and "What would Jesus *not* do?", they both take issue with the former, that is with the *a priori* benign idea that in the words of Teel:

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[560] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 94. My emphasis.

[561] The extent of, or even the pervasiveness of this should not come as a surprise and can indeed be read as a direct consequence or manifestation of original sin, which we discussed in the third chapter.

[562] Karen Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do: a white theologian engages whiteness" in *Christology and Whiteness*, 19-35.

[563] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 84.

> Surely a Christian could never go wrong in striving to imitate Christ, especially in racially charged situations where it seems obvious that kindness and compassion should replace hatred and misunderstanding.[564]

One concern shared by both authors is that WWJD? approaches to the Christian life tend to focus on private morality, thus failing to consider the systemic or structural underpinning problems, that is to say at the level of belonging, attached to whiteness and race that limit individual change. Race, Harvey tells us, is a complex social construction that relies upon and indeed "comes into existence in the relationships between institutional power, physical characteristics, and behavioral choices."[565] Considering the multifaceted nature of race is crucial if one wishes to tackle the issue to its roots. In Teel's words, "as a method for white Christians to discover how to address whiteness, asking 'What would Jesus do?' lends itself to answers that address symptoms, not the disease itself."[566] Yet, that its aims are too modest is not the only, or even the main issue that Teel and Harvey find in the "WWJD?" approach, at least as far as white Christians are concerned. Indeed, for Harvey

> the project of asking WWJD? has different implications for the white Christian than it does for the Black Christian, the Latina Christian, the Christian who is Asian American, or for any Christian whose racial identity locates them outside the presumed normativity of whiteness.[567]

As they discuss what it would mean for white Christians to ask "WWJD?", Teel and Harvey identify a series of considerations or obstacles to the identification of white Christians with Christ. A first and key issue is that white people do not normally see whiteness. Teel writes that

> We are barely aware of ourselves as "raced." […] In terms of the self-understanding of many whites […] to be white, we think, is to not race. To be white, we think is to be a

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[564] Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do", 23.

[565] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 85.

[566] Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do", 25.

[567] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 86. I will offer a rewriting of this quote toward the end of the section.

> unique, individual expression of universal humanity, while to be raced is to be conditioned, contingent, a less-than-adequate representation of universal humanity.[568]

This lack of cognitive racial awareness means that white people need to take race, and more specifically whiteness, more seriously if they wish to understand how they reproduce and benefit, sometimes unknowingly or even unwillingly, from unwarranted narratives based upon a structural racial iniquity that grant them social privileges.

This leads to the second key issue. White people cannot escape whiteness easily. Thus, Harvey claims that "white people need to continually acknowledge that we 'be white' even while we attempt to refuse to 'be white'."[569] Teel argues that "white Christians must cultivate *a particular existential and Christological discomfort in our own skins*."[570] Harvey describes this as "the conundrum of being positioned in a posture of dominance even while being committed to justice."[571] In other words, anti-racist rhetoric, sentiment, and even deep individual commitment to racial justice are not sufficient since race is a social reality that shapes one's belonging to a wider racially unjust social order. Within such an order, for they cannot easily or even realistically escape it, white people are faced with the conundrum of whiteness and need to occupy what I suggest calling an "apophatic" space. This space is "apophatic" in two ways. It is "apophatic" because white people *do not know* what it is like, or even how, to occupy a space in which they are *not* the centre and indeed the pinnacle of the distorted story they have received and embodied.[572] It is also apophatic because this learning process ought to start with the negation of whiteness, what we may want to call the *dis*-affirmation of whiteness, while at the same time acknowledging our entanglement with it, that is the simultaneous dis-affirmation and renewed engagement with, which however is not the same as affirmation of whiteness. This last point is one that I have already hinted at in the second chapter. There, I associated postlapsarian forms of belonging, of which whiteness is an example with what Simi et al have come to understand as the *addiction* to hate. They claimed

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[568] Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do", 20-21.

[569] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 97-8.

[570] Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do", 20. My emphasis.

[571] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 95.

[572] "One of the many effects of whiteness is that it always already locates white people at the center of most narratives and structures." Idem, 94.

that certain "social experiences can become so engraved in our interactions, psyche, and body that the parallels between identity residual and addiction become an interesting point of exploration."[573] Whiteness can therefore be understood as one of these social addictions that deeply shape white people's self-understanding and therefore their way of being, relating, and belonging to the world.

However, whiteness is distinct from the sort of marginal extremist movements that Simi et al explore in at least one way. Whiteness is characterised by its relative pervasiveness.[574] Indeed, while Simi et al's work asked what happens when people leave, undo, and sever themselves from *marginal*, *extremist*, hate-based, *openly* violent identities and forms of belonging, I am interested in the undoing or collapse of broken *mainstream* belonging and the gradual discovery of a radical and marginal, yet *non-sectarian* form of belonging lived in the midst of the old defective form. In this specific instance, this means letting go of whiteness amidst whiteness as transformation out of whiteness has to happen within the context of whiteness, that is from the inside. This is important because it means that *individually* opposing whiteness by becoming aware of it, denouncing its effects, and even repenting from one's own personal and collective complicity in whiteness is necessary whilst acknowledging that is not enough to sever oneself from it, as one continues to unwillingly physically symbolise and embody whiteness, and as a result still enjoy or rather benefit from the social privileges that the social positionality of whiteness gives them. As a result, both Harvey and Teel conclude that white Christians should *not* and indeed cannot, at least in this currently racially distorted context, identify with Christ.

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[573] Simi Pete, Blee Kathleen, DeMichele Matthew, and Windisch Steven, "Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual among Former White Supremacists", *American Sociological Review*, 82(6), 2017, 1167-87, 1168.

[574] Here, I use "relative" to distinguish it from the pervasiveness of original sin to which it is linked and yet distinct. I have already distinguished between original, structural, and individual sin. Although the line between structural and individual sins is blurry, it is important to distinguish them from original sin which is a diminished state of being. Thus, whiteness is a social construct/distortion or structural sin that proceeds from the ontological distortion of original sin rather than the ontological distortion itself.

Both refer to Cone's seminal work and his idea of the "Black Christ". Here "black" needs not be understood literally or in an exclusively racial way.[575] Instead, it stresses that Christ's incarnation as a Jew in Roman-occupied Palestine is not merely accidental.[576]
God's incarnation is God siding with and among the oppressed here identified with blackness. Thus, Cone writes,

> that the blackness of Jesus brings out the soteriological meaning of his Jewishness for our contemporary situation when Jesus' person is understood in the context of the cross and resurrection. […] It is in the light of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus in relation to his Jewishness that black theology asserts that "Jesus is black."[577]

Developing the Christological concept of blackness further, Cone claims that "Christ's blackness is both literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal in the sense that he truly becomes One with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of [black] struggle."[578] Other adjectives to describe Christ's blackness are "epistemological" and "ethical", as it constitutes a reality (and identity) altering statement at the theological and anthropological level. Firstly, it comes to disrupt or scandalise, and transform or purge, our distorted perception of *who* God is.[579] Secondly, and perhaps most obviously, it constitutes a reality and identity-altering statement for both black and white Christians in the light of who God is revealed to be and a radical critique of the form of belonging with which whiteness is associated. Thus, for white Christians, the revelation of Christ's blackness ought to lead to a painful reconsideration of whether such a Black Christ would indeed "look like" them, and whether they can, in turn, identify with such a God.

For Harvey, "in seeking to identify with the Black Christ, white Christians run the risk of actually avoiding their own race and power",[580] and therefore their own antagonistic positionally vis-a-vis the Black Christ, as the Black Christ's "structural enemy".[581] Harvey asks

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[575] Teel, "What Jesus wouldn't do", 27.

[576] Ibid.

[577] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975, 124.

[578] Idem, 125.

[579] More on this in the next chapter where I will explore the notion of scandal.

[580] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus do?", 95.

[581] Idem, 98.

a provocative and really powerful question: if Christ is the Black Christ, that is if Christ stands with and as the outcast, the poor, the persecuted, and the little ones, [582] upon whom and at the expense of whom one's privilege is built, *who* are white Christians to Christ? She answers that

> If we take the social justice Jesus and the Black Christ seriously, the white Christian discovers that he or she stands among the accused when Jesus as Christ calls out deadly and dangerous systems of oppression and subjugation.[583]

Following such a realisation, white Christians are called to challenge and deconstruct the narratives they have inherited and that bestows upon them power, visibility, and acceptability *at the expense* of others. This process is a penitential and reparative response to the spoiling, colonising, and/or polluting of the space of others, a situation that they have inherited. The picture that emerges from this description might seem grim. One might even want to ask if *this* Christ and his Gospel are good news for white people after all, as it entails a paradigmatic and costly shift, the collapse of their world and identity. Yet this grim picture is the picture of our present world, which Jon Sobrino has described as "a world of poverty and opulence, victims and victimisers".[584]

The same Sobrino writes that salvation and humanisation [..] are [..] urgently needed".[585] Such salvation and humanization might look very differently for white and black, or indeed non-white followers of Christ, as they will be required to embody different attitudes vis-a-vis whiteness and Blackness, the latter being coterminous with salvation for Cone. These distinct paths, towards liberation for some and redemption for others, towards a shared salvation and destiny, shed light upon this chapter and its underlying concern regarding belonging christianly. For black people, learning to see God as Black is a call to become *more*, to become *fuller*, or to reclaim and proclaim what they already are. For white people, although it does seem to be a call to become less, as it involves loss of security, status, and power, the call to renounce whiteness is not a call to identify with God's condescension, or even indeed a celebration of vulnerability as such, but *also* a call to become fuller and authentically human

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[582] Matt 25:42-6.

[583] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 97.

[584] Jon Sobrino, "Prologue", *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008, ix.

[585] Ibid.

beyond the distortions of whiteness. Therefore, both calls are calls for liberation from the bonds of oppression in which both oppressed and oppressors are trapped. In other words, both are "apophatic" calls, that is calls to let go and move beyond dehumanising forms of belonging through which both victims and oppressors are dehumanised. Indeed, this call to transformation is not "an arbitrary or voluntary imposition" but a liberation from what is in fact "a real damage to the human being."[586]

Here it might seem that the human being that is most obviously damaged is the one against which the injustice is perpetrated and whose humanity is actively denied or diminished. Yet, the first victim of evil is its perpetrator. This at least is what Herbert McCabe invites us to consider as he explores the effects of what he calls "evil done", and which we might want to call moral evil or sin. Thus, he, counter-intuitively claims, "what makes an action morally wrong is the harm it does to the perpetrator."[587] McCabe's rhetoric might seem inappropriate and even unnerving, as it seems to invite us to shift the focus from the one who is normally regarded as a victim, the one against whom evil is perpetrated, to the perpetrator— "in evil done the harm is done to the agent which causes it". Indeed, it even seems to victimise the perpetrator, at the expense of the victim, thus bringing confusion as to *who* is the real victim here, and therefore who deserves or requires attention and help. Let us look at an example McCabe gives which will hopefully bring greater clarity.

> An action may be morally wrong because it does harm to others, but what we mean by saying that it is morally wrong is that it damages the perpetrator. I can after all do a great deal of harm to others without doing morally wrong at all. I may bring with me to a foreign country some deadly infectious disease that I don't know about so that in a few weeks people are dying in agony because of my arrival. If so, I have certainly harmed them by my arrival, but I have not done anything morally wrong. If however I knew about it and went all the same, then you could well say that I was acting unjustly, that I was behaving in an irresponsible way in which no human being should behave, that I was defective in my humanity, that I was committing a moral evil. The moral evil

[586] Jose Ignacio Gonzalez Faus, "Sin", in Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993, 532-42.539-540.

