

BETWEEN GOD AND METAPHYSICS: An Interview with William Desmond

Christopher Ben Simpson

CHRISTOPHER BEN SIMPSON [CS]: How would you characterize the broad shape, the trajectory of your thought over the 25 years that have passed between your first books (*Art and the Absolute and Desire, Dialectic, and Otherness*) in the mid-1980s and today?

WILLIAM DESMOND [WD]: This is a question I would prefer were answered by someone else studying my work. In the main I see a deepening of certain insights, not least bearing on the fourfold sense of being I developed first in my doctoral work, published as *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness* (1986). There is a deepening of my understanding of the significance of this fourfold sense, as well as an extension of the range of considerations taken into account. The development is both more intensive and extensive, though the focus of it all is to give a logos of the *metaxu*, to understand what it might mean to say that “to be is metaxological.” The sense of “being between” is not confined to the human being as an intermediate being, though in the human being it finds something of the acme of its immanence singularization. The deepening of the immanent sense of the between is coupled with the realization that immanence is porous to what exceeds immanent determination. Thus the space of the between is also between immanence and transcendence as other, and in this space the urgent

need to think the significance of religion makes itself more and more felt in my work. Though this culminates in *God and the Between*, in a sense, this concern has always been with me. The last part or chapter of *Desire, Dialectic and Otherness* was entitled “The Absolute Original,” and this was the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation. In that sense, there is a continuity of concerns over many years.

I have also found that in one book there might be something in germ that grows into a more flourishing bloom in a later book. I am thinking about how chapters in *Philosophy and its Others* (1990), such as “Being Ethical,” or “Being Religious” become full length books with integrity in their own right in, say, *Ethics and the Between* (2001), or *God and the Between* (2008). The chapters on “Selves” and “Communities” in *Being and the Between* (1995) open into what became Part II and Part III of *Ethics and the Between*, each of which have something of the character of a monograph unto itself.

I will just mention just a few new concepts that come to the fore over the years: the primal ethos and the reconfigured ethos; the potencies of the ethical; the senses of selving and being in community as fourfold; the importance of what I call the porosity of being, and the *passio essendi*; the move to a givenness and receptivity more primal than determinate and self-determinate being; the overdeterminacy of being; the hyperboles of being and their importance for the philosophical renewal of the question of God, beyond the postulatory finitism of much post-Hegelian thought.

I have always had the ambition to philosophize in a plurivocal manner, and in my practice of philosophizing one can find more systematic work, more meditative, more interpretative, and indeed visitations from more poetic and religious voices. Finishing the trilogy, *Being and the Between*, *Ethics and the Between* and *God and the Between* brought a systematic undertaking of many years to a kind of completion. In more recent writings I am trying to find something of a balance between more meditative thinking and more systematic, with allowance for the more singing voices of the poetic and the religious.

CS: Your work has been admired as presenting something of an original constructive philosophical system. How do you describe your philosophical

system? Do you see any conspicuous conjunctions or disjunctions between other philosophical systems or perspectives today and your own?

WD: First I should say that always with me there is study of the longer tradition of philosophy, and respect for it, as well as more recent developments. In that study I do not aim to be just an echo of an echo of an echo, or to offer commentary on commentary on commentary...Nor am I primarily concerned with giving "readings." I am thinking about things.

I would say that I try to develop a post-Hegelian systematic form of thinking that takes due notice of what is at issue in his system without becoming captive to the form of mediation he finally privileges, namely, self-mediation in and through its own other. I defend system as metaxological: as articulating passages between univocal determinacy and equivocal indeterminacy; as opening to excesses beyond the circling of modern dialectic back to itself; as renewing an ontological porosity to being beyond ourselves, and beyond the claim of Hegelian dialectic to absolute knowing where thought asserts itself as unsurpassably self-determining. In all of this, I give due regard to the longer tradition's tendency to define being and intelligibility in terms of univocal determinacy (a claim which contemporary deconstruction tries to dismantle). I try to take the measure of the skeptical turn of reason against itself in the feel for equivocity that we find in a good number of post-Hegelian philosophers. I try to point towards a trans-dialectical form of thinking, which recuperates the openness of earlier forms of dialectic, while dissenting from the often accepted view that Hegelian dialectic represents the consummation and *nec plus ultra* of dialectical thinking. To the contrary, a more metaxological orientation is truer to dialectic in so far as the latter's attentive mindfulness of the other as such always exceeds any self-determining form of thought.

