Interrupting the church’s flow

Engaging Graham Ward and Romand Coles
in a radically receptive political theology in the urban margins
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However satisfying writing is – that mix of discipline and miracle, which leaves you in control, even when what appears on the page has emerged from regions beyond your control – it is a very poor substitute indeed for the joy and the agony of loving.

(Gillian Rose, Love’s Work\(^1\))

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\(^1\) Rose 2011 [1995]:59
Chapter 1

Entangled Dramas

In the title of this introductory chapter, I am assuming what Nicholas Healy calls (after Hans Urs von Balthasar) a ‘theodramatic horizon’ for theology, which conceives of ‘[t]he relations between God, world and church ... as something rather like a play’, and which ‘takes the perspective of a participant in the drama, of one who lives entirely within the movement of the play’ (Healy 2000:53-54). I am also assuming, with Healy, ‘the tensive and conflictual nature of Christian existence, reflecting in its very form the ongoing dramatic struggle that constitutes discipleship’ (Healy 2000:54) – although I will seek to make my own case for that description of Christian existence, over the course of the thesis. I also seek to gesture towards John Reader’s concept of ‘entangled fidelities’, which he deploys to describe the relationships which develop from our interactions across boundaries of ‘cultures, disciplines, faiths and ways of being’. We are ‘entangled’ because ‘it is not easy to extract oneself and stand outside’ our multiple relationships, commitments and ‘matters of concern’; and those relationships, commitments and matters of concern are themselves ‘entangled’ (Reader 2012. My efforts to tease out the distinct issues of ‘othering’, ‘agency’ and ‘receptivity’ here begin with an acknowledgment of their entanglement.

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On a bitterly cold Palm Sunday afternoon in April 2013, we crucified Jesus under the concrete pillars of the M6 motorway. Although lorries rumbled up above us, there was an almost-tangible silence among the small crowd of actors and spectators (and many were a mixture of both) that had followed the route of the Bromford Passion Play through the snow-covered streets of our estate to its conclusion in ‘the wasteland’ – a large patch of derelict, Council-owned land in the north-east corner of the Firs & Bromford estate, abandoned for some 30 years since its short-lived tower blocks had been demolished.²

The drama at its end, two voices punctuated the silence. The first was Phil’s.³ Phil played the part of the Roman Centurion, but he was also both the writer and director of this play:

[Roman officer] has pulled the red robe off Jesus and has it over his arm, holding it to his chest. His face has changed.

Roman 2: I have watched this man enter Jerusalem. I have watched him argue with these priests. I have watched him turn the other cheek when he could have escaped. I have watched him betrayed. This man’s kingdom is not from this earth, so I’ve been told.

² The blocks, built in the 1960s along with the rest of the Bromford estate, had been built close to the River Tame, and thus on a flood-plain, and had started sinking within a few years of their erection.
³ I am immensely grateful to Phil Howkins for agreeing both to allow his real name to appear in this thesis, and for excerpts of our recorded conversation to be reproduced in Appendix 2, below.
Roman officer drops to his knees.

(to crowd) So I leave this up to you. Was this man truly the Son of God? It is for each of you to decide.  

Cutting again into the thick silence that followed Phil’s last words, Daz, our travelling musician, began strumming his guitar and singing words first penned by an African-American woman poet thirty-five years earlier, Maya Angelou’s ‘Still I Rise’:

Now did you want to see me broken
Bowed head and lowered eyes
Shoulders fallen down like tear drops
Weakened by my soulful cries

Does my confidence upset you
Don’t you take it awful hard
Cause I walk like I’ve got a diamond mine
Breakin’ up in my front yard

So you may shoot me with your words
You may cut me with your eyes
And I’ll rise, I’ll rise, I’ll rise

Out of the shacks of history’s shame
Up from a past rooted in pain
I’ll rise, I’ll rise, I’ll rise

Many things are remarkable about that very first Bromford Passion Play. One is that the places in which its scenes were set seemed almost to resonate with the story being performed. The cry of godforsakenness from a crucified Messiah seemed, to those of us who reflected on it afterwards, to profoundly echo some of the deep stories of residents of the estate, both individually and collectively: of being promised the earth and then let down; of being done to by external agencies, who then left the area the moment funding dried up; of being overlooked (both literally, by those driving along the M6, but also metaphorically) and forgotten about by those with power to allocate resources and investment. ‘The wasteland’ was a visible illustration of these stories – and ‘the wasteland’ itself had shaped those stories.