[587] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, London: Continuum, 1987, 35.

would consist in the injustice and the way that I had diminished myself in acting like that.[588]

This rather lengthy excerpt is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, in locating the harm done primarily in the perpetrator rather than the victim, McCabe's powerfully articulates that to the extent that their involvement in whiteness is in direct contradiction with the most sacred of commandments— "You shall love your God and your neighbour as yourself"—those that whiteness "makes" white come out diminished from whiteness. This is important because it implies that while conversations around whiteness seem to oppose radically the interests of those that are socially constructed as white and those socially constructed as black, true growth and flourishing, authentic humanity and fraternity, that is the long-term interest or even good of both, is denied, albeit differently for both white and black people as both come out diminished from distorted forms of belonging of which whiteness is a structuring principle. Thus, Alison writes: "I am learning to see brothers […], scandalised brothers *who have to grab being from each other since we can't let go and learn to receive it from the only giver*."[589] If this is true, one cannot truly flourish while the other doesn't. Put it differently we can say that none belong until all belong.

Liberation, which Cone insists, "is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity" is therefore good news *for all*, even though at first sight it may only seem to be good news for the oppressed. While this is the case, one needs to acknowledge the pain, suffering and even mourning that such a purgatorial process of deep reconstruction of the self, the sort of process that was discussed in the previous chapter, involves on *both* sides. Indeed, while Black Christians might find their calling by the Black Christ intimately and ultimately liberating, and indeed a source of joy and hope, they still have to live with the effects of whiteness in society as well as its effects on their perception of themselves, as they undergo a deconstructive-reconstructive journey beyond self-hatred and internalised oppression. While one may be tempted, and for very good reasons, to focus exclusively on the suffering of the oppressed, one should not neglect the suffering that such a process entails for white Christians as they undergo the collapse of their identity, security, world, which they were taught was good,

[588] Ibid.
[589] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001, 207. My emphasis.

and learn to belong in the dark, which they might experience as a season of mourning and a journey in the wilderness. The path of white Christians is different from that of black Christians and yet it is the same, it is a path towards the fullness of life and towards theocentric belonging. It is the path of belonging christianly.

While Harvey and Teel share Cone's aim to undo witness and strive for racial justice and the coming of God's Kingdom, their approach is more pessimistic about the ability and even the appropriateness, for white people, to seek to become Black. As a white female Christian committed to anti-racism, Harvey shares her own struggle to disengage with whiteness as "whiteness is deeply intertwined with the actual body-selves of those of us who are white."[590] Discussing her discovery of Cone's work and her initial and maybe too naive "earnest" desire to "commit […] to the Black Christ",[591] Harvey describes her gradual awareness that "being racialized as white rendered [her] claim to identify with the Black Christ deeply problematic." Instead, she insists: "I cannot engage in anti-racist struggle as a non-racial human, nor as a person of color, but must face the profound dilemmas that my white racial location creates." Thus, Harvey suggests that:

> [R]ather than understanding the goal of identification with the divine—race-less, white, or Black—as the goal for the white Christian, the goal for the white Christian […] is to figure out how to seek *authentic* identification with humanity—to attempt to become human.[592]

3. Misidentification with the divine and re-identification with the human

For white people, "authentic identification with humanity—to attempt to become human" involves "go[ing] back through [their] whiteness and become traitors to it."[593] Thus, for Harvey, if white Christians mustn't identify with the Black Christ in a social context

[590] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 84.

[591] Idem, 92.

[592] Idem, 97. My emphasis.

[593] Ibid. At this point, it seems necessary to restate clearly that what is at stake here is not the physiological or biological characteristic of being white-skinned, but the socially constructed parasitic meaning associated with particular skin colours.

dominated by whiteness, Harvey's proposal is not entirely apophatic as she doesn't ban identification *tout simple*. Instead, she suggests a path toward reconstruction and recovery of one's fuller humanity according to which white Christians could identify instead with other biblical characters, especially those undergoing conversion. One such figure, she contends, is the tax-collector Zacchaeus, of whom she writes:

> Despite sharing a religious-ethnic heritage with Jesus, *he was Jesus' structural enemy*. When Jesus challenged him, however, Zacchaeus did not remain over-determined by his oppressor's location. In response, Zacchaeus chose radical conversion. [594]

Zacchaeus's story, Harvey contends, is therefore well suited to the kind of *de*construction-*re*construction process that white Christians need to undergo. Similarly, it seems that Zacchaeus is well suited, as a model for those seeking to undergo the transformative journey of belonging christianly. Indeed, according to Harvey's reading, the story of Zacchaeus is that of the encounter of two structural enemies and of the birth/emergence of belonging between them.

Yet, the encounter is also marked by Zacchaeus's eagerness to see Jesus and Jesus' first utterance— "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down: for I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5). Following Harvey's reading of the story, their encounter is followed by Zacchaeus' radical conversion and the initiation of a process of restorative justice on his part, the oppressor with whom she identifies white Christians:

> Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

According to this reading of the story, Zacchaeus therefore seems to pave the way before/for white Christians, indicating the sort of space they should seek to inhabit, a space of repentance and restorative justice, Zacchaeus's story is the kind of story that white Christians involved in whiteness need to hear. Moreover, Zacchaeus also appears as a figure of hope, the reading goes, as he did not remain over-determined by his social location and called by Christ, chose radical conversion. Indeed, it is important to notice that this (radical) transformation is rendered possible by Christ's first utterance, which in turn shows the centrality of God's grace which is a pre-requisite to this transformation, which echoes both Alison's anthropology of conversion

[594] Idem, 98. Harvey's reading of the story of Zacchaeus' conversion relies upon an article by Mark A. Lomax. Despite my efforts and due to what seems to be wrong referencing, I have been unable to find this article.

discussed in chapter 2 and the story of young Eustace, with whom we became acquainted at the end of the same chapter.

Repentance and restorative justice, as the outward signs of Zacchaeus's inward radical transformation, are therefore at the heart of what Harvey calls "WWZD?". Furthermore, this language of repentance echoes Kilby's own call to opt for repentance rather than kenosis as a more appropriate response to situations where "the accumulation of privilege and power represents an imbalance, probably indeed an injustice".[595] However, Harvey goes further, as she insists that "Jesus only recognized the authenticity of Zacchaeus' repentance and affirmed his salvation in response to his words and behavior together."[596] It therefore seems that although initiated by faith, itself initiated by his encounter with Christ, it is *works*, Zacchaeus's repentance articulated in the concrete acts of restorative justice that saved Zacchaeus and granted him belonging: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down: for I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5)

However, despite all its fittingness and its creative potential, Harvey's reading and use of this biblical encounter raises a series of issues. A first problematic implication pertains to the role of works in salvation as well as the place (and identity) of Zacchaeus in the narrative. One of the risks of applying an excessive focus on works when thinking of belonging christianly is to fall straight back into the pre-atonement, that is the postlapsarian mode of belonging rooted in reciprocity and centred upon the self's power, agency, success, and moral purity, that is the self's capacity to meet the requirements upon which belonging relies. Zacchaeus *deserves* to belong or receive belonging *because* of his act of repentance and restorative justice.[597]

Linked to this is another issue. Indeed, it is not entirely clear from the story of Zacchaeus whether his conversion and the process of restorative justice that follows are the condition or the consequence of the salvation and belonging offered to him by Jesus.

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[595] Kilby, "The Seductions of Kenosis", in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), *Suffering and the Christian Life*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019, 163-74, 166.

[596] Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?", 98.

[597] Despite what I just said, it is important to notice that this tension between the importance of works and the gratuity of grace should not be evacuated too quickly as it runs throughout Scripture, as exemplified by Paul and James, but even in Jesus' teaching itself.

Zacchaeus' role or identity in the story is deeply ambiguous. Indeed, it is not entirely clear *who* Jesus chooses as his host. Is it Zacchaeus the sinner, or is it Zacchaeus the outcast? The next verse suggests that the connection established by Harvey between Zacchaeus's newly gained salvation and his repentance and restorative justice is not as clear as it seems. There, Jesus proclaims, "*for all",* and I will come back to this important detail shortly, "Today salvation has come to this house *because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost*." This verse raises an important question. Why was Zacchaeus's belonging restored or reinstated by Jesus? In other words, has salvation, or belonging, come to Zacchaeus' house because of his profession of repentance, followed by the promise of acts of restorative justice, or has salvation come to this house because of *who* Zacchaeus is— "because he too is a son of Abraham". This suggests the possibility of reading the story differently, as one of restorative belonging where Zacchaeus is the one restored by Christ, rather than the one through whom the restoring process takes place. According to an alternative reading, it is possible to see Zacchaeus not as Christ's structural enemy, but as Christ's outcast brethren, *gratuitously* restored into belonging in front of a bemused and scandalised crowd.

Picturing the scene might help us to see why, according to such a reading, it might be problematic for white Christians to identify with Zacchaeus. As the story begins, Zacchaeus is an outcast, *at the periphery* of the crowd, observing the scene from a fig tree. Zacchaeus is then brought down from the fig tree from which he observes the scene, into the centre of the narrative, in fact, he becomes the centre, as Jesus chooses him as his host. Indeed, Jesus does not call Zacchaeus at the centre of the crowd, that is Jesus does not invite Zacchaeus into the pre-determined exclusionary centre where the crowd locates him, and indeed locates God, but instead, Christ invites himself in Zacchaeus's house, thus relocating the centre at the margins of the crowd.[598] Tomas Halik describes this narrative as a "Gospel in miniature" and writes [599]:

> It is not fortuitous that Zacchaeus wasn't part of the crowds. Even though, as a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus held an important and lucrative position, he was a person *on*

[598] This point has its limits as Zacchaeus albeit marginalised was also a rich man.

[599] Thomas Halik, "Patient with God*: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us,* New York, Doubleday Books, 2009, 25.

the fringe of society, like the blind beggar at the edge of the road to Jericho, whom Jesus had healed just before meeting him.[600]

Understanding the story of Zacchaeus as one from the periphery to the centre, therefore, complicates the narrative proposed by Harvey, namely that of the radical conversion of one of Christ's structural enemies and a pathway for white Christians towards racial justice. Indeed, the alternative reading suggests a potential danger of which Harvey shows her awareness elsewhere, reinforcing the centrality of the white Christian in the story. At this point it might be worth restating a concern formulated earlier in this chapter, namely, to tackle issues around privilege, social positionally, power, and vulnerability and how theological narratives can reinforce the power and privileges of some and indeed the vulnerability and lack thereof of others. As a result, inviting white Christians—here construed as insiders and oppressors, or at least complicit in the oppression and marginalisation of non-white people—to identify with Zacchaeus might have the exact opposite effect to that intended.[601] In fact, according to this reading, one may want to suggest that Zacchaeus might be a better model for the outcast.[602]

Whether Christ is calling into life and belonging to the chief tax collector, an outcast, or a son of Abraham, *or all at once*, I want to suggest two things. The first is that the story, like most good stories, is multi-layered and that what makes Zacchaeus a creative but also a problematic model is precisely his liminality.[603] Indeed, Zacchaeus' ambiguous social positionality, which is ignored by Harvey, is significant because it shows that the categories of oppressor/insider and oppressed/outsiders, although useful, are subverted in this story, and arguably by Jesus himself. This suggests that such categories might be more porous than Harvey's reading suggests and that the location of *actual* human beings within these structures of power and oppression is often more complex. It is therefore time, or so I suggest, to question

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600 Ibid.

601 Linked to this is the danger, already identified earlier of an individualistic understanding of morality: How does identifying with Zacchaeus, whose conversion is personal, account for the systemic nature of whiteness?

602 This suggestion is made by Fr James Martin: James Martin, "Zacchaeus, the Grumblers, and LGBTQ People", *Outreach: An LGBT Catholic Resource*, 30 October 2022. https://outreach.faith/2022/10/the-gospel-story-of-zacchaeus-has-powerful-implications-for-ministry-to-those-on-the-margins-including-lgbtq-people/ (Last accessed on 22 September 2023).