The term "system" and what it seems to imply is not in good odor with many philosophers in the Continental tradition these days and generally this is a carryover from Hegel's influence and its repudiation by many post-Hegelian thinkers. There is not a lot in philosophy today that wants to call itself by the name "system." "System" seems to be a catchword for Laputan constructions of abstract concepts which have to be treated suspiciously or deconstructed. I

would agree with Hegel that some sense of system is unavoidable, without subscribing to the view that there is *the* system which Hegel claims to bring to completion. If there is a systematic side to philosophy it has to do with the fundamental interrelations of being and mindfulness. When we think of one thing, or think it through, we find ourselves driven to think of another thing fundamentally related to the first, and further again. This is not only true of the processes of thought. The happening of being is intelligibly articulated, and to attend to the articulations of that happening is to see the dynamic of a certain systematic unfolding occurring in happening. The growth of a tree, for example, is the becoming of a botanical system, and our thinking is to stay in faithful attunement with that systematic unfolding when it is true to it. In such a view, what is systematic is dynamic, while articulate and intelligible, it is not static simply, though there can be systems that are less dynamic and that tilt towards the more static end of the spectrum. Rhetorical assaults on “system” do not help mindful attention to the intricate, immanent richness of the happening of being, nor to the call of a certain fidelity that is asked of us in mindful attention of that intricacy.

If system is essential, I have also tried to pay attention to the *trans-systematic*. Hence the concern with thinking between system and poetics (see the book, *Between System and Poetics* edited by Thomas Kelly). Poetics I take as referring to a more original coming to be, and as witnessing to energies of being that cannot be exhausted in this or that determinate formation, or systematic articulation. There is not so much an immanent whole as open wholes: open wholes that, in the first instance, are opened to a process of their own becoming, and that always shimmer with energies of being that exceed every finite determinate and systematic whole. A system, in the sense of an open whole, is metaxological, as exceeding its own self-relation, and always marked by an other-relatedness that cannot be completely enclosed in its own immanence. Poetics pays attention to sources of origination preceding a system, to energies of becoming that move a system, to energies moving in and through a system, and also to energies of transcending that open to what is beyond this or that determinate system, open to what exceeds system. One way I speak of this surplus to system is in terms of the overdeterminacy of being. For a theologically minded person, this overdeterminacy comes to expression in what I call the hyperboles of being

which are happening in immanence which exceed the terms of immanence. They allow porosity to thinking the divine as transcendence irreducible just to immanent transcending.

In some strands of philosophy I see poetics as turned *against* system, as if the point was to live down the ghost of Hegel, and by imputation the longer tradition of philosophy he is said to bring to an end. I share with the post-Hegelians a concern for otherness. I hold we need finesse for equivocities beyond system, but worry that we are often left with too simple an oscillation between univocity and equivocity – often in a very unthematized way at that. This is why a continued wrestling with the Hegelian possibilities of dialectic is important – that is, as a thinking in the between that yet is not properly metaxological in its circling of the overdeterminacy of being in terms of the self-determining of immanent thought.

CS: As former president of the Hegel Society of America and author of numerous books and essays on Hegel, how has your reading of Hegel changed over the years—say between *Art and the Absolute* (1986) and *Hegel's God* (2003)?

