

# THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, GOD AND THE BETWEEN

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## PHILOSOPHY OR THEOLOGY?

**H**ow are we to regard William Desmond's work—especially now after the completion of his systematic trilogy with *God and the Between*? How are we to “locate” Desmond—himself a master “locator”? Is he a philosopher or a theologian? Should we be uneasy about an answer that says he is in some sense both?

Thinking of the bond (*desmos* in Greek) between theology and philosophy, between Jerusalem and Athens, I suggest seeing Desmond as not merely a philosopher who has religious insights, who has philosophical ways of thinking about God, but as a part of the great tradition of Christian philosophical theologians drawing on the philosophical font of Neo-Platonism—the (overtly religious) pinnacle of classical philosophy—a theological tradition extending from Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine to Bonaventure and beyond.

Desmond, as with these earlier figures, thinks that philosophy and theology can relate to each other intimately, constructively - complementing and completing each other - that indeed theology and philosophy are better off for their interrelation. Could we not see Desmond as taking up this tradition (in spirit if not in the letter) that went into recess with the rise of the modernity? To

this end, I will examine the tradition/trajectory of Christian Neo-Platonic philosophical theology—with its robust, if indeed perilous, community between Neo-Platonic philosophy and Christian theology—while taking account of the heterodox tendencies within this tradition. I will then going on to examine the possibility of locating Desmond’s work, specifically what we have in *God and the Between*, against this background.

## NEO-PLATONIC PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY?

### *God*

The tradition of Christian Neo-Platonic philosophical theology presents some common positions regarding God and God’s relation to the world and the human soul that show the influence of Neo-Platonism—and that entail what must be seen as certain heterodox tendencies.

God is represented as the excessive One that is beyond being—and the Trinity is figured relative to this perspective. In Pseudo-Dionysius, as with Origen before him, God transcends being—is super-essential, beyond being. God is also, in Pseudo-Dionysius and in this trajectory generally, the One beyond all divisions.<sup>1</sup> Eckhart seeks the unity of the Godhead above the Persons of the Trinity,<sup>2</sup> and Cusanus sees God as *coincidentia oppositorum*—the One in which there is a unity of opposites.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Böhme sees God as the eternal One—the nothing and the all—the unity of Unground and Urground such that there a process of self-manifestation and self-discovery within God<sup>4</sup>—the one whose containment of opposites generates manyness.

<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, 1.1. The One as the most important title for Pseudo-Dionysius. See “The Divine Names”, 13.1.

<sup>2</sup> I am nothing like a specialist on any of these figures, but my presentation here is conventional and, I trust, not terribly controversial. I largely use the basic portraits as presented in Frederick Copelston’s classic *History of Philosophy*. Hereafter, CII designates the second volume, CIII designates the third. Copelstone, CIII, 185-86; Eckhart, *Sermons*, 17 and 48.

<sup>3</sup> Copelstone, CIII, 233.

<sup>4</sup> Copelstone, CIII, 271.

The Trinity is often presented from the perspective of this Neo-Platonic "One." For Origen, the Logos and the Holy Spirit, while of the divine nature, are a series of emanations between the Father and the created spirits.<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nyssa (along with the other Cappadocian Fathers), while influenced by Neo-Platonism, sees the Son and Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father but not as emanations—they are *homoousious*—God in the same way the Father is God—also, the Father is involved in the world, not merely acting through intermediaries.<sup>6</sup> For Pseudo-Dionysius, however, the Persons of the Trinity are manifestations or emanations of the One that is beyond manifestation.<sup>7</sup> In Eckhart, the begetting of the Son is put on the same plane as the simultaneous creation of the world—both are eternal emanations from God.<sup>8</sup>

### *The World*

The Christian Neo-Platonic tradition presents certain common positions regarding the nature of the world and God's relation to it—its origin, participatory being and end in God. In general, the creation of the world is viewed in terms of an overflowing and spontaneous emanation from the One. In the dependence of all things on God, the world becomes implicit in the being of God—its emanation a necessary product the One's nature. Though Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa would affirm the free creation of the world by God<sup>9</sup>, there are many voices in this tradition that would not. For Pseudo-Dionysius as well, the world emerges necessarily from the overflowing nature of the One.<sup>10</sup> For Eriugena, God's goodness is the "nothing" out of which all things are made such

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<sup>5</sup> From the Father to the Logos as mediator to the Holy Spirit to created spirits. Origen, *De Principiis*, 2, 6, 1-3; Kenney, "The Greek Tradition" 124-25.