603 Tomas Halik offers a third and interesting reading of Zacchaeus according to which Zacchaeus exemplifies the “seekers” of our times.

the reductionism of the Christological discomfort Harvey and Teel offer and, instead to expand the christological discomfort beyond whiteness. Indeed, a brief exploration of the development of contextual and liberation theologies from the 1960s onwards shows the provisionality and instability of hermeneutics of liberation which presumed *a priori* stable or fixed categories of oppression, as hermeneutics have evolved to uncover, denounce, and respond to ever more complex and subtle layers of oppression.[604] This means, or so I want to suggest, that this call to *dis*-identify with Jesus can be expanded beyond racial oppression, and "the presumed normativity of whiteness",[605] to other forms of systemic injustices.

4. Expanding the Christological discomfort beyond whiteness

As it has now become clear, the world of whiteness is a world in which white and non-white people are embedded in racist structures that separate them and grant the former privileges refused to the latter whose identity is defined over against that of those who constitute the norm. As the capacity of the latter to be fully human is denied, the capacity of the former to be fully human is also diminished, as is their capacity to identify with Christ. In such a world, one remains physically and symbolically embedded in the structures aforementioned, so that the *metanoia* of whites and the resistance of non-white individuals are not enough, or rather are met with the resistance of the very structures against which they stand, within which they live, and which give meaning (or not) and value (or not) to their bodies and lives. However, and although race may occupy a unique place, other forms of systemic injustices based on economics, class, gender, sexuality, ablism, nationality, language, and religion suggest that the same or a similar sort of Christological discomfort might be extended beyond whiteness.[606] Indeed, if one of the central issues with whiteness is the social

[604] Expressing doubts about the use of blackness in christology, Anthony B Pinn quotes Kelly Brown Douglas who writes that "the Black Christ explicitly disavows White oppression of Black people. The problem is that it does not go beyond that. *It does not portray the complexity of Black oppression.* Specifically, it does not address the fact that Black people oppress each other, and that racism is not the only barrier to Black freedom" Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 85-6 in Pinn, "Looking Like Me? Jesus images, Christology and the limitations of theological blackness" in *Christology and Whiteness*, 169-79, 173.

[605] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 86.

[606] I want to suggest that this same discomfort can also apply to our distorted relationship/with the environment. If it is the case that the ecological crisis puts at risk the lives and livelihood of all especially the poor, the damage caused by human action extends far beyond human societies to nature itself. Here it is humans who have put themselves at the centre and above the nature upon which they nonetheless rely and in which they participate, with no consideration for other living beings and their livelihood. The cry of the poor therefore also encompasses that of the earth and all its inhabitants. See what Pope Francis says in his memorable encyclical letter *Laudato Si*: "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm

construction of a group deemed superior which occupies the centre of our social narratives and whose privilege relies on the exploitation and exclusion of non-members, then this Christological discomfort can be applied to the other forms of systemic injustices aforementioned. It can be applied to postlapsarian belonging *simpliciter*, which grammar we have seen to be centred around an exclusive "*us*" built over and against an exclusive "*them*". At the risk of being redundant, it is important to stress that although all have in common that they *de*humanise those upon whom the injustice falls, they also damage those who benefit from them, as "to be complicit in injustice is to participate in one's own dehumanization."[607]

Another reason for expanding Teel and Harvey's claim beyond race or indeed beyond any particular category of oppression is what we may call the danger of othering, reinforced by this grammar of belonging. For Alison, "violence is not a "they" question. Violence is the "we" question."[608] By insisting on the need for white people to think seriously about and act against whiteness, Harvey and Teel recognise that violence is a "we"—rather than a "they"—question. Yet, by insisting so heavily on whiteness, the risk is to preserve the "we"—"they" dichotomy, here between the "we" of the oppressors and the "they" of the victims or marginalised,[609] thus leaving the identification of non-white/marginalised Christians with Christ unquestioned and therefore unproblematic.

Thus, I want to argue that it is not just *white* Christians, but *all* or at least *most* Christians who, to the extent that they are invested in one or the other, or indeed several of these exclusive structures, should reconsider their identification with Christ. In other words, it is not just white Christians who are Christ's systemic enemies, but all those whose visibility and belonging

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we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we are the dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and refreshment from her waters." Francis, *Laudato Si: On the Care for Our Common Home,* Vatican, 24 May 2015, §2. (Last accessed on 22 September 2023). Notice that Francis employs the language of fraternity to denounce the abusive exploitation of the earth. That is instead of this abusive exploitative relationship, he invites us to enter into a relationship of fraternity that is of belonging, with the creation.

[607] Harvey, "What would Zacchaeus Do?", 97.

[608] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 206.

[609] More on this in the next chapter.

depend upon the exclusion of and the oppression of others.[610] Therefore, Harvey's statement that "the project of asking WWJD? has different implications for the white Christian than it does for the Black Christian, the Latina Christian, the Christian who is Asian American, or for any Christian whose racial identity locates them outside the presumed normativity of whiteness" needs to be amended. For, if what I have asserted above is correct, then a more comprehensive statement would read as:

> the project of asking WWJD? has different implications for *the "belonger" or insider, whose belonging depends on the othering and excluding of an "other"*, then it does for *the othered, that is dehumanised, "other"* whose identity locates them outside the presumed normativity of *any given kind of postlapsarian belonging*.

Thus amended, this statement shows that what is fundamentally at stake is belonging and that it is precisely from distorted forms of belonging, that all, insiders and outsiders alike, need to be saved. What insiders, those who belong, can expect from a Christ who comes and meets those who don't, the Outsider among the outsiders? The answer is twofold—*everything* and *nothing*. *Everything*, for Christ, offers them/us an opportunity of learning to belong beyond the violence, shame, and exclusion of sacrificial belonging, that is to belong fraternally and *gratuitously*, where one's membership does *not* depend on one's wealth, social, or even moral state, but on being recognised as a child of God and a brethren in Christ. As we have already seen, this gratuity follows or rather proceeds from the gratuity of God's creating act as well as the Incarnation.

Paradoxically, it is the gratuity of belonging as taught by Christ that cost us so much. For indeed, Christ is in some real sense their, or here again should I say *our*, mortal enemy as his coming leads to the collapsing of our world and identity, and truly questions, or rather radically reshapes the self and what it means to belong, leading to the death of the old self. Here, we are reminded of the seemingly ambivalent words of Isaiah 34: 5:

> Be strong, do not fear;
> your God will come,
> *he will come with vengeance;*
> with divine retribution

[610] Thus, in the Magnificat, Mary proclaims a Lord that "has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart", "has put down the mighty from their thrones" and "has exalted the lowly".

he will come to save you."[611]

Commenting on these verses, Old Testament scholar Phillipe Lefebvre recognises that "there is a notion in our text that probably makes us tremble: the vengeance of the Lord." Yet Lefebvre proposes to understand "the vengeance of God" as "when God God-self comes to save his people."[612]

Christ's first coming announces and initiates the collapse of postlapsarian belonging which will be fully realised at his second coming. This collapse is not mere destruction, it is a disruption and radical transformation of belonging that requires us to imagine belonging in ways that are radically different and unfathomable and yet still have a connection with the lapsed form of belonging that we experience. The Catholic understanding of nature and grace, in which grace comes to restore, complete, and perfect fallen nature rather than merely destroy and replace it, requires us to assert the fundamental goodness of belonging. Christ's coming proclaims the goodness of belonging as he uncovers its present tragic shortcoming and its apparently inescapable and divinely sanctioned grammar of exclusion which is revealed to be the grammar of fear and idolatry. Belonging to Christ no longer depends on this grammar of exclusion. There is no longer a "*them*" in Christ, for "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

[611] My emphasis. Christ's coming, which we identify with God's coming in Isaiah. This passage from Isaiah is read on Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent).

[612] Philippe Lefebvre, "Méditation biblique: La vengeance de Dieu", *La Vie*, 9 December 2022. https://www.lavie.fr/christianisme/bible/meditation-biblique-la-vengeance-de-dieu-85437.php. My translation. (Last accessed on 22 September 2023).

Chapter 11:

Learning the art of belonging in the Dark: Apophatic identification and belonging christianly

Identification with Christ matters a great deal. Yet, as we have seen throughout the last three chapters, it can easily fall into misidentification, with sometimes dire consequences. In this last chapter, I wish to add several clarifying remarks on identification and disidentification to clarify the position to which I have come on the matter, and how this affects our understanding of belonging christianly. Firstly, I will briefly identify and reject two paths of disidentification and explore a third one, which I will call apophatic identification. This will lead me to discuss what, after Alison, I will call Christ's fraternal relocation of God and our own fraternal restoration as key to the possibility of, and also a defining feature for the shape of belonging christianly. Finally, I will reflect on Alison's critique of victimhood and resentment and what constitutes authentic fraternal identification with Christ and indeed belonging christianly, with a particular focus on the marginalised.

1. <u>Distinguishing between the threads:</u>

Disidentification from/with Christ offers three possible paths, but before we can dismiss one and explore another, it is necessary to rule out a third option, which is radical, total, or definitive disidentification with Christ. Indeed, disidentification *tout simple* or as an end in itself is not an option, for belonging christianly is precisely the journey into becoming "of" Christ, reshaped according to Christ's life. Going back to the two other possible paths, the first, which was discussed in the previous chapter, was proposed by Harvey as she sought to offer an alternative and a more appropriate model for white Christians. We can call this path the path of dis-reidentification.

Although initially apophatic, as it begins with the process of disidentifying with Christ as well as acknowledging and learning to resist and let go of whiteness as a "mislocation" vis-a-vis Christ, this option *too quickly* relapses into another form of positive identification, that is another gripping of a seemingly stable and unambiguous identity, which remains problematic. Furthermore, I have shown that Harvey's alternative model in the person of Zacchaeus, although very promising at first sight, runs the risk of re-placing oneself at the centre of the

story, the very danger which she sought to eliminate. In this case, the disidentification strategy threatens to do exactly the opposite of that which it claims to do.[613] Although it might be that a better or more appropriate model than Zacchaeus can be found, I suspect that this particular strategy of dis-reidentification, relying on one single alternative or replacement model, will prove ultimately unsatisfactory.

One of the reasons for this is that this option fails to account for the ways in which non-white Christians, here standing for the victims of the social order upon which postlapsarian belonging relies, can get identifying with Christ wrong.[614] In other words, Harvey and Teel fail to point out that identification with Christ is a perilous venture, even for those whose social dislocation does *not* present with the conundrum of whiteness.[615] Linked to this last point, this strategy seeks to subvert but runs the risk of inverting, and thus in fact reinforcing the distorted grammatical binary—*Us vs. Them*—upon which sacrificial belonging is built. As a result, this first strategy runs the risk of displacing but ultimately reinforcing postlapsarian or sacrificial belonging.

Instead, I offer another path of (dis)identification from/with Christ, which is both more radical and more congruent with the orientation of belonging christianly as it has been deployed in this thesis. Rather than quickly regain the illusory stability of an unambivalent identity that replaces one in the centre and among the insiders,[616] I am suggesting that followers of Christ should learn to dwell in the discomfort and uncertainty of the apophatic space that disidentification provides. That is, *they should learn to belong in the dark.* Disidentification with Christ thus understood can be called apophatic identification with Christ. Through what may seem like an oxymoron, I seek to articulate that here disidentification is only a step toward a greater and more authentic identification with Christ, indeed the only way for finite and fallen

[613] This echoes Tonstad's critique of inclusion and of strategy of affirmation of vulnerability which I discussed in previous chapters.

[614] As we saw in the previous chapters, *all* are victims of this social order, even those who benefit from it as their humanity is diminished by it.

[615] There is a sense in which this is hypothetical since, if I am right in expanding christological discomfort beyond whiteness, then all are in one way or another, and because of original sin, implicated in the distorted and dehumanising structures upon which sacrificial belonging relies.

[616] This is not to say that it is impossible to identify with or relate to biblical characters. There is a great deal to learn from the complexity, the ambivalence, the journey, and the richness of biblical characters.

creatures entangled in the distortions of postlapsarian belonging to appropriately identify with Christ.