WD: As a graduate student I wrote a first paper on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which I argued that Hegel did not do justice to knowledge of the other. The professor was not entirely happy with it, though I did manage to persuade him to come a little closer to my concerns. True, there are critiques of Hegel that verge on caricature. And yet in a caricature there is always a touch of the truth – albeit exaggerated or overstated. One of the reasons I wrote *Art and the Absolute* (1986) was to try to give Hegel a sympathetic run for his money. I was always interested in the relation of art and philosophy. I was also impressed by Hegel's aesthetics, and desirous to give him a more sympathetic interpretation. The book was liked by the Hegelians, though I now think I was sometimes ventriloquizing through Hegel – making him say things one would like him to say. The Hegelian confraternity liked *Art and the Absolute* since it seemed to offer a more open Hegel, and I was welcomed as a Hegelian sympathizer. Then in time I become a critical sympathizer, then a sympathetic critic, then a critic, and then

with *Hegel's God* (2003) the door at the back of the church was pointed out to me and I took the message that for the pious Hegelians I was now anathema. So be it. I have been increasingly more critical of Hegel in thinking there is a systematic bias at work in his practice of dialectic. The issue came to a head for me in relation to God whose unsurpassable transcendence is systematically reconfigured by Hegel, producing a counterfeit double of God, as I have argued in *Hegel's God*. I think many read Hegel much too innocently – this is especially true of those who want to make religious use of him. He is far more dialectically slippery and equivocal than they seem to realize or want to grant. That said, he is an essential thinker with whom one must come to terms. I'm afraid many of those who think they are beyond Hegel and dialectic are not quite where they claim to be. That is another reason why a recuperation of dialectic, both in its Hegelian and non-Hegelian forms is a continuing task. Dialectic is not univocal.

Does Hegel represent the end of metaphysics? No. Does Hegel stand for the consummation of the philosophical tradition? No. Does Hegel bring about the completion of dialectical thinking? No. Many anti-Hegelians answer yes to the above questions. I say no and engage the metaphysical tradition and dialectic differently.

There are some who today want a more pluralistic Hegel, one who *mirabile dictu* is one of us in the postmodern *Zeitgeist*. I often find commentators ventriloquizing through Hegel – he becomes the plastic dummy through whom we can say what we think Hegel would say, if Hegel were us. I find Hegel himself more interesting, and more challenging and more to be challenged. As for myself, as a teacher I continue to offer courses where Hegel figures but I have reached a point where I do not find Hegel helping me see things I am trying to see. And I do think I have seen things Hegel was unable to see. The reason I continue to teach Hegel is because the struggle with Hegel is worth it philosophically. I do see green readers fall under his bewitchment. I try to offer some philosophical inoculations against false conceptual enchantments. But what can one do when someone is infatuated? The spell will run its course. Or do we need to develop a need area of expertise for treating conceptual possession: philosophical exorcism?

CS: This question has some set-up before getting to an actual question, so bear with me: You have always been something of an outsider in continental philosophy. You have specialized in once pariah-status domains such as Hegel (seen as ur-totalizer), Metaphysics (seen as what-is-wrong-with-thinking-hitherto and that-which-is-to-be-avoided-at-all-costs), and Religion or God (when a certain atheism was de rigueur). However, the continental academy, more recently, has seemed to turn toward these domains anew.

Hegel has had something of a rebirth of late, whether it be in newer (perhaps “safer”?) re-readings of Hegel such as that of Pinkard and Pippin or in more “radical” appropriations such as that of Žižek. Metaphysics has returned in various incarnations in the work of Alain Badiou, Speculative Realism/Materialism (thinkers like Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman), the resounding influence of Deleuze, and in the theological metaphysics of Radical Orthodoxy. Religion has again taken the stage—be it in the more Levinasian mode of Derrida and Caputo after him, in the various meditations on political theology (Agamben), in the atheist appropriations (“laicization”) of Christian theology (Badiou and Žižek), in the mode of the return of a “radical” secular theology, or in the more confessional Radically Orthodox.