<sup>6</sup> Copelstone, CII, 35; Kenney, "The Greek Tradition" 125.

<sup>7</sup> Copelstone, CII, 96; Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", 1.4, 2.4.

<sup>8</sup> Eckhart, Commentary on Genesis 1:1, in *Sermons*; Copelstone, CIII, 190-91.

<sup>9</sup> Copelstone, CII 33, 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", 1.7; Kenney, "The Greek Tradition", 126; Copelstone, CII, 98.

that God is “in all things.”<sup>11</sup> Eckhart, likewise, sees the eternal generation of the world as a consequence of God’s nature.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the origination of the world, God relates to the world in terms of participation and divine self-creation. While Eriugena has a more emanational participation in which there is “the derivation of a second essence from a higher essence,”<sup>13</sup> Bonaventure presents participation in terms of a hierarchy of being structured relative to likeness to God—such that every creature is a *vestigium Dei*, and rational creatures are *imago Dei*.<sup>14</sup> Both Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa see God as creating/manifesting himself in the creation of other things<sup>15</sup>—the divine as one, infinite and eternal expresses or reveals itself in the multiplicity of finite things in temporal succession as a cosmic mirror such that the world is auto-theophany.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel to the emanational *exitus* of creation in Neo-Platonic philosophical theology is the *reditus*, the return to God such that God will be all in all. Pseudo-Dionysius sees a drawing back of all of the emanational hierarchy into God.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Eriugena envisions God as end of all things such that nothing will exist but God alone—though his intention here is deification, intending to preserve a distinction between creatures and God (it is a question whether he did).<sup>18</sup>

In the end, there is a pronounced tendency in Christian Neo-Platonic philosophical theology toward a kind of pantheism. For Pseudo-Dionysius, “all things taken as a whole are One”—are as participating in the unity of the One.<sup>19</sup> Eriugena, while maintaining some kind of difference between God and

<sup>11</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 1.72, 3.19; CII 125.

<sup>12</sup> Copelstone, III, 190-91.

<sup>13</sup> Copelstone, CII, 123; Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 3.3.

<sup>14</sup> Copelstone, CII, 266-68.

<sup>15</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 1.1, 3.23; CII 123-24, 134; Desmond, *God and the Between*, 233 (hereafter *GB*).

<sup>16</sup> Copelstone, CIII, 239-44.

<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, 1.7, Kenney, “The Greek Tradition,” 126.

<sup>18</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 5.3; Copelstone, CII, 117, 127-29.

<sup>19</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, 13.2.

creatures<sup>20</sup>, regularly refers to God as the all-comprehensive reality—that God is “substantially all that He contains, the substance of all visible things created in Him”<sup>21</sup>—that “We should not therefore understand God and creation as two different things, but as one and the same.”<sup>22</sup> For Meister Eckhart (though he has an affinity for antinomy), God is existence such that to be outside of God is to be outside of existence—leaving no final distinction between the one God and the multiplicity of creatures.<sup>23</sup> For Cusanus, God as maximum includes all things—transcending all creaturely distinctions and oppositions by uniting, containing them in Himself, incomprehensibly.<sup>24</sup> Though this, like the positions of many figures in this tradition, would suggest a kind of pantheism, Nicholas, like many figures in this tradition, would protest that it is not.

