

“Vindicated by her Deeds”: A Preferential Option for the Dispossessed

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Commensality: Opening Communion and Community

A couple of years ago I was teaching what we used to call catechism but now term an inquirers' class for newcomers to the parish who want to be baptized, confirmed, or received. During the discussion, a young woman—a lesbian—told us that the first time she came to Grace Episcopal she took two steps inside the front door, froze, turned around, and quickly left. Another young woman in the group, also a lesbian, said, “That's nothing. The first time I came to Grace I drove into the lot and when I saw the church I flipped a U and left!” Everyone in the group laughed with delight.

But we, especially those of us in the church, need to realize that dungeons and snake pits of sorrow and suffering lie buried beneath such laughter. A welcoming and affirming parish like Grace often functions as a triage unit for those traumatized—spiritually and psychically wounded, beaten, bludgeoned—by our fellow Christians. As a priest in the resurrected Diocese of San Joaquin, I have come to see that the more we empathetically and compassionately embrace those who come to us scarred and torn by our society's abuse—especially indifference, mistreatment, and cruelty at the hands of those who profess to be Christians—the better we model Jesus' life and ministry. Such empathy and compassion can sometimes run afoul of what the church has traditionally practiced and taught. Such modeling, as Jesus saw, will be costly: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’” (Matt. 11:18–19 // Luke 7:33–34). In response, Jesus declares, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

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Numerous writers have pointed out the radical, and deleterious, transformation of the word “belief” from being relational—to trust *in, rely on*, put faith *in* someone or something—to that of ascribing to a set of doctrines that come to be foremost, even dictatorial. In *The Case for God*, for example, Karen Armstrong notes that over time “the meaning of the word ‘belief’ changed, so that a credulous acceptance of creedal doctrines became the prerequisite of faith, so much so that today we often speak of religious people as ‘believers,’ as though accepting orthodox dogma ‘on faith’ were the most important activity.”¹ Rowan Williams has called relational belief “trust” and urges that “belief in” the Creed is more akin to “taking refuge in,” as in the Buddhist statement of faith: “I take refuge in the Buddha.” Williams concludes: “And the Creed begins to sound a little different if we begin here.”² The promises we make in the baptismal service in the *Book of Common Prayer* have it right: they emphasize belief in its older, primary sense as *actions*, therefore deeds, good works, *birthed from relationship*:

- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being?³

This reinforces Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of heaven:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 2010), xv. In a book review of Paul F. Bradshaw’s *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*, J. Barrington Bates notes that one of Bradshaw’s “not uncontroversial claims” is that “the original understanding of profession of faith at baptism was a transfer of personal allegiance rather than a statement of assent to doctrinal views” (*Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 [Summer 2012]: 552). See also Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 38, 136–137.

² Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 6.

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 305 (emphasis added).

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matt. 25:34–36, NIV)

This past summer's 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church testified to the conflict, and sometimes open war of words, between those advocating allegiance to the past verities of tradition (belief), and those promoting pastoral and theological adjustments (belief in) required by the pertinent—or, depending on one's point of view, impertinent—present. The House of Deputies and the House of Bishops passed by overwhelming margins Resolution A049, which authorizes provisional use of the rite "The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant,"⁴ and D019 and D002 extend equal rights in the church based on gender identity—in other words, transgender persons cannot be discriminated against.⁵

Many argue that the Episcopal Church's recent decisions constitute faithful biblical and theological reflection and pastoral fine tunings of the church's tradition; others, equally faithfully and forcefully, contend that the church's actions are *sui generis*, if not suicidal, and are, therefore, gross violations of tradition, the Bible, and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Mark Lawrence, former Bishop of South Carolina,⁶ for example, stated in a letter to his diocese that the decisions made at Convention regarding same-sex blessings are "contrary to the teaching of Holy Scripture; to two thousand years of Christian practice; as well as to our created nature."⁷ General Convention stuck with tradition

⁴ <http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions?by=number&id=A049>.