The continental world has turned and you have found yourself recently in a certain proximity to the rumblings of the philosophical *Zeitgeist*. Thinkers today may come to discover this Irish gadfly who has been addressing their pet issues all along. How would you situate your own thinking relative to these areas and these “returns”?

WD: There are lots of issues in your question and much might be said. Here are a few things.

I have noticed that there is a plethora of books in which the word “after” appears – *After God*, *After Christianity*, *After the Death of God*, and so on. What could “after” mean? Did religion ever go away? Did God ever go away? Or were we just astray? Of course, properly in postmodern idiom, there should be no returns, since there is nothing to return, and hence no “after” also, since nothing finally seems really to arrive at all, being infinitely deferred. After infinite deferral there is no “after,” and one wonders what there is before it also. Did

religion go away, or was it just so with the clerks? Did God ever go away, or was it just so with the clerks? What the clerks think, of course, eventually can take to the streets, and sometimes the results are riotous.

It is true that there is a kind of *default atheism* with quite a number of contemporary intellectuals. A default position is something for which a particular system is primed – the result of a certain configuration of being. We should be reflecting on that configuration. What are the configurations of thought and being that hinder even the arising of the question of God? This is related to a theme I consider important, namely, the given ethos of being, and our diverse reconfigurations of it, and how the latter can recess something essential, as well as reveal something essential. The question of God today means reflection on our reconfiguration of the ethos of being and a fuller understanding of its ontological and metaphysical promise, a promise never a matter simply of our reconfiguration or reconstruction. I find most discussions of God to be caught in the foregrounds of determinate configurations, without finesse for the more primal ethos of being and its ontological promise. A philosophy of the between tries to articulate something of the significance of the primal ethos. By understanding the latter better philosophy itself might reopen its familial relation with religion and with theology.

I do have some memory of a time when in Continental philosophy one met with disdain for religion, and if one sought to retain some fidelity to its call, one was looked at as some strange creature who had not heard what “everyone” knew, namely, that God was dead. Some of those disdainers now seem to see academic opportunity in the return of religion. *Homo academicus* is a herd animal. I sometimes wonder if with the academic professionalization of philosophy we all are scholastics now? I see a kind of hermeneutical scholasticism in Continental philosophy, a kind of technician scholastic in analytic philosophy. I would like a kind of deschooling of professional philosophy in which we re-learn the virtues of school, in the old sense of *skolē* – a kind of contemplative leisure in thinking the things themselves. While being an outsider may be part of being philosophical, being at school in the sense of *skolē* is also part of the *paideia* of the spirit, both religious and philosophical. In our hyper-active, hyper-performative times this spirit is lost.

On the return of metaphysics: I never bowed before the language of the “end of metaphysics,” or that of “the overcoming of metaphysics.” I can understand “overcoming” a kind of scholastic rationalism in metaphysics, but the practices of metaphysics are more plurivocal, as indeed are the senses of being. I looked around me for practicing metaphysicians answering the job description and did not find many. I suspected there was some shadow boxing going on. Called up were spooks from a past of scholasticism long quietly resting in the grave. Why disturb such spooks, when the great metaphysical questions still are alive and facing us constantly as querying companions? One of the things I liked about Radical Orthodoxy was that, while on the surface it seemed critical of “metaphysics,” it was alive to the spirit of genuine metaphysical astonishment and perplexity. In terms of the return of metaphysics I hope the philosophical *Zeitgeist* is waking up from its obsession with spooks of “metaphysics.”

The practices of metaphysics are plurivocal and this plurivocity I have tried to exemplify in my own work. Of course, one of the voices is that of univocity, and in modernity one could especially say that an excessively ascendant univocalizing project has come to the fore. This project may have recessed roots in some premodern practices of metaphysics, though I think the porosity between philosophy and religion in premodernity prevented philosophy from closing in on itself and claiming absolute rights to self-determination. Relative to this plurivocity of the tradition, those who totalize the same tradition ironically exhibit the same univocalization, albeit in meta-reflective form.