Nevertheless, the defiant hope of Maya Angelou’s poem also struck a chord with those present that day: abandonment would not have the last word. The Passion Play itself was the second performance of the newly-established Bromford Theatre Group, which four months earlier had made its debut with ‘Aladdin’ – a Christmas ‘panto’ which is now an annual tradition. The Theatre Group had brought together local people with talents not just for acting, but for prop design, costume-sewing, behind-the-scenes technical support and catering, to name but a few. And heading up the Theatre Group was Phil himself, in his late 60s, currently working in a factory but with a

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4 Howkins 2012
colourful career behind him that included farm work and being part of a travelling circus. Phil is someone who, with a twinkle in his eye, has an infectious ability to persuade people to say yes to almost anything: to discover gifts they did not know they had, and to join them with those of others to bring laughter and entertainment to many. This ability was one of several reasons why Phil had been nominated as a ‘Hodge Hill Unsung Hero’ the year before.

A third thing to note about the Bromford Passion Play 2013 is that many of those who performed in it (including Phil) would not call themselves Christians. This was not a church initiative. It was entirely Phil’s idea, and the Christians involved in staging it were either already part of the Theatre Group, or had responded to Phil’s invitation to join in this event. The five-act script itself was typed by me on my laptop, as Phil dictated it to me, word for word. It was then kicked around, and only slightly ‘tweaked’, as the first gathering of the cast tried to make sense of their characters, and the logic of the plot, in one of the most profound bible studies I have ever been fortunate enough to observe. If there is an element of church initiative to be found anywhere in this unfolding drama, it might merely be found in the intentionality of a number of us Christians, moving to live on the Firs & Bromford estate in the preceding years, seeking to get involved with our neighbours, make friends, and celebrate compassion, generosity, trust, friendship and hope wherever we found them – mostly in little, everyday ways, but occasionally through more organized events such as ‘Hodge Hill Unsung Heroes’ in the spring of 2012. Phil made us part of the Passion Play. It could quite conceivably have happened without us. Was there anything about our presence, our involvement, our responsiveness as Christians that made a distinctive contribution? That is what I will explore in the pages that follow.

This thesis is about the intersection, then, of these three themes: abandonment, hope, and responsiveness; or, in more technical language, ‘othering’, ‘agency’ and ‘receptivity’. These themes arise from the everyday experience of my neighbours and me on our outer estate in the urban margins of east Birmingham, but they are also themes which have recently received significant recent attention, politically, theoretically and theologically – conversations which I survey briefly here.

1.1 Dramas of exclusion: discourses of ‘othering’, dynamics of ‘expulsion’

‘The Firs & Bromford’ is a large 1950s/60s outer estate, a mix of semis, terraces and tower blocks, historically home to ‘white working-class’ households moved out from the city centre ‘back to backs’, but increasingly also to Somalis, Nigerians, Romanians and other recently-arrived communities. Large parts of the estate rank within the 5% most deprived in England’s ‘indices of multiple deprivation’, and a brief survey of local residents would find evidence of each of the Church Urban Fund’s three dimensions of poverty: of ‘resources’ (financial, educational, health), of

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6 ‘Unsung Heroes’ was the culmination of several months of mapping, visiting and listening across the parish of Hodge Hill (through a programme called ‘Know Your Church – Know Your Neighbourhood’), by a small team of volunteers from Hodge Hill Church. 97 people who either lived or worked in Hodge Hill were nominated by friends, neighbours, customers and school children, and almost all of these nominees were able to attend an awards ceremony evening, which celebrated something of their stories over a meal. That evening we asked nominees “if you could find a couple of other people to join you, what would you start in your neighbourhood?”. Phil was one of those who responded, with the idea for the Theatre Group.