⁵ <http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions?by=number&id=D019> and <http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions?by=number&id=D002>.

⁶ I wrote this article in late summer 2012, before Lawrence's removal as bishop. See, among many articles, "Presiding bishop's pastoral letter to Episcopalians in South Carolina," <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/11/15/presiding-bishops-pastoral-letter-to-episcopal-diocese-of-south-carolina/>; "Presiding bishop accepts Mark Lawrence's renunciation," <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2012/12/05/presiding-bishop-accepts-mark-lawrences-renunciation/>; "Lawrence says he's still bishop, calls renunciation 'superfluous,'" <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/?s=mark+lawrence>.

⁷ "Bishop Lawrence Addresses Diocese Following 77th General Convention"; http://www.diosc.com/sys/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=433:bishop-lawrence-addresses-diocese-following-77th-general-convention&catid=1:latest-news&Itemid=75.

when it rejected several resolutions proposing removal or review of confirmation as a requirement for church leadership, but did approve C029 “to appoint a special commission charged with conducting a study of the theology underlying access to Holy Baptism and Holy Communion in this Church.”⁸ Former-Bishop Lawrence believes that even study of this issue “moves the Church further down the road toward encouraging the communion of the unbaptized which departs from two thousand years of Christian practice.”

Lawrence follows this disavowal of change with a vague but truly alarming threat based on the misinterpretation of a passage from 1 Corinthians, concluding that receiving communion prior to baptism “puts the undiscerning person in spiritual jeopardy (1 Corinthians 11:27–32).”⁹ In fact, far from condemning those who were receiving communion while unbaptized, Paul is angry with those Corinthians who were eating the Lord’s supper in “an unworthy manner”: well-off Christians who apparently came early for the supper (in the early church the eucharist was not separated from an actual meal) so they could gobble up all the food and scarf all the wine, leaving very little or nothing for the poor.

Paul here is condemning some of the better-off Corinthians who are acting like pigs, as 11:33–34 reiterates and makes clear—verses that Lawrence conspicuously omits. The former bishop inappropriately applies Paul’s condemnation of those gluttons long ago to persons today who, unbaptized, participate in the eucharist. He even appears to threaten them with “spiritual jeopardy.” Paul, a Jewish child of his time, believed that those ancient eucharistic transgressors were being punished, presumably by God: “For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor. 11:30).¹⁰ Lawrence apparently sees at least spiritual, if not physical, “jeopardy” for people today who are unbaptized and receive communion. Such threats are not appropriate for God’s children. One notes that the chapter of this letter to the Corinthians that Bishop Lawrence uses contains the Apostle’s famous—or infamous—declaration about women: “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—

⁸ <http://www.generalconvention.org/gc/resolutions?by=number&id=c029>.

⁹ “Bishop Lawrence Addresses Diocese.”

¹⁰ See the popular understanding (what Marcus Borg calls “conventional wisdom”) of why “the man born blind” is blind (John 9:1–12): “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. . . . Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man" (1 Cor. 11:5, 8–9). One rightly wonders how former-Bishop Lawrence applied *this* "tradition" in South Carolina.

At Grace Episcopal Church in the Diocese of San Joaquin, where former-Bishop Lawrence was once a priest, we practice open communion: after the consecration of the bread and wine, the celebrant announces, "All are welcome at Christ's table." The eucharistic hospitality that we practice and emulate at Grace is what John Dominic Crossan has termed "open commensality,"¹¹ which he cogently argues lies at the heart of Jesus' own message and practice: "It was, therefore, open commensality *during his life* rather than the Last Supper before his death that was the root of any later realization. And open commensality could be ritualized into eucharists of bread and fish just as well as eucharists of bread and wine."¹² Rephrasing the creedal statement from Liberation Theology, in a city as conservative and traditional as Bakersfield, one could say that at Grace we practice a "preferential option for the dispossessed."¹³