I admire many things in Heidegger, especially his efforts to re-raise the question of being. Are we now suffering from a further, a second forgetfulness of being, and not without the influence of Heidegger himself? The language of the “overcoming of metaphysics” does not fertilize the soil of thought with seeds of metaphysical astonishment, always new and always old. Heidegger himself was the recipient of that astonishment, but blaming the cure (metaphysics) for the ill (“metaphysics”) reveals a symptomatic equivocation.

Am I wrong in noting in some French admirers of Heidegger that they spend the first third of their book loading themselves up with Heideggerian chains, the second third taking off these chains again, and the last third trying to say something interesting? Putting on and taking off chains involves heavy lifting, and it sometimes seems to leave one exactly where one started, but the

expenditure of energy can tire and weaken one. Perhaps there are chains that are part of the protocols of scholastic professionalism.

What about claims for “post-metaphysical” thinking? This is another instance of the power of the “after.” It might be that certain forms of metaphysics are behind us but there is no post-metaphysical thinking, since all thinking is informed by fundamental senses of being which are at work whether we think about them or not. Being post-metaphysical without attention to these is being a poor metaphysician, not a post- metaphysician.

And Hegel again? In the work of John McDowell and Robert Brandom the spirit of a kind of idealism is resurrecting itself in analytic philosophy where Hegel remains still a bit of a bogeyman. This spirit is closer to an objective idealism and not at all an absolute idealism in Hegel’s sense. This is a more pragmatically tinged idealism, calling to mind (I think earlier of Dewey) an “Hegelianism” without the absolute.

What of commentators like Pippin and Pinkard? They are fine scholars, but I think they have made a Hegel conformable to, more comfortable to academic colleagues at home in the contemporary liberal *Zeitgeist* in Anglo-American philosophy. They make Hegel too Kantian in the end, which is not to deny that Hegel is nothing without Kant, but he is much more. This reconfigured Hegel is evacuated of his metaphysical and theological power.

In some quarters there is a kind of Hegel lite which does seem to make him more relevant, but it also makes him less interesting. I sometimes take the attitude to religion as a kind of test case of genuine openness to otherness. If there is nothing but silence here, or a reconfiguration that makes religion inoffensively humanistic, then I check the exits. While Hegel tried to speculatively overcome the God-man, we now do not even have the man-God but the last man – desperately trying to make Hegel as metaphysically inoffensive as possible. Hegel is just like ourselves so we can relax, there is nothing scandalous to the *Zeitgeist*, nothing alarming. This last man has read Hegel and Nietzsche on the death of God and is reconciled with this. He is asleep to the dark clouds gathering round him, ominous with something like Vico’s “barbarism of reflection.”

What of someone like Žižek? He has struggled with Hegel, but he shares a tendency to tell us that now at last, with Lacan's help, say, or even Schelling's, we are in a position to understand the real Hegel, covered over by stupid scholars for almost two centuries. Marx talked about Hegel's mystification of *Geist* in terms of the divine spirit and Marx wanted to demystify Hegel in terms of the human spirit. I sometimes think Marx is more honest, and Žižek is in the business of a *re-mystification* of Hegel, and he is not alone in this. He tends to exhibit one of the major tendencies in using Hegel since Hegel, namely, uncoupling the power of dialectical negativity from Hegel's strong claim to systematic completeness. (As recent examples with something of this, Catherine Malabou and Karin de Boer, under some influence from Derrida, come to mind.) The energy of negativity rides over the systematic claim, and Hegel as a speculative philosopher, with intimate ties with metaphysical and theological traditions, is relegated from the premier league. I find that Hegel can be seen as conceptually colonizing Christianity, and even in those not sympathetic to Hegel, I find analogous appropriations of Christianity. I think of Badiou on St. Paul. The risk of colonizing the religious is perhaps more insidious in more recent appropriations than in Hegel who, after all, wore his dialectical heart on his sleeve. The taking over of Christianity turns it to ends that are neither religious nor Christian. Theologically one must be concerned about the production of counterfeit doubles of a post-Hegelian sort. True, along the way striking insights can be offered. I sometimes shake my head at the way some thinkers claiming to be religious can quote like sacred scriptures words of the post-Hegelian atheistic colonizers, when for them there is nothing in the end that is truly sacred or holy.