If speaking of disidentification *tout simple* or as an end in itself is not acceptable, after all being Christian *is* to become a member of Christ's Body, apophatic identification, just like any theological use of apophasis, is not pure negation. Thus, apophatic identification is a "qualified" disidentification and constitutes a step "back", but in fact *towards* an authentic and eschatological transformation of the self and identification with Christ. Such an apophatic identification is therefore entirely appropriate but also necessary for there is no viable alternative to Christ who is the ultimate and eschatological model. Whichever model we seek to replace Christ with can only be a provisional model bringing us closer to and reshaping us in the likeness of Christ, the ultimate model.[617] Apophatic identification might also be helpfully described as a dynamic process of dis/re-orientation, as one reckons with the loss of a certain kind of apparently stable belonging and learns to reconsider one's place in relation to Christ and neighbour, but also within the stories that society, but also the church tell us about God, ourselves and others.

The idea of disorientation seems to effectively capture the dizziness that results from the Christological discomfort discussed in the previous chapter. It also generates two central questions—*Who* is Christ to and for us and *where* are we standing in relation to Christ and others? The path of belonging christianly is precisely the journey of answering this question through the de-reconstruction and dis-relocation of all our forms of belonging in Christ, in the midst of the ruins of postlapsarian belonging. It is a journey of belonging in the dark, that is of mourning and of feeling around, to become more and more of Christ, that is like Christ to us and others as we are brought by him into the divine life.

In the third section I will argue that this sense of disorientation is prompted by, but also *balanced* by what Alison calls "Jesus' fraternal relocation of God",[618] which is the very condition for the possibility of speaking (properly) of the "Black" Christ.[619] To use the

[617] Turning any other model into the ultimate model would be idolatry.

[618] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001, 56-85. I will come back to this essay in the next section.

[619] Here I mean properly in two related ways. It is only because of Christ's fraternal relocation that we can identify Christ with the outcast. It is also this fraternal relocation that opens the possibility to speak

language of disidentification or apophatic identification, we can say that it is Christ's relocation of the divine that makes apophatic identification with Christ, and our own relocation, possible. Such a relocation is *apophatic*, but it is also *apocalyptic* and *eschatological*. It is apocalyptic because it *un*covers and reveals *who* God truly is and *where* God is to be found, as a brother, and especially among and as the poor and outcast. In the light of the previous chapter, it may seem that those in positions of power and privilege i.e., those to whom postlapsarian belonging is granted, must be the first concerned with the purgatorial process of apophatic identification. However, for reasons that will soon become clear, apophatic identification with Christ will prove vital to the victims and outcasts of the social order, that is those to whom belongingness is denied in the current postlapsarian order, and whose identification with Christ seems a priori unproblematic.

The remainder of this chapter can also be seen as a prolongation or an expansion of chapter 6. After Alison, I argued that atonement is *not* a theory to get right or a transaction between the Son and the Father, but a radical transformation underwent *after*, with, and through the Son that is non-violent,[620] compassionate, revelatory, liberating, and life-giving. Atonement in Christ is the gift and the "opening up of creation" to the until-then inaccessible God-given fullness of life and belonging, what I called theocentric belonging in Part 1. As a result, it has profound and outstanding consequences for our understanding of belonging christianly since it is the induction into a new kind of belonging.

Creativity and transformation are required to envision and inhabit this already-not-yet-new, radically *fraternal*, non-violent, non-sacred, non-rivalrous, non-coercive, non-exclusive, and non-death-fearing mode of belonging. I concluded chapter 6 with this quote from Alison:

> We can imagine retaliation, we can imagine protection; but we find it awfully difficult to imagine someone we despised and were awfully glad not to be like – whom we would rather cast out so as to keep ourselves going – we find it awfully difficult to imagine that person generously irrupting into our midst so as to set us free to enable something quite new to open up for us. But being empowered to imagine all that

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of Christ as the outcast, or the Black Christ, without it leading to an inflated exclusionary christology. I will develop this further as the chapter unfolds.

[620] Here I do not wish to deny the violence of the Passion, but to deny it any meaning and indeed divine sanction.

> generosity is what atonement is all about; and that is what we are asked to live liturgically as Christians.[621]

This points to how easy it is to be scandalised by the loving, generous, forgiving, radically *fraternal*, non-violent, non-sacred, non-rivalrous, non-coercive, non-exclusive, and non-death fearing, and for all these reasons, scandalous presence of Christ and the mode of belonging he initiates. The last sentence may seem puzzling, redundant, or even a tautology, stating the obvious. It is easy to be scandalised by the scandalous presence of Christ. Yet, the concept of scandal is an ambiguous one, especially in Christianese. For that reason and before we can explore the fraternal shape of this new form of belonging any further, the next section will investigate the various meanings of scandal. In time, the clarification of and distinction between different understandings of scandal will enable us to distinguish between different kinds of scandalous forms of belonging, and the response to them. The exploration of the fraternal shape of belonging christianly as a scandal will help us to better understand what apophatic identification and belonging christianly entail for the outcast of postlapsarian belonging, those we often call, although it is rather generic, the marginalised, first, I now turn to the different meanings of scandal and the forms of belonging attached to them.

2. Scandalous forms of belonging:

I want to suggest that the Christian story, but also postlapsarian belonging *and* belonging christianly are all scandalous. Here the task of theology, and more humbly the aim of this section, is to carefully assess and distinguish between different and sometimes antithetic kinds of scandal, and in turn two kinds of "scandalous" modes of belonging—postlapsarian belonging and belonging christianly.

The word scandal comes from the Greek *skandalon*. It occurs fifteen times in the New Testament and generally means obstacle (Romans, 14: 13), a trip or a trap, that which leads to sin. Scandal is an ambiguous concept for several reasons. Firstly, like symbol, another ambivalent theological concept, the traditional theological understanding of scandal is significantly different from the common secular meaning of the word. Scandal has come to be associated with the irrupting in the public sphere of a story which the main protagonist(s) would have preferred to remain unknown, and the subsequent loss of reputation of such protagonists

[621] Alison, "An Atonement Update". *Australian eJournal of Theology* 8, October 2006, 1-11, 11.

in the public eye, *which remains largely unaffected by it.*[622] We tend to think of financial and political scandals (bribery, tax evasion, embezzlement) and above all sex scandals (sexual misconduct, adultery, sexual abuse etc). In brief, our modern secular understanding of scandal is exclusively centred upon the protagonist(s) guilty of moral failure who have brought scandal upon themselves. However, and this is the second meaning of scandal, in traditional theological discourse, scandal has been primarily understood as that which leads *another* to stumble.[623] Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines scandal as

> an attitude or behaviour which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbour's tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offence if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offence.[624]

Aquinas also distinguishes between active and passive scandal. Other distinctions include distinctions between direct and indirect scandal or the idea of pharisaical scandal, which will not be discussed here.[625] A third layer of complexity pertains to the limitations of the theological concept of scandal. In recent years, the theological concept, as articulated in official Catholic theology, has come under scrutiny, partly due to the discrepancy between the contemporary and theological meanings of the word, but also because of the actual limitations of the theological concept itself, such as its rigidity.[626] "Scandal" has also been perverted, some contend, by the institutional church as a coercive tool to maintain order,[627] and even to cover up abuse. A fourth layer of complexity on which I want to focus, and which will enable me to introduce the third meaning of scandal, is the ambiguity of the theological concept. Is scandal something to be unilaterally overcome, and what does it have to do with belonging christianly?

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[622] This is crucial for the distinction I am trying to draw here.

[623] Another translation for skandalon is stumbling block.

[624] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1993, §2284. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P80.HTM (last accessed on 22 September 2022). From now on referred to as CCC.

[625] Patrick Connolly, "The concept of scandal in a changed ecclesial context.", *Studia Canonica*, 51, 2017, 141.

[626] Idem.

[627] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 175.

Postlapsarian belonging leads us to stumble. It reinforces sinful patterns of being and relating to one another and to God as discussed in previous chapters. In that sense, it is scandalous, in the second meaning. More in line with the contemporary understanding of scandal, one may feel compelled to call scandalous a form of belonging where some members suffer and even die, physically or spiritually, at the hands of others, for the sake, or so they were told, of more or less sacred social bodies such as family, country or church. Postlapsarian belonging is therefore scandalous on both accounts. It causes us and others to stumble and suffer at the hands of each other. Slightly rephrasing the definition in the CCC we can say that scandal "damages virtue and integrity; [it] may even draw [us] into spiritual [and physical] death." In both instances, although operating with slightly different understandings of scandal, scandal is understood, as it has generally been in the Christian tradition, as negative. It *must* be avoided.[628]

We may want to call this form of scandal a degrading scandal, as it contributes to our diminishment and indeed reinforces those very idolatrous patterns of power, self-mastery, systemic injustice, false sacredness, sacrifice, and exclusion that need to be undone. The scandal of the abuse cris*es* in the church comes to mind and constitutes the profanation of the Body in the bodies, spirits, and souls of its most vulnerable members by those who called themselves—and were called to be—their guardians, shepherds, or even *fathers*.[629] Such scandal does not reveal *but deforms* Christ.[630] I want to point out that there is another form of scandal, one embodied by Christ and which arguably characterises belonging christianly. This third form of scandal rejects the scandals that shape and structure postlapsarian sociality. They are, as it were, a grace-filled stumbling, an opportunity for *metanoia*. Alison writes

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[628] "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to *stumble*, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to *stumble*! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matt, 18 6-9).

[629] Here I use the plural because abuse is not limited to sexual abuse but also the spiritual abuse and mistreatment of vulnerable women and children (see the scandal of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland), the abuse of indigenous communities in Canada, nuns, or minorities such as the LGBT community.

[630] Pope John Paul II, "Salvifici Doloris", The Holy See, 11 February 1984, §9.

> the real scandal is the possibility that when God himself becomes present in the midst of a particular human group, those who are scandalised are not scandalised by the heaviness of his demands. On the contrary, they are scandalised by the fact that God himself does not fit into the scheme into which, according to them, God should fit. It is not that God is too sacred for ordinary people to be able to bear it, but that he is so little sacred that religious people find it impossible to bear it. It is they who find it scandalous and seek to retreat into old wineskins. The heavy demands which certainly do follow from this scandalising presence are not the heavy demands of scrupulous religious observance. *On the contrary they are the existentially heavy demands of letting go of the sort of security and belonging which good religious people may find themselves aspiring to, and setting off into something which will look markedly atheistic which is to say, into the heart of God.* These existentially heavy demands will include running the risk of being persecuted, even to death, just as Jesus was, especially by religious people who think that they are serving God.[631]

Although they don't use the language of scandal, Althaus-Reid and Isherwood do not say anything else when they write that:

> There can be no sanitization here or something of the divine essence will be lost—it is […] the screaming baby born amidst the cow shit and fleas, covered in his birthing blood and received into the uncertain arms of his child/mother that declares salvation for all.[632]

If the Incarnation, the Cross, and the Eucharist scandalise our idolatrous instincts and expectations of who God is, and what the sacred, strength, purity, but also fraternity and belonging ought to be— thus revealing to us *who God really is*— might it be that scandal, understood as the otherness and strangeness of God, can also be understood in positive terms, as the radical and disruptive clash of encounter with God, compromising our idolatrous economies of belonging? Might it be, therefore, that belonging christianly can be described as scandalous precisely because it makes those heavy demands Alison describes:

> the existentially heavy demands *of letting go of the sort of security and belonging* which good religious people may find themselves aspiring to, and setting off into something which will look markedly atheistic which is to say, into the heart of God.

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[631] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment,* 178.

[632] Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, "Thinking Theology and Queer Theory" in *Feminist Theology*, 2007, 302-314.

Not being scandalised by Jesus is precisely to embrace the scandal of the Incarnation as the disruptive encounter compromising our lapsed economies and theologies. Not being scandalised is precisely not to reject or deny how scandalous the Christian story is, which would run the risk of turning it into something tame, seemingly inoffensive yet harmful, granting our broken social order the sacred veneer of justification on which it thrives. What we may want to call Christian scandal, or the scandal of the Gospel is therefore what Louis-Marie Chauvet called "stumbling as shattering of our dreams" or rather our illusions and fears,[633] what I suggest calling *holy stumbling*.[634] Scandalous belonging thus understood is, therefore, the appropriate way of belonging to "the community founded upon a scandal, and it is this scandal which necessarily unfolds and up-roots this community".[635] Jesus' fraternal relocation of God and our fraternal restoration in Christ are the heart of belonging christianly. To them, I shall now turn.