Grace Episcopal Church in Bakersfield was founded atop the ashes and cremains left when the former diocese willfully devoured itself. Those in power had excluded gays and women from full membership in the church and excommunicated, both *de jure* and *de facto*, anyone who dared to disagree. This went far beyond regulating disagreement to attempts at diocesan conventions to shame and to shun. Yet while the former diocese as a matter of course practiced and legislated radical exclusivity, in resurrection those of us who founded Grace, who had been exiled and ostracized from our former parishes, vowed not only to practice but to *celebrate* Christ's radical inclusivity. Open commensality both symbolizes and enacts the dominical embrace of all God's children. Good and faithful people can have differing views; but hearty and heartfelt disagreement need not be either alarmist or threatening. I do not wish our church either to legislate or

¹¹ "Commensality" comes from Latin *cum*, "together with," + *mensa*, "table."

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 202 (emphasis added). See also John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 398–404.

¹³ The phrase "option for the poor" was first used by Liberation theologians in Latin America.

forbid open communion but rather, in good Anglican fashion, to leave the decision to local exigencies, practice, and preference.

The Spiritual Surgery

In a society—unknowingly, for most—as maimed as ours, our parishes often function as emergency rooms. To make doctrinal correctness the price of admission is like medical attendants in an emergency room demanding proof of insurance before they will care for a badly injured patient. Using the medical metaphor, in a recent book on pastoral theology Christopher A. Beeley urges that “through faith Christ continues to guide us with ‘the medicine to heal the most corrupt customs’ of human society.”¹⁴ The author does not specify what these “corrupt customs” are, but I think we can all agree that we Christians look to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus to help us heal both ourselves and others. But the author then continues on a perilous course: “In this sense the deep logic of pastoral therapy is really the doctrine of Christ himself, or orthodox Christology.”¹⁵ Beeley appears to be saying that doctrine heals, that a pastor should use the Nicene Creed to counsel someone. More than 125 years ago in Protestant America Mark Twain indelibly visualized the heartfelt, yet inappropriate, use of the Bible, which we Anglicans can parabolically transfer to the insistence by many within our tradition today who give Bible, tradition, orthodoxy, and doctrine suzerainty over pastoral concerns. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a man named Boggs is shot and Huck witnesses the aftermath:

They took Boggs to a little drugstore, the crowd still pressing in around him and the whole town following behind. I rushed over and got a good spot at the window, where I was close to him and could see inside. They laid him on the floor with a large Bible under his head, tore open his shirt, opened another Bible, and then spread it on his chest. I saw where one of the bullets had entered his body. Boggs made a dozen or so long gasps, his chest lifting the Bible up as he drew in his breath, then letting it down again when he exhaled. After that he lay still. He was dead.¹⁶

¹⁴ Christopher A. Beeley, *Leading God’s People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 75.

¹⁵ Beeley, *Leading God’s People*, 75.

¹⁶ John Crowther, ed., “No Fear: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (SparkNotes LLC, 2009), chap. 21, [http://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/huckleberry-finn/>.\]](http://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/lit/huckleberry-finn/>.)

Fifteen hundred years ago, Abba Isaiah of Scetis, an Egyptian monk and renowned author of spiritual counsel, offered, I believe, a sane understanding of our spiritual and pastoral situation.¹⁷ The early desert monks, the *ammas* and *abbas* of the fourth through sixth centuries, have bequeathed to us in their sayings and stories a lifetime of learning and teaching on pastoral care.¹⁸ One of the most striking things about the earliest strata of early monastic writings—especially given the all-out creedal conflicts of these centuries—is how rarely doctrine figures in the monks’ teachings. Their primary concern is the care of the human person, body and soul, what our tradition calls “the cure of souls”:¹⁹ “We are all as if in surgery,” says Abba Isaiah. “One has a pain in the eye, another in the hand, a third in the veins, and whatever other diseases exist.”²⁰ Yet Isaiah’s surgery is not a posh and private seaside recovery center for movie stars and celebrities; it is a county hospital whose emergency room is open 24/7, where after nightfall the cries and whispers from those with gunshot and stab wounds haunt the rooms and hallways. Isaiah understands—“We are *all* as if in surgery”—and we *do not* comprehend, at least most of the time, that theologically, anthropologically, we are *all* at County; swanky recovery resorts are fantasies for those in denial. “Since those in surgery have different illnesses,” Isaiah continues, “if someone cries in pain with regard to his own suffering, let no one else ask, ‘Why are you crying out?’ Is not each one concerned with his own pain?”