I am happy that thinkers like Badiou and Deleuze make no apology for their commitment to metaphysics. It is interesting for me to ask if they have passed through dialectic in a fruitful way and to what extent they are genuinely trans-dialectical thinkers in a manner that would allow communication with metaxological possibilities of thought. Generally, in the last part of the twentieth century in France dialectic seems to have fallen into deep silence. It is traduced by Deleuze in his book on Nietzsche and philosophy. If dialectic itself harbors plurivocal promise, we must resist what one might call agenda-driven philosophy which has a project, say, carrying through the Nietzschean inversion

of Platonism. For me philosophy is not a project, shaped and driven by an agenda. Let the matter itself take thought where it will, even towards the philosophical friendship of “Plato.” There is a deep patience to truer thinking. The word “materialism” also evokes for me something agenda-driven, something programmatic.

I did write about deconstruction in earlier books, in *Art and the Absolute* (1986) and *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic* (1992), but fell into silence after the Paul de Man affair, for reasons explained briefly in a forthcoming book, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being: Metaphysics After Dialectic* (2012). (Even I can’t escape the word “after”!) One reason is related to the very apt phrase you coined in your book *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*: the “LeviNietzschean vision.” I was always perplexed how one got from Nietzsche to Levinas, from Rome to Judea. I did note the mutation of tonality (in the late 1980s, early 1990s) in concerns from a more Nietzschean to more Levinasian register. The virile phase of transgressive deconstruction seemed to give way to an almost hyperbolic concern for the other. (“Transgression”: Am I mistaken in the impression that this word now seemed less used, or used less virulently?) Deconstruction revealed itself as justice. The “thou” is older than the “I,” Zarathustra intoned. Now it seems as if the older “thou” had made a big comeback. Many seemed to have become flagellants of the self in penitence before the excessive other, the “thou” they previously marginalized as the servile other. “Rome versus Judea,” Nietzsche exclaimed, but Judea seemed to have stepped out of the desert and back onto center stage, even among erstwhile Nietzscheans. For the Levinasian penitents, the pagan Zarathustra has been dispatched back to his cave to languish for now in exile. How does Rome become a convert to Judea or revert to it? That is never explained. Indeed the issue is passed over, since harping on such an awkward transition might hinder “keeping the conversation going,” as a Rortyan might insist.

CS: From the vantage point of your career in continental philosophy how would you characterize the “present age”? What comes after the “postmodern”? Were we ever “postmodern”? Were we ever “modern”?

WD: Are we are living in the end times of the narcissism of autonomy – even when we deconstruct autonomy? Many uses of the word “postmodern” set my teeth on edge because in trying to mean too much the word can end up meaning nothing at all. We are postmodern in the sense that modernity is in question to itself, modernity as the epoch in which freedom as autonomy has hugely shaped our reconfiguration of being. You might say: such being in question is part of modernity, but it is part of modernity that can be turned against modernity. I should say that modernity as the epoch of autonomy is twinned with modernity as the epoch of the unprecedented project of univocalizing all being, so far as this is possible. Massive objectification goes with huge subjectification. In that light one can also agree with some who say postmodernism is more a form of hypermodernism than anything else. If so, it is blithely sawing the branch on which it is sitting, happy to sing about the groundlessness of being, in chirpy disregard of its own fated downfall. I admit there is much of equivocity to the situation. There is much critique of autonomy but I would say there is also much of lacerated autonomy or self-lacerating autonomy in this critique of autonomy.