### *God and the Soul*

In the midst of such an understanding of God and the world, the Christian Neo-Platonic tradition presents a constellation of positions regarding the relationship between God and the human soul. For Augustine and Bonaventure, the soul is innately oriented toward God in the manner of a Platonic *eros*.<sup>25</sup> Further, Augustine and Bonaventure following him sees God’s active relation to the world, to rational creatures specifically, in terms of divine illumination through which we grasp that which transcends us and God draws humanity

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<sup>20</sup> Copelstone, CII 117, 120-21.

<sup>21</sup> Copelstone, CII 125. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 3.18.

<sup>22</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 3.16. See also Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 1.72; Copelstone, CII ,120-25.

“His language rather gives the impression that he is straining at the leash and that his thought, in spite of his orthodox intentions, tends toward a form of philosophic pantheism”. Copelstone, CII , 122.

<sup>23</sup> Copelstone, CIII ,187-89.

<sup>24</sup> Cusanus, “Learned Ignorance”, 1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 2.11. In *Selected Writings*. As he writes: “God is the enfolding of all things in that all things are in Him; and He is the unfolding of all things in that He is in all things.” “Learned Ignorance”, 2.3.

<sup>25</sup> Copelstone, CII, 69, 242-43, 253-54.

upward to Himself.<sup>26</sup> Eckhart, however, presents a more unitary position in which the Godhead is both the ground of the soul and the ground of God.<sup>27</sup>

In standard Neo-Platonic fashion, many of the figures in this tradition see God as beyond human conception. For Gregory of Nyssa, faith is superior in that it accepts the mysteries of faith—though this faith can be rationally expounded.<sup>28</sup> For Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena after him (but drawing from Gregory of Nyssa before him) however, negative/apophatic is preferable to positive/cataphatic theology in that the denying of attributes is closer to attaining to the divine “super-essential darkness.”<sup>29</sup> For Cusanus (following both Dionysius and Eriugena) the “learned ignorance” of the *via negativa* is superior in that our lower faculties (sense-perception, and reason [*ratio*]) see the mutual exclusion of opposites, whereas the intellect (*intellectus*) denies the oppositions and sees their coincidence, and so can attend to God’s nature.<sup>30</sup>

More broadly, this tradition presents the end of human being in terms of a mystical ascent toward union with God. In both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, the soul is envisioned as reaching beyond itself toward God in ecstatic love in which the unification with God is never complete—such that the soul is ever-approaching in the inexhaustible love of the Beatific Vision.<sup>31</sup> For Eckhart, however, mystic union involves the essence of the soul being united with God such that we are wholly transformed and changed into God and no distinction remains (though Eckhart later conceded that this was an error).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Copelstone, CII, 61-65, 288-91. For Bonaventure, we have true knowledge only by recourse to the (Platonic) *rationes aeternae*. We know creatures fully inasmuch as we see them as examples of the divine exemplar—these *rationes* are identified with the Word of God. Copelstone, CII, 288-89.

<sup>27</sup> Eckhart, *Sermons*, Sermon 15.

<sup>28</sup> Copelstone, CII, 31-32.

<sup>29</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 1.14; CII 95, 118-19.

<sup>30</sup> Copelstone, CIII, 235-37, 244.

<sup>31</sup> Kenney, “The Greek Tradition,” 126; Copelstone, CII, 35-37, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Copelstone, CIII, 192-93.

Finally, there is a strong tendency in this tradition to view evil as privation, as the absence of the good and a defection from being—as can be seen in Origen, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>33</sup>

In this (overly) brief sketch of an influential tradition of figuring of the relation between theology and philosophy one can see how Neo-Platonic philosophy—itsself already a (pagan) theology—has been taken as a fruitful resource for thinking through Christian theology. But the question remains regarding the nature of this philosophical resource as a *pharmakon*, a supplement. It should be seen that there are recurring tendencies toward heterodox positions taken over from Neo-Platonism: of a certain collapsing of relation, of community, of otherness into unity—of privileging the One, emanation, and union over Trinity, creation, and community. In Eriugena, Cusanus, and Böhme especially, the emanational “way of the world” creeps into God and becomes divine self-development—for an understanding of the manner of creation of the world (here emanation, erotic origination, dialectical unfolding) necessarily influences one’s understanding of the nature of the creator/origin. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Hegel represents most if not all of these questionable traits of Christian Neo-Platonic philosophical theology “behaving badly.”