Isaiah is *not* saying that we should have no empathy or compassion for our fellow-sufferers—the desert monks nurture compassion out of aridity. Rather, he is urging us not to worry about others’ *sins*, their diseases, dis-eases, dysfunctions, wrongdoings: “Therefore, if the pain of my own sin is before me,” Isaiah continues, “I would not

¹⁷ “Sane” is a careful word choice; it derives from Latin *sanus*: “whole, sound, healthy.”

¹⁸ A whole library wing of good resources on early Christian monasticism exists; one of the best books is by Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). For a daily reader of early monastic sayings and stories, see Tim Vivian, ed., *Becoming Fire: Through the Year with the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, Minn.: Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, 2008).

¹⁹ *Cura animarum*, better translated now as “the care of souls.”

²⁰ Abba Isaiah, *Ascetic Discourse 8*; John Chryssavgis and Pachomios Robert Penkett, trans., *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications /Liturgical Press, 2002), 92–93. On Isaiah, a fourth-to-fifth century monk (or composite), see Chryssavgis and Penkett, *Abba Isaiah*, 16–20.

look at the sin of another.” When hospital staff are wheeling you into your room at County, Isaiah would say today, don’t worry why two cops are standing outside your neighbor’s door. For, he concludes, “everyone who lies in surgery observes the precautions of his own doctor.” Being “saved,” then, does not mean subscribing to X, Y, or Z, or accepting Jesus as one’s Lord and personal savior, or having a “believer’s baptism,” or “believing” the Creed, thus saving one from the fires of hell. Rather, it means being whole, sound, safe: holy.²¹ As Isaiah emphasizes, our healing is of primary importance—a making whole enacted and symbolized at each and every eucharist—not our beliefs on the nature of the Trinity or the meaning and jurisdiction of baptism.

Where we start, where we place our emphasis, matters. A couple who recently joined our parish came to us from one of the schismatic “Anglican” parishes in town. The husband and wife in a blended marriage each have a child who is gay. They left their parish because the vicar told them that being gay is sinful. End of discussion. Another new couple, lesbians, came to Grace because the priest at their Roman Catholic parish refused them communion. Compare these clergy’s pastoral care—or lack thereof—with the following understanding by another desert monastic, Abba Macarius of Scetis. Macarius offers us an image of overflowing, even overwhelming, love—love that surpasses all understanding. A monk sins and comes to Macarius seeking forgiveness.²² The great abba offers this counsel:

Repent, my child; you will see him who is gentle, our Lord Jesus Christ, his face full of joy for you, like a nursing mother whose face is full of joy for her child. When he raises his hands and his face up to her, even if he is full of all kinds of uncleanness, she does not turn away from that bad smell and excrement but takes pity on him and lifts him up and presses him to her breast, her face full of joy, and everything about him is sweet to her. If, then,

²¹ The deep meanings in our language reflect this: the word “holy” occurs before 900. The Middle English *holi* evolves from Old English *hālig*, related to words meaning “whole,” “hale” and “hearty.” “Heal” also derives from this root; thus “holiness,” “heal(ing),” and “wholeness” are siblings, if not triplets. Likewise, the Coptic (late Egyptian) language of most of the early desert monks often uses *oujai*, “whole, sound, safe,” to translate Greek *sōzō*, “save.”