3. Holy Stumbling: Beyond idolatry and retaliation. Jesus' fraternal relocation of God and our fraternal restoration after/in Christ:

In John 8:31-59 Jesus scandalises his audience as he invites them into taking "a step further with him in his programme of *deidolatrising God*."[636] For Alison, *this*, rather than a mere confrontation or "community rivalry", [637] another kind of scandal, between Jesus and his listeners, is what this controversial passage is about.[638] Perhaps we can speak of a scandalous revelation of divine fraternity. This revelation works like the two sides of a coin. Alison himself describes it as "the gratuitous revelation of divine fraternity in the midst of fratricidal nihilism"

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[633] Louis-Marie Chauvet, S*ymbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (trans. by Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont). Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995, 154.

[634] Brian P. Flanagan has written about "stumbling in holiness". See Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church*, Liturgical Press, Minnesota: Collegeville, 2018. Flanagan's use of the expression is, however, rather different as he seeks to articulate the tension between the holiness of the church and its sinfulness.

[635] Brannon Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality: The Eucharist in Literary and Theological Perspectives*, Eugene: OR, Wipf and Stock, 2014, xvii.

[636] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 58. My emphasis

[637] Idem, 56.

[638] Alison remarks that "John 8: 31-59 is often read as a particularly striking example of an antisemitic tendency which is to be found in all gospels but especially in John's." Ibid.

or again as "the gratuitous irruption that is an invitation to move beyond idolatry and construct fraternity".[639]. The "positive" side of this revelation is the fraternal relocation of God in Christ:

> The only authentically divine voice we have ever heard or will ever hear is spoken to us not through the clouds and mystifications of some paternal scheme, demanding sacrifice, laying down prohibitions, or fixing the limits of belonging. The only authentically divine voice we have ever heard taught us to move beyond all that, speaking to us uniquely and rigorously at the fraternal level.[640]

In light of this divine-fraternal revelation, there is what we can perhaps call the negative side of this revelation. In contrast to/with this divine fraternity, our own sacrificial forms of belonging and appropriations of God are revealed to be idolatrous. "None of us", Alison tells us, "can bear that sort of word" because "it suggests that our god, our social belonging, our sense of security are all idolatrous."[641]

Before we detail further the implication of this fraternal relocation for belonging christianly, and especially for the marginalised, it is worth addressing one obvious and serious objection. Isn't speaking of "the recasting of God entirely within the terms of reference of fraternity" too radical and even unscriptural?[642] After all, Jesus frequently refers to his Father, including in John 8:31-59. Moreover, throughout the Gospels, including at key moments, Jesus speaks and prays to the Father, receives confirmation from the Father, and teaches us to pray to the Father. How is this compatible with Alison's radical affirmation? Here it is worth quoting Alison himself again to clarify what this relocation entails and what it does not.

> Certainly, the whole point of this chapter is to make the stunning truth of God's parenthood more, not less, available. So, of course, there is in the New Testament a huge amount of teaching concerning praying to the Father, imitating the Father, being rewarded by the Father and so on that is fundamental to the Christian faith. The point I want to drive home is that it is never a *paternal voice* which teaches us these things. It is rigorously a fraternal one. For if we are to accede to allowing ourselves to be loved

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[639] Idem, 73.

[640] Idem, 81.

[641] Idem, 64.

[642] Idem, 57.

> by a Father entirely without rivalry, one who does not want sacrifice but mercy, it is by learning a new mode of fraternity that we will do so.[643]

Thus, together, the revelatory gift of divine fraternity and the moving beyond idolatry that it initiates leads to a profound and radical recasting of belonging as Jesus "refuses to concede any divine element at all to inherited group belonging."[644] This desacralisation of all forms of belonging is precisely what belonging christianly is. As I said before, Alison describes this desacralisation or disruption as "Christ […] crashing like a comet which has strayed out of some distant galaxy […] forever ruining the relative stability of the party".[645]

> Jesus' word collapses the sort of group belonging […] which leads to exclusion and fratricide […] and introduces instead a paternity which is quite outside biology and culture [and] which is accessible in and through the imitative creation of an inclusive fraternity following Jesus.[646]

To understand the significance of this shift from fratricidal and idolatrous to fraternal belonging, it might be necessary to remind ourselves of the key tenets of Alison's Girardian anthropology which were already discussed in chapter 6 and

> which assumes that all of us are bound in a certain sort of paternity, one where our group belonging is dependent on a number of received traditions, many of which appear to have divine backing. The divinity in question backs up inherited group belonging, giving apparent authority to those who determine who is in and who is out. Fraternity is available to those who stay with the group, going along with its apparent paternity, and agreeing to exclude those who must be excluded for the group to keep its identity."[647]

Fraternity as it is deployed in Christ is a radically inclusive fraternity that transcends all groups, sects, genders, races, species, and even death. It is in sharp contrast with the exclusive and idolatrous fraternity which leads to fratricide.

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[643] Idem, 81.

[644] Idem, 74.

[645] Alison, "Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging", Talk for Conference on Discipleship and the City, Villanova University, 3-5 October 2006. https://jamesalison.com/discipleship-and-the-shape-of-belonging/ [last accessed on 8 September 2023]. My emphasis.

[646] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment,* 64.

[647] Idem, 74.

By now the implications for belonging christianly have begun to become clear. Establishing in Himself, that is through who He is, the Word made flesh, a new kind of fraternal belonging to God, at the fraternal level, Christ also opens the possibility for a second relocation, *ours*, in relation to this God-Brother, as well as a restoration of fraternity amongst or between ourselves. Three things need perhaps to be emphasised or summed up here. Firstly, identification to/with Christ is always preceded by and only made possible by Christ's prior identification to/with us. Secondly, identification with Christ is only possible because it is taking place at the fraternal level. Thirdly, this fraternal relocation of God in Christ does not only affect our belonging to God but flows into the very fabric of human belonging to remove the stain of fratricide. It is because this relocation is so radical (and scandalous) that it can only be understood in apophatic and eschatological terms, as Christ takes us with Him on a mysterious and ineffable journey into God. In Christ, the God of surprises calls us "out of an old form of belonging and into a new one",[648] in Him, "God made brother, offering us to become siblings, but vulnerable to fratricide".[649] This has implications for how victims themselves are called to identify with Christ and inhabit this new space of belonging christianly. To these we shall now turn.

4. Belonging beyond resentment: the difficult journey of belonging christianly for the marginalised:

In this fourth section, I want to explore another aspect of the scandal of belonging christianly that pertains to the relationship between Christ as the Forgiving Victim, being marginalised, and belonging christianly as liberation from victimisation *and* victimhood, that is from resentment and retaliation.

4.1. The Forgiving Victim:

In Christ, victims find a comforter and an advocate, but also someone who has undergone their journey of marginalisation and dehumanisation before them and undergoes it

[648] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology: Conversion, Theological Reflection, and Induction,* London: T&T Clark, 2020, 9.

[649] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment,* 73.

again with them.[650] Crucially, however, Christ's journey does *not* end on the Cross, the place of marginalisation *par excellence*— And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27: 46) The echo of these chilling words down the ages reminds us that in Christ, God Godself has experienced marginalisation and dehumanisation. Yet, if this were to end at this, the Christian story would be profoundly tragic. It would be the tragic story of a loving and compassionate yet powerless and vanquished God, like a knight in armour that fought the good fight, proudly and nobly to his last breath, but ultimately defeated. *But* the Christian story is not ultimately a tragedy. In the same Christ who was forsaken by his disciples and friends, insulted, spat on the face, tortured, hanged upon the tree of shame upon which he died, marginalisation and dehumanisation do *not* have the last word, for on *this* Cross and from this "dying but not-yet-dead body […] life springs forth, the Tree of Life growing past the limits of the crucified body, abandoned and nailed to the tree."[651] Indeed, this Christ is the same Christ who, having endured all, this definitely defeated death, has entered life everlasting and invites us to walk in his footsteps.

This resurrection, not that of a triumphalist and vindictive God, but of a forgiving victim who presents himself as a brother, is absolutely fundamental to the sort of anthropology that underpins Alison's work and more specifically his understanding of victimhood and forgiveness. It is also essential to the way in which Christianese, at least as it is articulated or spoken in this thesis, can speak about belonging christianly for the marginalised.

Indeed, apophatic identification with Christ as it has been articulated in this chapter cannot be understood adequately without the sort of resurrection Christ undergoes which is characterised by "forgiveness".[652] For Christ's resurrection

> is not revealed as an eschatological revenge but as an eschatological pardon. It happens not to confound the persecutors, but to bring about a reconciliation. *God is revealed not*

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[650] I am using "victims" and "marginalised" interchangeably. Although not all victims would consider themselves marginalised and vice-versa, both proceeds from the fratricidal tendency toward *de*humanisation, that is the exclusion from, or the rejection of, the bond of fraternal belonging that we have discussed in the previous section.

[651] Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality*, 97.

[652] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroads, 1998, 124.

> *as partisan interested in vindicating a particular group over against its enemies*, but rather as the self-giving victim of the remaining victimising tendency of even the chosen people."[653]

To this, one may want to add, "the remaining victimising tendency of *even the victims*." For even innocent victims are at the mercy of the victimage mechanism that led to their own victimisation in the first place. Even victims remain affected by the ontological damage of original sin and are made even more vulnerable to the destructive forces of vengeance and resentment.

It is only in the light of Christ's distinctive and disruptive coming back to life and forgiving presence among them that his fearful and shameful disciples came to understand and receive his presence not as a mere coming back to life or an occasion for revenge, but as an entering into the fullness of life and an opportunity for forgiveness and liberation from sin, guilt, fear, shame and death. Only if Christ' resurrection is understood in this light can we see how it differs from the other accounts of resurrection present in the Gospel, be that of Lazarus or Jairus' daughter. Indeed, Christ's resurrection is not merely a reset, as if death had not happened. Jesus's resurrection is not a mere coming *back* to life, however spectacular such a miracle may be. Jesus' resurrection is far beyond, far deeper, far more lavish and spectacular than these miracles, which precede and announce it. Christ's return is the return of the "Forgiving Victim" who brings with him Life Everlasting.

It is this radical, over-the-top, lavish act of love of an eccentric God that brings to full light, an uncomfortable and revealing light, the extent of our "remaining victimising tendency" which he has come to overcome and forgive. Therefore, through his Cross, but above all through his Resurrection, Christ truly sets us free from the bondage of sin and victimisation, but also, and perhaps more surprisingly, the bondage of victimhood. Post-atonement and post-resurrection belonging is rooted in the Victim who is discovered as the Forgiving Brother. As a result, it is non-sacrificial, beyond victimisation and beyond victimhood.

4.2. Beyond victimhood:

Christ's subversion of the status of the victim is liberating and also apophatic in two ways. Firstly, the crucified Christ reveals to us the lies in which we are entangled and how

[653] Idem, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 98.

quick we are to victimise others—even God in our midst. Even more liberating perhaps, the risen Christ also breaks the infernal and vicious cycle of victimisation, by presenting victims with a path beyond the bondage of resentment and vengeance.[654] This is the paradox articulated by Alison. Although Scripture gradually reveals to us that God is fundamentally non-violent and that God stands with the victims, a revelation which is completed in the person of Jesus Christ who stands as the Victim, this does not result in the divinisation of victimhood *per se*. If this were the case, God would not be non-violent and non-rivalrous. Therefore, another danger for victims themselves is to seriously misconstrue Christ as an ally and indeed *their* champion *over* and *against* their enemy.