So, is the philosophical supplement to theology worth the heterodox risk? Does Desmond want to be in this company? Should theologians (or Christian philosophers) be nervous about Desmond as somehow continuing this tradition?

### III. DESMOND’S PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

#### *Philosophy, Theology and the Between*

William Desmond’s *God and the Between* is, as he calls it, “something of a philosophical theology”<sup>34</sup> that occupies a place between philosophy and theology—a posture to the philosopher, too religious—to the religious, too

<sup>33</sup> Copelstone, CII 27, 98-99; Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, 4.20.

<sup>34</sup> Desmond, *GB*, xi.

philosophical—which to Desmond is “a good between”.<sup>35</sup> For Desmond, theology and philosophy form a metaxological community in which they are other and yet together. The togetherness is described in terms of a porous border—“not a rigid separation, and communications can carry or be received from both sides”.<sup>36</sup> From the side of theology: the possibility of philosophical idols (be they Hegelian or Neo-Platonic) cannot justify the simple rejection of philosophical consideration from the theological task. From the side of philosophy: “a true philosophy of the between,” Desmond says, “cannot a priori close off porosity to the divine and its communication”.<sup>37</sup> With creation and trinity, for instance, we have ideas “of religious provenance [which become] the occasion of a more radical philosophical reconsideration”.<sup>38</sup> Desmond, as with these earlier thinkers, thinks that philosophy and theology can relate to each other intimately, constructively—complementing and completing each other—that indeed theology and philosophy are better off for their interrelation.

As a theologian and in view of some of the heterodox tendencies just sketched—can “something of a philosophical theology” be at once porous and yet orthodox? My proposal is that Desmond’s work can be seen as presenting many of the positive positions of Christian Neo-Platonic philosophical theology without the heterodox pitfalls—without a certain Neo-Platonic (Hegelian) preference for thinking of God as erotic absolute in dialectical relation to the world.

Desmond’s resistance to the Hegelian dialectical option coincides with his resistance to what can be seen as the dialectical impulse in the tradition of Neo-Platonic Christian philosophical theology<sup>39</sup> and is aligned with Desmond’s keen sensitivity to the question of difference and otherness. Desmond’s philosophical

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<sup>35</sup> Desmond, *GB*, xii. For Desmond, “*between* Jerusalem and Athens” (*GB* 9) is difference but not an “unsurpassable dualism.” *GB*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Desmond, *GB*, xii.

<sup>37</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 243.

<sup>39</sup> Thus Desmond’s orthodoxy from the perspective of Christian theology may be at least partially due to the influence of Hegel’s own heretical theology—in the manner that proximity to a near-truth—to the counterfeit double (such as one may have in Hegel’s trinitarian or triadic ultimate)—attunes one to the distinctive marks of the true.

insight here (not only his, but his) is that togetherness (between theology and philosophy, between God and the world) can be thought differently. Beyond the dialectical—which privileges the whole, the one over the infinite, transcendence, otherness<sup>40</sup>—Desmond proposes the metaxological as a “transdialectical *logos* of the *metaxu*”—where—over unity—community, pluralized intermediation, and “being in relation” are held up to be the more universal and ultimate categories.<sup>41</sup> The metaxological “divines the nature of the togetherness, the absolved relativity, with heed to the difference, and without forgetting the transcendence of the divine and its reserves.”<sup>42</sup>

*Between God and the World*

Between nothing  
& something  
What happens  
Is the pure surprise  
Of everything  
That is

Intimate to the between  
Never captive to the between  
The beyond  
Springs surprise<sup>43</sup>

Desmond shares Plotinus' view of God as an originitive plenitude that brings about the world through the overflow of the over-full reserves of divine goodness.<sup>44</sup> The danger with Plotinus, for Desmond, is that this overflow is also a kind of fall that yields an ontological deficiency in the lower levels of being—a

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<sup>40</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 114.