²² I am emphatically *not* suggesting that homosexual or transgender orientation requires repentance; I am supplying the context of the story.

this created person has pity for her child, how much greater is the love of the creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, for us!²³

By contrast, many within Anglicanism today (and within other traditions) privilege, as it were, proof of medical insurance over care and concern for others, doctrine over empathy and compassion. This may not be their intention, but it is the result. Christopher Beeley, for example, argues that “if the [pastoral] direction we are giving does not accord with apostolic tradition as the church has publicly received it in diverse times and places, then it cannot properly be called Christian leadership”²⁴ The Diocese of San Joaquin was torn asunder not long ago because of a radical insistence on “orthodoxy” (as defined by “the orthodox”) and an absolute intolerance of anyone with differing or dissenting views.²⁵ Today in San Joaquin, I am the grateful vicar of a parish of 160 or so souls, about 30 percent of whom are LGBT folk.²⁶ Most of whom are in committed relationships. The vast majority of the parish’s young children have lesbian and gay parents. My fear is that conservatives could use Beeley’s (“accord with apostolic tradition”) and Lawrence’s (“created nature”) “traditional” requirements to exclude some fifty of God’s children at our parish, and their children.²⁷ Requirements like these all too often devolve into handcuffs, and even chokeholds. According to Beeley’s logic, to be proper leaders in obedience to apostolic tradition, we would also have to exclude all those who have divorced; such a stricture would make most of our parishes anorexic. As we know far too well, especially in dioceses like San Joaquin, apostolic tradition in diverse times and places has, until recently, also excluded women from leadership. If we are

²³ *Virtues of Saint Macarius*, 23; Tim Vivian, trans., *St. Macarius the Spiritbearer: Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 104.

²⁴ Beeley, *Leading God’s People*, 70.

²⁵ See “The Rev. Dr. Tim Vivian: ‘Kissing the Leper,’” January 28, 2008; <http://frjakestopsttheworld.blogspot.com/2008/01/rev-dr-tim-vivian-kissing-leper.html>.

²⁶ For Grace’s history, see “Grace’s History,” <http://www.graceepiscopalbakersfield.com/graces-history.html>; and Tim Vivian, “Growing with Grace,” in Jane Onstad Lamb, ed., *Hurt, Joy, and the Grace of God: A Resurrection Story of the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin, California* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Applecart Books, 2012), 143–148.

²⁷ By “exclude” I don’t necessarily mean push out the door. A friend of mine told me that his church welcomes gays; they just cannot be in positions of leadership. That is not being welcoming; it is ecclesiastical “separate but equal.” His church may as well have segregated water fountains and bathrooms, since these at least would make the darkness visible.

looking to our tradition, therefore, we can do no better than reflect on what Origen of Alexandria clearly discerned in the third century: “You shouldn’t cling to the letter of scripture as if it were the [only] truth; rather, look for the treasure hidden within the letter.”²⁸

Indeterminism, Humility, Freedom, and Mystery

To what paradigms, then, what understandings, can we look further—not for absolute answers, but for suggestions on how we can broaden our theological and pastoral understandings? To conclude this essay, let me proceed by analogy and offer possibilities not from scripture or Christian tradition, but rather, to encourage us to flex a bit our cramping theological muscles, from what at first may seem an odd menagerie: quantum mechanics, process theology, and primal religion.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Isaac Newton revolutionized physics with his laws of mechanics—thus overturning one tradition, we should notice, and substituting what became, in time, another. Built into Newton’s laws is determinism; for example, if we treat the solar system as a closed system and determine the planets’ velocities and motion, those determinations will predict the planets’ subsequent actions. Thus, as Paul Davies points out, “Determinism carries the implication that the state of the world at one moment suffices to fix its state at a later moment.”²⁹ By analogy, we can say that for many in the church, “tradition” functions as mechanical laws, a closed system, and determinism. For example, Mark Lawrence charges above that some of the resolutions of the 77th General Convention depart “from two thousand years of Christian practice.” Two millennia of Christian practice, then, fix the church’s practice at all later moments. Physicists before 1920 believed that physical properties were strictly deterministic. But the discovery of quantum mechanics in the late 1920s overturned Newton’s determinism and substituted for it indeterminism. Werner Heisenberg shortly thereafter postulated his famous uncertainty principle, which states that “all measurable quantities are subject to unpredictable fluctuations, and hence to uncertainty in their values.”³⁰

²⁸ Origen, *Sel. in Gen.* (PG 12:101); my translation.