I sense we are like swimmers trying to get out into clear water, but we are always driven back by the waves. Being out beyond: genuine openings to otherness entail a new porosity to transcendence. This means being beyond the idolization of immanence as that greater than which nothing can be thought. Such postulatory finitism, as I call it, is a position impossible to sustain – even as it offers a pragmatic impersonation of the ontological argument for the necessity of finitude as such. Being out beyond: and I don’t mean the easier immanent transcendence but a more robust other transcendence. The two thinkers who come to mind who had an intrepid sense of this are Kierkegaard and Levinas. If Levinas sometimes strikes one as tending to a somewhat dualistic frame, with hints of something like the dialectic of mastery and servitude, Kierkegaard is a genius of dialectical strategy – a dialectical master mastering dialectic of the Hegelian type and bringing it to the point of its porosity to what exceeds it. Interestingly, he said “the dialectical algebra works better,” when considering if *Sickness unto Death* might also ask for a rhetorical treatment.

If the equivocal ground of postmodernity does open to transcendence as other, the opening is promised through the mindfulness of what is hyperbolic to immanence in immanence itself. These hyperboles of being, as I call them in *God*

and the Between, are signs communicating of God's own wording of the between – to speak theologically. Perhaps modernity is an interim: before it there was a more living porosity between philosophy and religion/theology, and after it perhaps a renewed porosity is opening up. Perhaps the first porosity was too much taken for granted, whereas the second porosity cannot be taken for granted. And yet it is only open for us, given our readiness to receive it thoughtfully again as granted. The first porosity enabled thought but perhaps was not always thought through. The second porosity comes to thought at the end of its tether, so to say, enabling thought again about the elemental and ultimate things that, in truth, have never left us, and hence can never return, since it is rather for us to turn towards them as always turned towards us.

Who can honestly make epochal claims about modernity, postmodernity? We can be too intoxicated with the dubious grandeur of such claims. We need to turn to the elemental if we are to get a sense of the epochal. Here I speak of the intimacy or idiocy of being, and in the end I think only the personal God a genuine theism can reconcile the singular and the universal in terms of what I call the intimate universal. If postmodernism is still not free enough of the narcissism of autonomy, or is not yet more than autonomy's self-laceration, the full promise of both the intimacy and the universal have not been understood. I think the latter leads to a sense of freedom beyond autonomy (see *Ethics and the Between*) in which we are released truly to what is, released too from our own self-encirclement. I am not particularly optimistic on an epochal scale, since we are still trying to encircle the earth in our own self-encirclement. From the glory of God's creation we are reconfiguring it, in accord with serviceable disposability, as something closer to a toxic wasteland.

CS: This interview appears in the inaugural issue of *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*. How do you understand the distinction and the relation between theology and philosophy? Where do you see your work in the midst of this relation (perhaps thinking about the role that the Christian tradition plays in your work, explicitly or implicitly)? How is your largely philosophical work related to the fundamentally theological perspective of Radical Orthodoxy?

WD: The metaxological philosophy I have been developing is hospitable to a variety of intermediations between philosophy and its others, and this applies most intimately when the others are religion and theology. There is a dialogue between reason and faith that is not dualistic or dialectical but metaxological in a familial way. If there is faith seeking understanding, there is also understanding seeking faith, at the limit of the understanding's power to be entirely self-determining. I hope something of the intimate intermediation is at work all throughout *God and the Between*. Certainly members of Radical Orthodoxy have shown serious hospitality to my work for which I am grateful. It is a plurivocal movement impossible to summarize in any univocal formulation. It has the nature of a certain communivocity, hence witnesses to multiple interplays of likeness and unlikeness. In the interplays something of an intellectual and spiritual dynamic is in motion. I came to know of Radical Orthodoxy initially through reading John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, and Catherine Pickstock's, *After Writing*. I was very impressed by both works, by an intellectual robustness in matters philosophical and theological, by a certain fearlessness in giving utterance to a point of view in which no apology was given for being concerned with God. Later I got to know the work of Conor Cunningham and Graham Ward and continued to be both engaged and illuminated by their courage in taking up issues extremely contemporary and yet with a perspective that opened to vistas of longer and larger traditions. I continue to be engaged and illuminated.