<sup>41</sup> Desmond, *GB* 5, 10, 117. Against the dialectical return to the univocal, Desmond presents the metaxological as an affirmative equivocity. Desmond, *GB*, 109.

<sup>42</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 117.

<sup>43</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 241.

<sup>44</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 58-59.

generation that is a degeneration.<sup>45</sup> With emanation, as “the mode of divine origination and self-return”<sup>46</sup> God’s self-origination and the origination of the world are not separate.<sup>47</sup> In such a dialectical “sublationary infinitism,” *both* the “finite and infinite turn out to be the dialectical self-mediation of the infinite with itself, through the finite as its own other”<sup>48</sup>—no true otherness arises, only temporary and temporal fodder for the self-becoming of the eternal One.<sup>49</sup> Desmond lacks/short circuits the pantheist tendencies of certain Neo-Platonic theologies with his focus on creation, on the “coming to be” of genuine creation that is distinct from finite becoming writ large.<sup>50</sup>

The fullness of God, for Desmond, is an infinite reserve—a transcendence completely at home with itself<sup>51</sup>—not lacking, not in need of creation for completion. “God,” Desmond writes, “is God apart from the relation to creation”<sup>52</sup>. As such, creation *ex nihilo* is “a free giving of the finite other ‘outside’ the divine immanence”<sup>53</sup>—an “hyperbolic origination”<sup>54</sup>—an absolving “letting

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<sup>45</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 59. Plotinus, Desmond observes, protests against Gnosticism...perhaps too much: “The vehemence of his attack makes one wonder about his own passionate anxiety to separate himself from a position not unlike his own: materiality as the lowest of ontological lows, farthest away from the plenitude of the One, on the verge of nothingness”. *GB*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 233.

<sup>47</sup> “Emanation stresses the continuity of the world and God, creation underscores their discontinuity. In the first, it is the immanence of the world of the divine or of the world in the divine, that matters; in the second it is the transcendence of the divine that matters, hence the non-divinity of the world.” *GB*, 234.

<sup>48</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> “God becomes fully God in returning to Godself and in returning the otherness of the world and self to Godself, a return not really the return of an irreducible other but of the othered-Godself.” *GB*, 105.

Such emanation is not the same as creation, where “the interplay of finite and infinite is *between* the actual infinite communicating the being of the finite as other and just that finite other gifted with the promise of its own kind of infinitude.” *GB*, 235. In finite becoming the indeterminate is in the process of becoming determinate. *GB*, 108-9.

<sup>50</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 108-9

<sup>51</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 107, 160.

<sup>52</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 291.

<sup>54</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 161.

be”<sup>55</sup>—such that the arising of the finite world is “*the arising of another as other*”.<sup>56</sup> Such creation is an agapeic origination<sup>57</sup>—a “nonpossessive dispensation” that gives and releases, even serves, the other for itself.<sup>58</sup> Agapeic creation affirms the “pluralism of being as good for itself”.<sup>59</sup> Difference, the singular, the finite, the temporal—these are given to be gratuitously and not out of need or lack.<sup>60</sup>

For Desmond, God is, in relation to the thus originated world, both absolute (in transcendent reserve) and related (transcending into the midst of creation).<sup>61</sup> God endows the metaxological community of creation with the promise of agapeic being—intimately empowering, energizing, communicatively enabling a fuller agapeic community in its midst and with its Origin.<sup>62</sup> To the one reawakened to the gift and goodness of finitude,<sup>63</sup> the open whole of created being in its given goodness and promise yields then signs in immanence of what transcends—of its origin.<sup>64</sup> Desmond calls these excessive happenings in immanence the “hyperboles of being”.<sup>65</sup> It should be noted that, for Desmond, we are made mindful of the transcendent God not merely by our lack or the

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<sup>55</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 307.