²⁹ Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 29.

³⁰ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 30.

Analogously, church tradition becomes measurable in the church's various canonizations, whether they be of scripture; the acts of councils, synods, and conventions; or hallowed custom and usage. But, as in quantum physics, all are subject to unpredictable fluctuations. Heisenberg demonstrated that one cannot accurately measure at the same time both the position and momentum of an electron. By analogy, we in the church cannot exactly fix at one and the same time both our position (tradition) and our momentum (either the evolution of tradition or the pastoral application of it, or both). But we human beings need certainty. And we often go to extreme measures in order to possess it. To quantify our uncertainty, as Davies points out, we group observables—in our case, tradition and practice—into pairs: “The principle requires that attempts to reduce the level of uncertainty of one member of the pair serves to increase the uncertainty of the other.”³¹ We in the church need to pay attention to this. For example, when we attempt to reduce the level of theological and moral uncertainty surrounding such issues as, say, divorce and remarriage, sexual orientation, or the meaning of baptism (practice) by appealing to tradition (which includes scripture), we concomitantly raise the level of uncertainty regarding tradition itself. We should translate “uncertainty” from physics’ lexicon into biblical, spiritual, and practice-able “humility.” Such translation makes it less foreign, therefore less threatening. Put in traditional terms, when we “practice uncertainty” what we are really doing is walking humbly with our God.³²

“Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle,” Davies concludes, “puts paid to the notion that that the present determines the future *exactly*.”³³ For our purposes, the past (tradition) does not determine the present (practice) *exactly*. The emphasis here on “exactly” is extremely important: I am not saying that tradition has no value (for Anglicans it has great value); what I am saying is that in the twenty-first century we in the church can no longer be theological or pastoral Newtonians: because scripture declares something or because we have done something one way for two thousand years does not mean

³¹ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 30.

³² Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Even further, in the poetic parallelism of the Hebrew Bible (1) what is good = what the Lord requires, and reciprocally, and (2) to practice justice and kindness = walking humbly with God, also reciprocally.

³³ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 30 (emphasis added).

that scripture or tradition dictates our present actions; they *guide* us. Without the third leg of “the Anglican stool,” reason, the other two topple over. But isn’t this, then, a house built on sand (Matt. 7:24–27 // Luke 6:47–49)? Davies is quick to anticipate our normal reaction: “So does this mean that the universe is irrational after all?”³⁴ For our purposes we can say (and we often hear this), “Does this mean that everything is relative?” But it is not all or nothing, and to say it is offers a false dichotomy. Tradition births her children, who are all different. As Davies points out, there is a—I would add “huge”—difference between “the role of chance” (for us: the uncertainty surrounding our theological, moral, and ethical decisions) and “the unrestricted chaos of a lawless universe.” In physics, Davies concludes, we thus have “relative probabilities.”³⁵ This may seem like an oxymoron, but doesn’t daily life itself show us that it is an accurate description of reality?