I came to Radical Orthodoxy from outside theology as an academic discipline and have sometimes been taken aback by the ire of the theologians as they engage in friendly fire with each other. When talking about the relation of philosophy and theology I hesitate about the academic distinction of the faculties. Kant talked about the conflict of the faculties but one wonders to what degree the entire existential dimension of philosophy and theology gets lost sight of in these internecine conflicts between academics. Kant is representative of something that happens in all academic circumstances. The challenge to intellect and spirit in philosophy and theology cannot be contained in any faculty – albeit I know such organizations are needed pragmatically. Theology is not just a science, not a regional science (Heidegger), but rooted in a community of belief and watered by the reverence of true piety. Without the latter it becomes

sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Analogously in philosophy there is an academic side, but without the spirit of metaphysical astonishment it easily becomes a scholastic technique, leading to the barbarism of reflection. Keeping the spirit of astonishment alive is not unlike opening oneself to the divine porosity of prayer. Theology and philosophy are siblings in the same family. I sense something of that familial relation with regard to Radical Orthodoxy.

One of the reasons I have admired Augustine, an admiration I share with many in Radical Orthodoxy, is precisely the lack of fixation of such academic territorialities, on porosity between thinking and worship, philosophy and theology, on fine attunement to the fluid intermediacy of our metaxological being. This means being both inside and outside at the same time. This is another way of me being an outsider, even when I am an insider. In most of current professional practices of philosophy, I don't see a lot of openings either to religion or the divine. I read recently that in the US close to the least number of philosophy positions on offer were those in philosophy of art and philosophy of religion. In all honor to Hegel, art and religion are included with philosophy in absolute spirit. But that philosophy of art and religion should be close to the bottom of teaching possibilities says something about our time in which finesse for the question of the absolute has weakened, if not vanished. It used to be all but essential to the self-definition of a philosopher that he or she would make some effort to address the ultimate question of God. Now among many intellectuals atheism is the default position and operative in a relatively thoughtless way. Obviously in theology, one meets with more openness, though theologians are sometimes too timid. One thing the representatives of Radical Orthodoxy are not is timid. If there is to be a dialogue between philosophy and theology, it is important who serves as representative of philosophy. Some philosophical positions are Trojan horses for default atheism.

Radical orthodoxy is not a great respecter of academic walls. This, of course, risks treading on toes in the eyes of some. What impressed me was an intellectual and what I took to be a spiritual seriousness in its representatives. I felt here were theologians with fire in their bellies. Of course, fire is dangerous: it can burn up, though it also vivifies, revivifies, lights us up. Am I wrong in the impression that often theologians were comfortable talking to themselves but uncomfortable with outsiders, not least in confrontation with the pervasiveness

of default atheism? I referred above to the new scholasticism in philosophy, whether hermeneutic or technical, and here too we need fire. For all its critics Radical Orthodoxy has given new fire to the life of theology.

Modernity sometimes shows a stupidly antagonistic attitude to the longer intellectual and spiritual traditions of the West – in theology and philosophy. This leads to the invention of new wheels, but these wheels are not necessarily better helpers to motility of spirit. Bad wheels bring motion to a standstill and we cannot move forward. Sometimes we need to rock backwards to get out of a rut and budge the jam and then roll with release into the future. I would say Radical Orthodoxy has something of this rocking motion – and with its releasing promise. Rocking back allows forward release.