<sup>56</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 247.

<sup>57</sup> “Agapeic origination gives rise to the other for the good of the other; and though the originated other is not the origin itself, there need be no negative judgment of ontological defect. To be finite is to be good...” Desmond, *GB* 59).

<sup>58</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 44, 252.

<sup>59</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 167. In that it “harbors the promise of agapeic being”. *GB* 167.

<sup>60</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 236.

“The origin is not for the world *in general* or creation in the mass; it is for the intricacy of the singular.” *GB*, 168.

<sup>61</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 253.

<sup>62</sup> Desmond *GB* 164, 167-68, 252, 320.

“Standing with’ is a relation to the other in which the being and good of the other is upheld. The constancy of God would be the agapeic upholding of the otherness of becoming as creation itself”. *GB*, 299.

<sup>63</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 32-33.

<sup>64</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 8, 108. “God is to be thought through the between as given to be, and given to be as good.” *GB*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 128-58.

want of the finite world but by the excessive and over-full givens in immanence.<sup>66</sup>

### BETWEEN GOD AND THE HUMAN

Desmond's understanding of the relation between God and human beings bears upon the kind of knowledge humans can have of God, the nature of their mystical relation to God and upon human freedom and evil. Desmond, like the Neo-Platonic thinkers mentioned, sees our knowledge of God as possessing a kind of poverty—a mindfulness that seeks to attend to that which is beyond it—this “reticence of reserve, or excess, is mystery which will eternally be mystery, even were we come into the company of angels”.<sup>67</sup> Our ways of talking of God are necessarily indirect because of the “*difference* between origin and creation”.<sup>68</sup> However, our knowledge of God is not purely negative. The negative (erotic, apophatic) indirections, which transcend via the lack of the finite, are proper and necessary. However, the positive (agapeic, kataphatic) indirections which make affirmations about God from the surplus givenness in the finite pointing toward the divine pluperfection are the more ultimate.<sup>69</sup>

Regarding the relation between humans and God more generally, our relating has a metaxological doubleness. Our *eros* is both *penia*/lack that seeks what it wants and *poros*/full that is always already given from a prior other.<sup>70</sup> We are our *conatus essendi*, our ecstatic endeavor to be, to urgently ascend to the ultimate. But we are also, and more primordially, our *passio essendi*—created, given to be as a good gift, enabled in our transcending.<sup>71</sup> Rather than mystical absorption,<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Desmond, *GB*, xii, 109. The radical excess of God has “reserved in itself in its light inaccessible.” *GB*, 127.

<sup>68</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 122.

<sup>69</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 143. Desmond sees metaphor and symbol as negative and analogy and hyperbole as positive in these senses.

<sup>70</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 40-43, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 33-34, 273. The soul as created is in communication with the origin. “There is no return of uncreated soul to uncreated origin; there is the opening to a communion of

Desmond's model for the relation between the soul and God is one of intimate communion—like marriage—"a union that sustains otherness [singularity and particularity] in togetherness and is not a self-mediating unity but an intermediating *metaxu*".<sup>73</sup>

Desmond's understanding of the agapeic creation of the human entails a certain freedom in the relation between humans and God. The agapeic origin lets freedom be—it is an "absolving power, releasing others beyond itself, without insistence on the return of the power of the others to itself"<sup>74</sup>—thus allowing the space for real community in being.<sup>75</sup> Evil, defection from the good, is possible—for God is not an erotic sovereign but an agapeic servant—who lets the other be, who is patient even to evil.<sup>76</sup> Evil is not mediated.<sup>77</sup> Given agapeic creation, the community between God and humans is cooperative: "In the reserve of divine patience, the gift of freedom sometimes means allowing by doing nothing, sometimes secret rejoicing with the creature, sometimes anonymous coaxing, sometimes persuading silently".<sup>78</sup>

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soul and origin, a communion ultimately a gift of the origin, since everything that is, though finite, is also such a grace." *GB*, 273.