Plato long ago “confronted the paradox of necessity versus contingency by proposing two gods, one necessary, the other contingent: the Good and the Demiurge.”³⁶ Monotheistic process theology argues that the contingent and necessary are complementary aspects of a single “dipolar” God. (We should always remember that *all* language, even in scripture, perhaps especially in scripture, is metaphor, at the same time approximate and imaginative. When in theology we paint with words, we should, when compared with God’s reality, always humbly see ourselves as finger painters in the first grade.) Process theology “asserts the primacy of *becoming* over *being*” and “in contrast to the rigid mechanistic view of the universe that arose from the work of Newton and his associates, process philosophy stresses the openness and indeterminism of nature.”³⁷

Many—not all—traditionalist or conservative arguments value an overly-rigid mechanistic use of tradition at the expense of openness and indeterminism. Another word for the latter two is “freedom,” and thus free will. In Protestantism and Anglicanism reliance on mechanism manifests itself in biblical fundamentalism; in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy it is the fundamentalism of the magisterium. Might not openness, probability, and indeterminism, though, be the trinitarian polestars (a seeming contradiction) between which

³⁴ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 31.

³⁵ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 31.

³⁶ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 181.

³⁷ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 181.

the Holy Spirit has pitched her tent? Instead of attempting to erect impregnable theological fortresses, or bunkers, which with time will crack anyway, no matter how assiduously we shore up our ruins, we should instead

Ring the bells that still can ring
 Forget your perfect offering
 There is a crack in everything
 That's how the light gets in.³⁸

The mathematician Kurt Gödel showed that even in mathematics there are statements “for which *no* systematic procedure could determine whether they are either true or false.”³⁹ Paul Davies points out that this “came as a great shock.” This “shock of recognition” perhaps applies most of all to those of us who are religious in the modern era.⁴⁰ But Davies, to his great credit, embraces “Gödelian limits to rational thought,” where we encounter “the mystery at the end of the universe.”⁴¹ Davies, a mathematical physicist, demonstrates in physics and mathematics what one of my seminary professors, the late Very Rev. Guy Lytle, used to say: “You can end in mystery, but you can’t begin there.”

Or can you? What we have is an irony only if we fail to appreciate—indeed savor, even absorb—its truth: the “wisdom tradition” of the primal religions understood, perhaps tens of thousands of years before quantum mechanics “discovered” it (like Columbus with the “discovery” of the Americas or Freud’s friendship with Oedipus),

³⁸ Leonard Cohen, “Anthem,” <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/anthem.html>. “Shore up our ruins” is borrowed from T. S. Eliot, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” in “What the Thunder Said,” *The Wasteland*, <http://eliotswasteland.tripod.com/>.

³⁹ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 101.

⁴⁰ As Karen Armstrong, along with many others, has pointed out, “Modernization has always been a painful process. People feel alienated and lost when fundamental changes in their society make the world strange and unrecognizable.” She confesses that “those of us—myself included—who relish the freedoms and achievements of modernity find it hard to comprehend the distress these cause religious fundamentalists.” But, she powerfully reminds us, “to prevent an escalation of the conflict, we must try to understand the pain and perceptions of the other side.” Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2000), xviii. “Primal” religion is a better term than “primitive,” with its pejorative connotations.

⁴¹ Davies, *The Mind of God*, 231.

the great “mystery at the end of the universe.”⁴² *And* at its beginning. The primal religions, what we in the Americas call “indigenous religions” and in North America “Native American religions,” do not have one word for God; instead, they have many for “the Great Mystery.”⁴³ For the Hopis, “ultimate reality is simply, numinously, *a’nehimu*, ‘a mighty something.’”⁴⁴ That mystery, the mystery of God, the mystery of Spirit, the mystery of each human being, is where—seemingly paradoxically, but only seemingly—we both begin and where we end, in tradition and in practice. As T. S. Eliot summarizes it so well:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁴⁵

⁴² Davies, *The Mind of God*, 231. Phil Cousineau, ed., *A Seat at the Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006), xix. See pages 1–5 for Smith’s account of his “discovery” of the primal religions and how that changed his famous *The World’s Religions*.

⁴³ Perhaps best known by the Sioux term *Wakan-Tanka*.

⁴⁴ Cousineau, *Seat at the Table*, xix. Perhaps we would say “a mighty wind”—*pneuma*, Spirit; see Acts 2: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (2:1–2).

⁴⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *The Four Quartets*, <http://allspirit.co.uk/gidding.html>.