Of course, to construe Christ as a liberator fighting on behalf of the poor, the outcast, the victim of this world to overthrow the current order is not entirely out of place. Christ does indeed come as a liberator, and does indeed overthrow the current order, or at least shows it for what it is and what life everlasting is like.

> He has shown the strength of his arm,
> he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
> He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
> and has lifted up the lowly.
> He has filled the hungry with good things,
> and the rich he has sent away empty.

However, Christ's "smashing of the party", to use Alison's words, is not mere inversion but a radical subversion of the current order. Understanding Christ's coming as that of a warlord, leading to mere inversion of this world, and indeed belonging, rather than its (radical) subversion, is a temptation to which even the disciples themselves were not strangers.

Such an understanding, which I will call here retributive, is on some level perfectly reasonable, appropriately giving justice to the victim by making the guilty party pay their debt. The perpetrators must indeed be accountable for their crimes. It is also not entirely without scriptural warrant. In the Old Testament God, such as in Exodus 15, "the Lord is a warrior"

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[654] I only separate the crucified Christ and the risen Christ to insist on the distinct, revelatory, and demanding teachings for the perpetrators and victims, although most of us fall in one way or another and to different degrees into both categories. One mustn't forget that the crucified Christ also offers to the victims his comforting, compassionate and strengthening presence. To the perpetrators, the Risen Christ shows a God that loves them beyond and despite their destructive tendencies.

(Exodus, 15, 3), whose hand "hand shattered the enemy" (Exodus, 15, 6) and "drowned" "the best of Pharaoh's officers […] in the Red Sea" (Exodus, 15, 4). Perhaps, even more challenging are the passages in the Gospels where Christ presents salvation in antagonistic terms and may seem to present a vengeful, or at least retributive God. See for instance in Matt 18: 6: "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Yet, on the Cross, there is no sign of vengeance or retaliation, as Christ addresses his Father: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". (Luke, 23, 34) No sign of vengeance is to be found either in his post-resurrection encounter with the disciples who, although his friends, had nevertheless abandoned him at the last hour. Thus, the Risen Christ who is the Risen Victim, from whom we should according to our human fallen retributive logic expect divine wrath and retaliation, does not dwell on his status of victim. That is, he does not sacralise and stabilise victimhood as a new triumphant and vindictive idolatrous identity crushing his former persecutors. Thus, "Through Easter eyes" we come to see or rather we learn to see the Cross differently:

> From being the grotesque and vicious instrument of torture, the cross, which reaches away from God and into the darkness and ash of human sin (...) is transformed. It is transformed from a human work of death into a divine work of love and life.[655]

This transformation is important, for it means that "the cross has become a spiritual guidepost ironically leading us from the ways of death to the ways of choosing life",[656] that is a journey into and toward an entirely new form of sociality with God and with others— which this thesis has attempted to point to and called belonging christianly. The Cross is therefore both the ultimate example and the transgression of the sort of mechanism upon which postlapsarian belonging is built, and which after Christ and with Christ, we are called to undo. As a result, the Cross, understood through the eyes of Easter, is a pedagogical instrument for belonging christianly.

If Christ is not just a victim or even the Victim, but the "*Forgiving* Victim", this changes everything. For if this *forgiving* Victim stands in solidarity with, indeed in the midst of the

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[655] Simon Oliver, Sermon given on Good Friday 2019 at Durham Cathedral. I am grateful to Simon Oliver for giving me access to the text.

[656] Chris Glaser, *Coming Out To God, Prayers for Lesbians and Gay Men, Their Families and Friends,* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991, 47.

countless victims of this world, his ineffable generosity and solidarity go further than mere solidarity with the victims and marginalised of sacrificial belonging. As he calls them/us into life and being after him, not only does he share in his humanity our/their pain, loss, diminishment, and suffering, but transgressing them by showing beyond them restoration, and life everlasting, he opens up the possibility for belonging beyond resentment. Similarly, Christ's mighty hand does not crush his enemies,[657] and the countless perpetrators of this world, but rather his broken yet resurrected body brings them testimony of their deeds and the possibility of true life beyond them. In doing so, Christ exhorts them/us to experience the metanoia that leads to repentance, redemption, and life everlasting. Therefore, for victims to—understandably—seek to appeal to Christ as their advocate and vindicator *against* their enemies is to proceed to a redoubtable (and tragic) *inversion* of the victimage mechanism, rather than the radical *subversion* of it operated by Christ. It is, in other words, to perpetuate the old grammar of belonging, while Christ's death and resurrection offer an entirely different language of fraternity in which the deadly chasm between "us" and "them" is no more.

4.3. Beyond resentment:

In *Beyond Resentment*, Alison analyses two stories, one focusing on the victims, and the other one on the perpetrator. In the first story, which however appears second in the book, Alison discusses the sanctioning of Fr. Robert Nugent and Sr. Jeanine Gramick by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its then prefect Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Alison is deeply sympathetic to Nugent and Gramick's courageous and pioneering pastoral work with LGBT Catholics. He is also aware that they "have been subjected to extremely painful treatment, had their life work treated not so much as something of no value, but as something harmful to the Church and to the eternal well-being of those to whom they have ministered".[658] However, Alison is also adamant that he "would [not] be doing either Bob or Jeannine a favour by harping on about their being "victims."[659] This is because, Alison claims,

[657] He let them crucify Him and then implore the Father to forgive them.

[658] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 172. Here, one may wish to distinguish being victimised for standing for truth and justice and being victimised simply for who/what one is, as experienced by people of colour or LGBTQI+ people. Alison distinguishes between persecuted and victims as "people who use their status to accuse victimisers". Ibid.

[659] Ibid.

the status of the victim is a dangerous one to claim and hold onto, as it only leads to the inversion rather than the subversion of the defective order which led to victimisation in the first place.

This points to what at first may seem like a paradox or even a contradiction in Alison's work. On the one hand, the victimage mechanism is shown to be at the origin, and at the centre of what we can call postlapsarian human sociality. Moreover, it is as a victim that Christ reveals to humankind *who* God is but also who they are. On the other hand, Alison is also eager to denounce the danger of victimhood. What may firstly appear like a contradiction is only superficially paradoxical and even perfectly logical since Christ's coming as a victim does not function as a sacralisation of the victim, at least not in the sense of the sacralisation of victimhood as a new stable and vindictive identity, but as the overcoming and desacralisation of the victimage mechanism itself of which victimhood is a key part.

Elsewhere in *Faith Beyond Resentment*, and perhaps more shockingly, Alison addresses the demonisation of a conservative powerful prelate accused of sexual misconduct. Alison is not so much interested in the prelate's actual guilt (or innocence), but instead focuses on the appropriate Christian response, in the eventuality that he is guilty:

> those who have marginalised the cardinal, including some of his ecclesiastical colleagues have participated in a Christian-seeming 'inversion' of the matter: the pharisee has been transformed into the bad guy. But have they participated in authentically Christian *subversion* of the story? Subversion goes much further than inversion because inversion keeps the same mechanism alive even when the protagonists change.[660]

Alison continues "For some people he deserves it. But are we satisfied with that? I fear that if we speak thus, then our justice really is not greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees."[661] Instead, he asks that "we recognise our complicity in mechanisms that are similar, when they are not identical, and seek to understand the violent structure of our hypocrisy to go about creating ways off the hook for our co-hypocrites".[662]

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[660] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 25. Already italicised in the text. In the last clause, Alison uses subversion which I replaced by inversion as the sentence doesn't make sense otherwise.

[661] Idem, 26.

[662] Ibid.

In this essay, Alison has in mind and denounces a very specific problem to which he comes back frequently, "the structure of a monosexual clerical caste where repressed homosexuality is very much present", and its catastrophic effects on the members of this ecclesial culture as well as for the wider church.[663] The issue at hand here is primarily one of systemic hypocrisy and cowardice upon which a kind of clerical belonging relies and which leads to the alienation of its members. In this instance, and because Alison is a victim, as well as a part of the system that he denounces, Alison may very well be entitled to make such a diagnosis and prescription. Yet, do the same diagnosis and prescription apply to other social distortions and even to horrendous evil suffered by others? Is there any time or place left for anger and resentment?[664] Can reconciliation be an imperative or a necessity imposed upon the victims by those who are not victims themselves? To put it differently, can this prescription be extended beyond one's *own* particular case and generalised as the appropriate, even *obligatory*, path for victims?

An easy "get-away" answer would be to point out that here Alison is not speaking of or even to the victims themselves but to the wider community, the "ecclesial mob" as they discover among themselves a guilty member that needs othering and expelling to preserve their own integrity. Nonetheless, the issue remains. Coming from a slightly different angle, but clarifying the issue at stake, Kilby takes issue with a serious and often neglected implication of universal salvation—universal reconciliation.[665] She asks,

> could this be what heaven is like? Could it be heaven if the victims of horrendous evil are endlessly locked into a relationship with those who have inflicted horrors upon

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[663] For a controversial read on this see Fréderic Martel, *Sodoma: Enquête au coeur du Vatican*, Paris: Fixot, 2019. Also, see Alison's own review of Martel's book. Alison, "The unexpected shape of forgiveness", 4/09/2019, https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/in-the-closet-of-the-vatican/. [last accessed on 28 September 2023].

[664] Alison writes that "one of the best fraternal critiques [he has] received […] pointed out to [him] that [he does] not give enough space for the proper anger which annihilated gay people feel in the face of the intransigence and hypocrisy of religious authority […] it is true that I am, for reasons of my one history, so frightened of being blown away by my own anger at my own experience of annihilation, and thus losing the possibility of engaging in the sort of constructive conversation which might make me count as a person, that I am perhaps over-desperate to deny the pain and instead rush to accede to rational and courteous discourse." Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 26.

[665] To be clear Kilby is not "actually objecting to universal salvation in general, but to Thiel's presentation of how it would work, what would go on in heaven." I am grateful to Kilby for pointing this out to me in a private conversation. See John Thiel, *Icons of Hope: The "Last Things" in Catholic Imagination*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.

them? Maybe. I am not, perhaps, in a position to insist that this is impossible. On the other hand, *one thing that does seem clear is that those who are not the victims have no right actively to imagine heaven in this way, no right to speculate that the joy of redemption for the abused might be found in the eternal activity of reconciliation with the abuser*.[666]

Can one take on board Alison's critique of victimhood as a dangerous identity and threat/obstacle to belonging christianly which should be rejected, while doing justice to Kilby's concern to not speak in the place of the victims?

Kilby's concern is not out of place here, as we have seen again and again in the last three chapters that an underlying issue for identification with Christ is location—how does one locate oneself in relation to Christ, and here in relation to victims? Later in the same essay, Kilby establishes a grammatical distinction, which I have already mentioned in chapter 8, between first, second-, and third-persons accounts of suffering. To sum up Kilby's point, one should not project meaning onto the suffering of others, that is one should consider one's location and be epistemologically humble. Her claim in the quote above seems to obey a similar grammatical logic between the first, second, and third accounts of forgiveness and reconciliation. One cannot *dictate* reconciliation to others, the one who is not a victim cannot enjoin victims to reconcile with their persecutor.[667] More specifically Beyond this issue of projection or prescription, Kilby also asks: "Could it be heaven if the victims of horrendous evil are endlessly locked into a relationship with those who have inflicted horrors upon them?"[668]

Alison's and Kilby's concerns might be closer than expected. Indeed, if Kilby is concerned with victims being entrapped forever in relationships with their perpetrator(s), letting go of victimhood as Alison understands it is precisely to refuse to be "endlessly locked into a relationship with those who have inflicted horrors upon them". To use Alison's words, it

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[666] Kilby, Kilby, "Eschatology, suffering and the limits of theology", in Christophe Chalamet , Andreas Dettwiler , Mariel Mazzocco and Ghislain Waterlot (eds.), *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017, 279-92, 288. The first emphasis is mine, the second emphasis is already italicised in the text.

[667] This is important because this command comes from Christ who is the Forgiving Victim.