<sup>72</sup> Communion "does not reduce to a mystical monism." Desmond, *GB*, 273.

"The last word cannot be with the union of opposites, if this means the vanishing of difference." *GB*, 274.

<sup>73</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 275; *GB* 36, 110-12. This is an agapeic ecstasis—a transcending, both ours and God's—in which "transcendence meets transcendence in the rich community of immanence." *GB*, 275.

<sup>74</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 254.

<sup>75</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 237.

<sup>76</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> The erotic One does not "let be," is not patient, at all. Desmond, *GB*, 110. The existence of evil is then proof of the character of the origin as agapeic—for if the One is the good, that is being, and if evil is a defection from this One, how then is evil even possible?

<sup>78</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 257. "The unconditioned activity of the divine is conditioned relative to the world.... The conditioned relation goes with the act of creation, and hence to act in oblivion of the gift given would be to rescind the creation as other." *GB*, 257.

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**GOD AND THE BETWEEN**

Being good  
 You alone  
 Keep your promise  
 The bird in the dark  
 Sings three times  
 & its song is not the rooster's  
 Announcing triple treason  
 To the dawn<sup>79</sup>

For Desmond, the God of the dialectical way, the “pan(en)theistic God,” “the God of the whole”<sup>80</sup> can hold, at most, a penultimate position within Desmond’s broader vision of the metaxological community of being. With Plotinus and those who come after him there is a “noble hermeneutics of finitude” that is no simple flight from given manyness for a univocal unity;<sup>81</sup> there is a robust project of understanding the relationship between God and the world—there is a Neo-Platonic between (though it tends toward what Desmond would call a dialectical between). This between, however, will always be tenuous under the (perhaps all too human<sup>82</sup>) acquisitive gaze of the “*self-determining eternity that determines itself in its own temporal productions*”.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond this, the theistic God of creation is, for Desmond, the God beyond the whole.<sup>84</sup> As beyond the whole of the world, this God possesses an absoluteness (ab-solo—from itself alone), an asymmetric and “idiotic” infinity that is beyond any need for completion and so opens the space for otherness apart from itself.<sup>85</sup> Such an agapeic transcendence is also intimate to, in community

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<sup>79</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 327.

<sup>80</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 225ff.

<sup>81</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 58.

<sup>82</sup> Desmond sees dialectical divine transcendence as a version of human self-determining self-transcendence. Desmond, *GB*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 106.

<sup>84</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 241.

<sup>85</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 159, 163, 304.

with finite being<sup>86</sup> as an overdetermined origin whose excessive reserve<sup>87</sup> enables the "possibilizing" of the world as more than a moment within the self-determining One.<sup>88</sup> Beyond a dialectical erotics "that loves itself in and through its own self-othering"<sup>89</sup>—the divine erotics of the agapeic origin is a "wanting beyond want"<sup>90</sup>—"a seeking that as overfull is for the creature as other...seeking of the other released by fullness not lack".<sup>91</sup> It is in such an agapeic mode that Desmond can follow Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure by seeing the Good as the highest, hyperbolic name<sup>92</sup>—the Agapeic Good that radiates and communicates itself—but truly giving to the other (giving the promise of further agapeic giving)<sup>93</sup>—that says: "I give you everything, and I have kept nothing back, but I have everything more, and yet, to give".<sup>94</sup>

The nature of God as agapeic and metaxological is given its fullest explication yet in Desmond's corpus in his more or less explicit presentation, in *God and the Between*, of God as *Trinity*. The theistic God beyond the whole is not only agapeic in relation to the world and humans but is agapeic in Himself—"the agapeic One is already agapeic community".<sup>95</sup> Thus Desmond writes that the "hyperbolic unity"<sup>96</sup> of God, "if it has a 'unity,' would be more like a community: manifestation of agapeic love of the plural as plural".<sup>97</sup> Such would be a "metaxological monotheism".<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 282-87.

<sup>87</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 113.

<sup>88</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 285.