[668] Kilby, "Eschatology, suffering and the limits of theology", 135.

is to refuse "being run by evil done to ourselves."[669] Such a letting go is far from cheap forgiveness. It is a process, which does not preclude rightful anger or deny the reality of the pain suffered and the evil inflicted, the accountability of the perpetrator, or even the destructive power and attraction of resentment. Instead, it offers a path of liberation beyond resentment, that is toward reconstruction, a reconstruction in which the perpetrator is no longer central to one's own identity and retaliation part of the picture at all. To conclude, Alison writes

> The Christian faith enables us to inhabit the space of being victimised not so as to grab an identity but, in losing an identity, to become signs of forgiveness such that one day, those who didn't realise what they were doing may see what they were doing and experience the breaking of heart which will lead to reconciliation.[670]

One may be forgiven for wanting to go further and add: "and to true belonging".

5. Towards Eucharistic belonging:

In an essay with an evocative title, "the exilic transformation of anger into love",[671] Alison explores the journey of transformation beyond resentment in the lives of the prophet Ezekiel and Paul and describes what he calls the "eucharistic dynamic" of said transformation. Of Paul he says:

> The voice doesn't offer Paul a new form of belonging over against his previous one, it doesn't even contrast Jerusalem and Rome—Jerusalem bad, Rome good. It commands instead a new form of open-ended continuity in Paul's life, one bereft of any comfortable identities on which to lean. Paul must learn the terrifying lesson of moving into the serene waters of bearing witness to the truth of the living God not over against anything at all, but in the midst of a world simply indifferent to it.[672]

This open-ended continuity in the life of Paul is precisely what I have tried to describe throughout this thesis as belonging christianly, that is the process of (radical) transformation of our existing belonging into the shape of Christ. Although this subversive process is radical it is a restorative process, rather than one of mere eradication or replacement. It is precisely

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[669] Alison, "Are Christian discussions of LGBT issues a proxy for other theological conflicts".

[670] Alison, *Faith beyond Resentment*, 45.

[671] Ibid.

[672] Idem, 110.

because belonging christianly is not a mere replacement of a particular form of postlapsarian belonging with another form of (postlapsarian) belonging that obeys the same grammar of exclusion and restrictions that the transformation and purgation that constitute the journey into belonging christianly is both apophatic and eschatological. This process Alison describes as eucharistic, as he speaks of "the eucharistic dynamic" behind which "lies […] the invitation out of idolatry and into being."[673] This echoes the previous section and the call to apophatic identification which I presented as a journeying beyond idolatry and into Belonging. Thus, Alison describes "the beginning of accession to Eucharist" as "the beginning of the collapse of the difference between "we" and "they"".[674]

It is not uncommon to associate the Eucharist with belonging, especially ecclesial belonging. Thus, as de Lubac reminds us, the Eucharist makes the church.[675] Indeed Brannon Hancock writes that

> to understand the Church as a "eucharistic community" is on the simplest level to conceive of the Church's identity as the Body of Christ as that which is received as a gift through the Eucharist. This sacramental celebration takes atomized individuals and makes a community: takes '*I*'s and makes a '*We.*'[676]

In that sense we can talk of the Eucharist, and indeed baptism, as sacraments of belonging and unity, precisely because they incorporate the faithful/recipient in the one body of Christ of which the church is the ecclesial sign and partial realisation. Less common perhaps, is the idea that the Eucharist unmakes the church and, I want to argue, leads to the collapse of postlapsarian belonging. By "the Eucharist unmakes the church", I do not have in mind the ways in which the Eucharist can become or has become in too many cases, a sacrament of

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[673] Idem, 123.

[674] Idem, 121.

[675] See de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds, London, SCM 2006. For instance: *"*Literally speaking, therefore, the Eucharist makes the Church. It makes of it an inner reality. By its hidden power, the members of the body come to unite themselves by becoming more fully members of Christ, and their unity with one another is part and parcel of their unity with the one single Head' idem, 88. Also, see McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue*, San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1993.

[676] Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality*, 185.

division, a sign of disunity or conflict among, between, and within ecclesial communities and/or churches, or a way of policing and excluding others within one's community.[677] I do not speak either of a distorted individualistic understanding of the Eucharist which leads to the neglecting of the ecclesial, social, and political significance of the sacrament, that is the *ad-intra* and *ad-extra* ecclesial effects of the Eucharist, only to focus on the assumed individual effects such as increased or perceived personal holiness.

Rather, here I am talking about the intrinsic disruptiveness of sacramentality in general and the Eucharist in particular. At this point, it is worth mentioning that this final section does not constitute a fully articulated and thoroughly developed theology of this disruptiveness of sacramentality and the eucharist, and more specifically what I would like to call the disruptive sacramentality of belonging christianly. Rather, it should be seen as an evocation or an "afterthought", and a path to be explored further, a conversation to be pursued in subsequent research.

The work of Louis-Marie Chauvet would seem a fitting starting point for such an exploration. Influenced by Chauvet, Brett Hancock writes about what he calls "the poetic of sacramentality" of which he says that

> like all metaphoric and poetic speech, Christ's words punch a hole in the mundane (bread, wine; language), create tears and exposes openings, reveals cracks and fault lines, through which wholly (holy?) new meaning(s) may erupt – life bursting forth from the vacant opening in a stone-hewn tomb.[678]

Here a parallel can be drawn between the bread and belonging. Just like the wholly and holy new meaning of bread turned into the Body of Christ, belonging christianly turns our mundane, profane, and too often sinful forms of belonging into *holy* ones. Thus, universally shared experiences of ordinary everyday life, bread and belonging, are transformed into channels of grace and participation in the divine life.

To go back to the language of the Eucharist making and unmaking the church,

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[677] Here comes to mind the sacramental segregation operated by the Roman Catholic church vis-à-vis members of other Christian churches, as well as some of its own members such as the divorced and remarried and in some cases LGBT Catholics.

[678] Hancock, *The Scandal of Sacramentality*, 99.

On the one hand, the Eucharist institutes the church. On the other hand, it brings it beyond itself, constantly challenging it and breaking boundaries, between God and us, between substances, between bread and flesh, wine and blood, and between each other as all are called and brought into the life of the One who gives Himself on the altar and who is Life itself. Thus Hancock writes that

> the Church is both founded and unfounded – both made and broken – in her eucharistic celebration. In this way, the Eucharist has both a stabilizing and destabilizing effect on the recipient, both individually and corporately.[679]

Thus, in the same way that the Eucharist (un)makes the church, the Eucharist (un)makes belonging. This disruptive process is precisely what Alison calls the "eucharistic dynamic" of the transformation beyond the distorted grammar of sacrificial belonging.

Thus, following Alison and Hancock we can suggest that belonging christianly can be called eucharistic in so far as it constitutes the eucharistic practice of deconstructing the antagonistic grammar of sacrificial belonging and exclusion. Like the Eucharist is the sign of the eschatological Feast to which all of Creation is summoned, the presence of, as well as participation into, the divine in our midst, belonging christianly is the sign and participation into the reality which I have called theocentric belonging in which all things are in God and God is all things to all. We can conclude this embryonic reflection with the words of Teilhard de Chardin whose cosmic or extensive and expansive understanding of the Eucharist led to write that

> As our humanity assimilates the material world, and as the Host assimilates our humanity, the eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. Step by step, it irresistibly invades the universe. It is the fire that sweeps over the heath; the stroke that vibrates through the bronze....in a true sense, the sacramental Species are formed by the totality of the world, and the duration of the creation is the time needed for its consecration.[680]

Before turning to the conclusion of this thesis, I wish to briefly recall what was discussed in Part 3. Part 3 carried on the task of envisioning belonging christianly through the

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[679] Idem, 60.

[680] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life*, London and Glasgow: Collins / Fontana, 1966, 125-26.

lens of identification and imitation of Christ with a particular concern for the issue of misidentification with Christ and its implications for belonging christianly.

Gathering the Fragments (3):

Chapter 8 explored the role suffering should (not) play in our imitating and identifying with Christ. It concluded that suffering is not a pre-condition to belonging christianly and that the call to imitate Christ is not fundamentally or primarily a call to suffer and/or sacrifice but a call to love. Belonging christianly therefore emerged as the process of being reshaped according to that primordial love. Following in the same vein, Chapter 9 sought to reflect on vulnerability, and more specifically the idea of self-emptying or kenosis. and the two ways in which this can lead to misidentification with Christ, which in turn can have dire consequences on how we conceive belonging christianly. This led me to argue against what I called kenotic belonging. In the first section, I discussed the issues raised by the valorisation and indeed the celebration of vulnerability and argued that belonging christianly does not involve celebrating vulnerability but coming to terms with it. In the second section, I explored another, perhaps less evident, issue with kenosis which I named the misidentification with the divine. This last point, which raises the issue of idolatry, was also explored from different angles in the last two chapters. Chapter 10 discussed another, potentially more controversial, misidentification with Christ. Here we talked about the misidentification with the "Black" Christ and the conundrum of following Christ as "white" Christians. As a result, this chapter reflected critically on identification as well as on the alternative offered by Harvey and Teel. Expanding on Chapter 10, Chapter 11 proposed what I called apophatic identification with Christ as the orientation for belonging christianly. Firstly, I briefly recalled and rejected two paths of disidentification and explored a third one, which I will call apophatic identification. This led me to discuss what, after Alison, I called Christ's fraternal relocation of God and our fraternal restoration as key to the possibility of, and a defining feature for the shape of belonging christianly. I then reflected on Alison's critique of victimhood and resentment and what constitutes authentic fraternal identification to Christ and indeed belonging christianly, with a particular focus on the marginalised. Finally, I spoke of the eucharistic dynamic as the heart of belonging christianly.

Conclusion: Belonging christianly beyond this thesis

As this thesis comes to an end, I wish to do two things. Firstly, in “Reminder” I will briefly recall what this thesis tried to achieve and the arguments it deployed in the service of that aim. Secondly, in “Looking forwards", I will attempt to sketch a non-exhaustive list of avenues or paths deemed worth exploring *beyond* this thesis. Doing so will also help reflect critically on the thesis and identify lacks or weaknesses in the present state of this study of belonging christianly and ways of strengthening the concept by myself or others.

1. Reminder:

This thesis aimed to explore how the Christian story frames and answers in a radical and subversive way the longing for belonging which takes many different shapes across cultures but seems to be universally shared by humans. It did so through experimenting with and reconfiguring creatively several primarily contemporary theological voices, Catholic and otherwise around the theme of belonging and a new concept, belonging christianly. To this end, the thesis was structured in three parts, each of them divided into a series of chapters connected by a common theme.

Part 1 sought to identify a grammar of Theocentric belonging functioning as a metaphysical foundation for the theology of belonging christianly, discussing the role of key Christian doctrines, especially that of the Trinity, creation *ex nihilo*, and the Incarnation. Together these doctrines helped construct theocentric Belonging, at once the source of belonging christianly and the horizon which it receives in faith and hope, and against which present forms of postlapsarian belonging need to be critically assessed. Other formulae used to describe theocentric belonging included expansive, “over the top”, and “deep”.

More specifically, in Chapter 1, I discussed Kilby’s and Tanner’s noted critiques of social trinitarianism, specifically issues linked to projection into the Trinity and imitation of the Trinity, to articulate what the doctrine of the Trinity does *not* have to say about belonging,

that is how it can*not* or even should *not* shed light upon and provide the foundations for thinking belonging christianly. Chapter 2 began to (re)discover and deploy what I called theocentric belonging. More specifically Chapter 2 explored the idea of belonging as participation in the Trinity, and participation as creation of the Trinity and incorporation in the Trinity. Here belonging was understood as synonymous with life (participation as creation) and salvation (participation through incorporation in the life of God). Therefore, in contrast with Chapter 1, Chapter 2 tells us how the Trinity *does* provide the foundations for thinking about belonging christianly, that is not through projection but in participation. The doctrine of salvation also emerged as the fourth key doctrine to understand the depth, breadth, and purpose of theocentric belonging. Here, I did not reflect on the mechanisms of salvation, which were discussed in Part 2, but on its nature and scope. Salvation was understood primarily as deep belonging, that is through the lens of, and as the invitation to participation of *all creatures* in, the divine life through Christ and in the Spirit. This led us to explore what I called deep belonging which allowed for an expensive approach to theocentric belonging, and in time belonging christianly. To do so, I resorted to recent developments in the theology of creation, specifically the ideas of kinship and deep incarnation. Finally, Chapter 4, explored the limitations that a theology of theocentric belonging entails. It argued that a christocentric theology of belonging must also be pneumatic and that apophasis and eschatology are characteristic marks of theocentric belonging.