<sup>89</sup> "The whole love is the love of the whole, the whole that, in embracing time and eternity within itself, loves just itself...What kind of love is this?" Desmond, *GB*, 106. "Real giving over must break the subtle secret of 'me' and 'mine.'" *GB*, 111.

<sup>90</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 162.

<sup>91</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 303.

<sup>92</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 328.

<sup>93</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 160, 329.

<sup>94</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 329.

<sup>95</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 301. Desmond writes of the "(comm-)unity of the One." *GB*, 292.

<sup>96</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 288-92.

<sup>97</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 179.

<sup>98</sup> Desmond *GB*, 179, 184.

The “giving for the other [in creation] is already consummate in the superplus of the immanent divinity”.<sup>99</sup> It is indeed this community “of the (over)full”<sup>100</sup> in the divine that “allow[s] a free giving of the finite other ‘outside’ the divine immanence”<sup>101</sup>—for the eternal movement of giving in the community of God from (plu)perfection to (plu)perfection constitutes a center of creative power complete and full in itself that is within the Agapeic Origin.<sup>102</sup>

The understanding of God as Triune affirms an intermediation “*within* the divine”<sup>103</sup>—“the immanent intermediation of Godhead”.<sup>104</sup> The intermediation of the “agapeic trinity” as a “social” procession of love is at once personal—for “to be personal is to be in social relations”—and “transpersonal” as a community of Persons.<sup>105</sup>

It is at this point that we might conclude that in *God and the Between* we have a Christian philosophical theology that is similar its Neo-Platonic progenitors (“quasi-Neo-Platonic”?) but stands apart from certain heterodox impulses *specifically in his Desmond’s trinitarianism*—for at this point Desmond secures intermediation as the ultimate. I quote at length: “Is not *inter*-mediation more primordial than *self*-mediation? Yes. I would say yes, especially so if the inner life of the divine is like a love that is communication: an immanent community that is also a self-communication...It is hard for us human beings to think this, since normally we tend to contrast self-mediation and intermediation with an other. But if the immanent otherness of the divine is agapeic, it is loved by itself for

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<sup>99</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 291. Again: “This intercommunication from (over)full to (over)full to (over)full would be an absolute self-communication, in that it would refer us to an absolute surplus, or pluperfection already effective through itself, before anything finite as other is effected.” *GB*, 160.

<sup>100</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 112.

<sup>101</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 291. It “affirms the creation of the finite other as given being for itself as good for itself.” *GB*, 291.

<sup>102</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 289-90.

<sup>103</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 113.

<sup>104</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 192.

<sup>105</sup> Desmond, *GB* 191, 291. “Agapeic being in metaxological community points to the transpersonal that less suppresses the personal as fulfills its release into a more ultimate communicative transcending beyond self.” *GB*, 191.

itself, loved by itself for its otherness, goodness loving and loved for its goodness, as intimately immanent and immanently other, and these all 'all at once'.<sup>106</sup>

A trinitarian ontology is an agapeic ontology—in necessary tension with the merely erotic vision that is an inherent tendency in much Neo-Platonic philosophical theology. In a trinitarian ontology, metaxological community—and not the One—is the ultimate. For even the One is a community that originates genuine community in the otherness of the finite being of the world and ourselves—a finite community lovingly created for its own good which is to realize the promise of its own agapeic being. "That means," Desmond concludes, "that it be like God"<sup>107</sup>—that it become a community of agapeic service—a community that is itself the highest finite "hyperbolic sign of transcendent good" for "our participation in agapeic transcending is our fullest self-transcendence: our love, in transcending self, transcends to transcendence itself".<sup>108</sup> Thus we are called in our very being to join in the divine life of the blessed community—the between—which is God.

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<sup>106</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 160. "The idiocy of the divine would have to do with its own immanently communicative being. But metaxologically speaking, can it be entirely right to refer to a divine *self*-mediation?" *GB*, 160.

<sup>107</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 330.

<sup>108</sup> Desmond, *GB*, 156.

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