In Part 2, I have attempted to hold in tension, interrogate, and (re)construct the relationship between the fundamental and yet eschatological reality or mode of belonging painted in Part 1, what I called theocentric belonging and the finite, transitional, performative, fragmented, and distorted ways in which humans do effectively belong in a finite and fallen world, which gradually emerged in Part 2 and which I called postlapsarian belonging. Belonging christianly then emerged as the life-long journey or pilgrimage from postlapsarian belonging into and/or toward eschatological theocentric belonging, or perhaps more accurately as the process of receiving from Christ, and gradually inhabiting or embodying theocentric belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong christianly in the midst of postlapsarian belonging.

In Chapter 5 endeavoured to articulate the place and role of the doctrines of sin and original sin within the theology of belonging christianly. It argued that the doctrines of original sin and sin are determining in helping us to achieve the aim of attending to the tensions and

contradictions between postlapsarian belonging and theocentric belonging and moving beyond the pathological forms of the former into the latter. To develop this argument, it resorted to an unlikely combination of voices including Amia Srinivasan and Alistair McFadyen. The engagement with Srinivasan and more specifically the way in which she envisions "sex" beyond political oppression showed the points of contrast or tension between Srinivasan's secular analysis and a theological analysis from within the Western Christian tradition and its counter-cultural doctrine of original sin. To understand the specificity of Christianese when it speaks of such distortions and the limits of contemporary secular analyses of which Srinivasan's essay is an exemplar, Chapter 5 referred to the work of Alistair McFadyen. This led me to conclude on the necessity of sin-talk as it achieves two purposes. Firstly, sin-talk resituates human distortions within a broader framework in which God is the point of reference. Secondly, the doctrine of original sin helps us to assess more accurately the extent, depth, and indeed source of such distortions. Both, I contended are necessary if we wish to reflect on how to receive and gradually inhabit/embody belonging in a world misshaped by sin, or in other words, how to belong in the midst of belonging. That task was carried out in Chapter 6 which sought to further refine our understanding of sin and its place within the Christian story and vision, as well as the role of atonement within this vision to create room for thinking belonging christianly beyond our numb imaginations, as well as beyond shame and violence. A first key finding was that while the doctrine of sin remains necessary to articulate and respond adequately and theologically to the distortion of reality and belonging that it seeks to name, the doctrine of original sin is *only* an ancillary doctrine which does not belong at the centre of the Christian story. I also argued that Alison's theology offers a helpful diagnosis of the pathology of postlapsarian belonging, as well as an eschatological horizon beyond it, where water is thicker than blood, that is where all belong through being forgiven and washed in the living water flowing from the side of Christ rather than the blood of kinship and human sacrifice. The other key finding from engaging with Alison's reconfiguration of the doctrine of atonement is that atonement is not a theory to get right, or a transaction between the Son to the Father, but a radical transformation undergone *after* the Son, the opening of an until-then inaccessible reality. Belonging christianly can therefore be called post-atonement belonging and is the process of learning to be part of and inhabit this new reality that is the risen Christ. Expanding on the previous two fragments, Chapter 7 explored what I called the dynamics and freedom of belonging christianly, as well as its challenges and even obstacles. It reflected on the limits of radicality, the meaning of success and failure, and considered appropriate ways of naming

radical yet less-than-perfect belonging christianly as a journey in the dark on which one is limping with grace as one discovers God, the world and oneself anew.

Part 3 carried on the task of envisioning belonging christianly through the lens of identification and imitation of Christ and with a particular concern for the issue of misidentification with Christ.

Chapter 8 explored the role suffering should (not) play in our imitating and identifying with Christ. It concluded that suffering is not a pre-condition to belonging christianly and that the call to imitate Christ is not fundamentally or primarily a call to suffer and/or sacrifice but a call to love. Belonging christianly therefore emerged as the process of being reshaped according to that primordial love. Following in the same vein, Chapter 9 sought to reflect on vulnerability, and more specifically the idea of self-emptying or kenosis. and the two ways in which this can lead to misidentification with Christ, which in turn can have dire consequences on how we conceive belonging christianly. This led me to argue against what I called kenotic belonging. In the first section, I discussed the issues raised by the valorisation and indeed the celebration of vulnerability and argued that belonging christianly does not involve celebrating vulnerability but coming to terms with it. In the second section, I explored another, perhaps less evident, issue with kenosis which I named the misidentification with the divine. This last point, which raises the issue of idolatry, was also explored from different angles in the last two fragments. Chapter 10 discussed another, potentially more controversial, misidentification with Christ. Here we talked about the misidentification with the "Black" Christ and the conundrum of following Christ as "white". As a result, this chapter reflected critically on identification as well as on the replacement strategy of disidentification with Christ suggested by Harvey and Teel. Expanding on Chapter 10, Chapter 11 proposed what I called apophatic identification with Christ as the orientation for belonging christianly. Firstly, it briefly recalled and rejected two paths of disidentification and explored a third one, which I have called apophatic identification. This led to discussing what, after Alison, I called Christ's fraternal relocation of God and our own fraternal restoration as key to the possibility of, and also a defining feature for the shape of belonging christianly. I then reflected on Alison’s critique of victimhood and resentment and what constitutes authentic fraternal identification with Christ and indeed belonging christianly, with a particular focus on the marginalised. Finally, I introduced another mark of belonging christianly as I spoke of eucharistic belonging.

Having refreshed our memories, I can now turn to the other, more constructive, aim of this conclusion. Here I seek to look forward and sketch a non-exhaustive list of avenues or paths deemed worth exploring beyond this thesis.[681] Doing so will also help reflect critically on the thesis and identify lacks or weaknesses in the present state of this study of belonging christianly and ways of strengthening the concept.

2. Looking forward:

1. One quasi-absent theological reality in this thesis is the church. I offered a rationale for this absence in the introduction. There I suggested that although a Christian understanding of belonging cannot do without the church, lest it run the risk of construing an individualistic understanding of belonging, an oxymoron, a theology of belonging christianly that did not start with the church offered several advantages. The first advantage I identified was to help theologians, and more broadly Christians, to resist the temptation to focus (exclusively) on belonging in the ecclesial context, either at a highly systematic level or with greater attention to its local instantiation, thus neglecting the impact of Christ on other forms of belonging that remain uninterrogated, segregating profane belonging from sacred ecclesial belonging. Another opportunity offered by this experimental approach pertained to my own personal ecclesial journey and tells the story of belonging (in the dark), from the place of an "internal exile",[682] of a Catholic Christian struggling with the deep and intoxicating desire to belong (to the church), that is the urge to “be in” and to “get it right” … *and the fear not to*. Reflecting on belonging christianly or belonging in the dark thus became the opportunity to explore a path for those estranged from the church, those standing at the threshold, and even those who wish to stay in solidarity with those estranged from or excluded by the church. Nonetheless, I insisted that this experiment did not intend to ultimately neglect or even reject the theological meaning and function of the church, but instead aimed to offer a landscape within which the meaning and purpose of the church could then be (re)discovered and explored. This ambitious task,

[681] Not all the avenues are given the same length of treatment. Some are only mentioned in passing. The order in which they figure is not indicative of their order of priority or importance. Most are also linked with each other.

[682] Wener G. Jeanrond, “Sent into exile”, *The Tablet*, 15 April 2023, 10.

which was not taken upon in this thesis, is one obvious path worth exploring if the idea of belonging christianly is to grow further.

2. At the end of the last chapter, I began to speak of what I called eucharistic belonging, which I suggested is not simply an ecclesial category, but a cosmic reality and presence signified by the sacrament. I also suggested calling the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist sacraments of belonging. Exploring the role of sacramentality, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, would be necessary in order to achieve a richer understanding of belonging christianly as well as of sacramental participation and evaluate critically the shortcomings of our ecclesial practices. This would require a deeper reflection about the nature of sacramentality, as well as the ecclesial and cosmic realities upon which sacraments operate, and how that affects or should shape belonging christianly. I suggested that Louis-Marie Chauvet might be a helpful guide to explore this particular avenue. Teilhard de Chardin and Edward Schillebeckx might be two others. Linked to sacramental theology and ecclesiology is the question of the impact of the digital world upon ecclesial belonging, and the ways in which belonging christianly can help us think creatively about the digital revolution and its impact on belonging. A possible starting point would be Katherine Schmidt's recent book *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination*.[683]

3. In part 1, I began to speak of the implications of belonging christianly for our understanding and relationships with non-human life. The reverse is also true. Critically exploring and reshaping our relationships with non-human life must be an important task of belonging christianly if it is to lead beyond anthropocentrism to the sort of deep and expansive belonging which I described as theocentric belonging. Although I discussed the limits of anthropocentrism in Christian theology, perhaps have I fallen into that very trap, as the theme has remained largely undeveloped in the rest of the thesis. Exploring in greater depth the nature of the relationship between belonging christianly and non-human life, as well as the political implications, potentialities and challenges of belonging christianly at the time of the climate crisis is perhaps the most politically pressing, and prophetic, of all the paths identified in this conclusion. Here the works of Celia Deane-Drummond, Carmody Grey, and Elizabeth Johnson

[683] Katherine G Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination*, Lexington Books, 2020.

would seem complementary and suitable starting points. It would also be interesting to see how Alison's work, largely concerned with human sociality, can help us engage critically with our distorted ways of relating to the rest of creation.

4. Although the word "queer" appears several times in the thesis, it hasn't been treated extensively. Thus, another avenue worth exploring would be that of the relationship between belonging christianly and queerness, and more specifically the relationship between apophasis, queer theory, and normativity. Here, two obvious starting points would be the queer theological works of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Linn Tonstad and Thia Cooper.

5. More ecclesially focused perhaps, a timely avenue of exploration would be that of the relationship between belonging christianly and synodality. As Pope Francis invites us to reflect upon the synodality of the church as a constitutive part of the ecclesia and its praxis, belonging christianly might help us expand or at least reflect critically upon and articulate our understanding of synodality through the language of belonging. This could help us reflect more generously about the place of other Christians and indeed non-Christians, but also expand our listening practices beyond human life to the whole of creation as we seek to listen to the Spirit. Here a possible partner in conversation could be Avril Baigent and her work around the school of synodality, closely linked to Durham University and the Centre for Catholic Studies.

6. Another area that needs expanding is that of pneumatology, and more specifically the implications of a pneumatological theology of belonging christianly. Invoking Congar I argued that christology and pneumatology go together. I thus contended that the Christocentrism of this thesis ought not to be at the expense of a theology of the Spirit. However, this might have been too easy an answer. A more actively pneumatic orientation would no doubt strengthen and enrich the concept of belonging christianly.

7. In the preface to MacDonald's *Church and World in the Plan of God*, Congar reflects upon his oeuvre and writes: "I am not familiar with the human sciences and with sociology, and have not been able to incorporate these methods, and their language into my ecclesiology. I am aware of it, and it hurts, but what can one do?"[684] Although this thesis does not rival

[684] Congar, 'Preface', in Charles Macdonald, *Church and World in the Plan of God,* Peter Lang**,** 1982, ix.

Congar's theological finesse and depth, a greater engagement with sociological and psychological work in the field of belonging studies would be a valuable step in building further the concept of belonging christianly. This engagement would seek to render applicable, and indeed correct, if necessary, the idea of belonging christianly, not merely as a theory, but also as a praxis, in the myriads of contexts in which humans find themselves.

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