‘relationships’ (fear of crime, isolation, family breakdown, lack of trust in others), and of ‘identity’ (poor mental health, lack of wellbeing and self-worth). If ‘poverty’ is one way of describing the situation in which many local people find themselves, then ‘exclusion’ or ‘marginalization’ is a way of attending to the dynamics which produce that situation, dynamics which are (as Mike Pears and Paul Cloke have recently noted) ‘simultaneously social and spatial’, and which include both ‘cultural’ and ‘structural’ (political and economic) factors.

Starting at the most local level, it is not hard to see how dynamics of marginalization might operate within a neighbourhood, in the ‘cultural politics of social relations’ that accompanies the inevitably ‘complex and contested’ nature of place itself. Viewing an outer estate such as the Firs & Bromford within its wider context, however, it is also easy to understand how ‘poverty of identity’ might be produced and exacerbated by negative portrayals of such neighbourhoods in the media (by both politicians and commentators) as, to take one example, ‘sink estates mired in welfare dependency, drug abuse and a culture of joblessness’.

Such descriptions inflict what Pierre Bourdieu has called a ‘symbolic violence’ on a place and its inhabitants, which in turn can intensify divisions within a neighbourhood, particularly on outer estates where an established ‘white working class’ population and more recent arrivals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, live side by side. On the one hand, Bev Skeggs, Owen Jones and Lisa McKenzie are among those who point to the rampant classism and contempt (among British media, politicians and wider – especially middle-class – society) for low-income white people and their perceived ‘culture’ – exemplified by the popularizing of the abusive term ‘chav’, and TV portrayals such as Channel 4’s 2014 series ‘Benefits Street’. On the other hand, researchers attentive to the experience of migrants and asylum-seekers describe the current ‘ecology of fear’ in which fears among the ‘established population’ both ‘feed’ negative media discourse, acts of hostility and restrictive [government] policies and practices, ‘coupled with international geopolitical insecurity’ – and are intensified by them in turn. These two apparently separate discourses are then frequently brought together in public discourse, Kjartan Sveinsson observes, with the interests of ‘the white working class’ being ‘habitually pitched against those of minority ethnic groups and immigrants’. What such a twin focus effects, Sveinsson argues, is an avoidance of structural questions, such as ‘the legacy of Thatcherism and deindustrialization, [and] the rise of the super-rich’. If it is apparently acceptable within the media, Sveinsson suggests, to ‘use the word “class” in the context of multiculturalism’ (‘the white working class is losing out to ethnic minorities’), to use the same word ‘in the context of inequality’ (‘the white working class is losing out to the middle classes’) is, he notes, apparently ‘objectionable’.

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9 Church Urban Fund 2014
10 Pears & Cloke 2016a:2
11 Such ‘cultural politics’, as Pears and Cloke highlight, ‘can set up implicit but powerful expectations about behaviour … and can end up excluding certain groups of people who are deemed to be “out-of-place” by others’ (Pears & Cloke 2016b:96).
13 Bourdieu and Wacquant define ‘symbolic violence’ as ‘the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity’ – that is, a violence which is internalised within those subjected to it (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:167, quoted in McKenzie 2015:8).
15 Snyder 2012:118
16 Sveinsson 2009:5, 3
For both sociologist Bev Skeggs and postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, such structural inequalities themselves have a cultural dimension. Skeggs’ research has demonstrated the extent to which the ‘fluidity’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ of white, middle-class identities themselves depend to a significant extent on the ‘fixing’, and then appropriation (as ‘commodities’), of ‘other’ identities (including those labelled ‘black’, ‘white working-class’, and, most profoundly, ‘female white working-class’). Meanwhile Gilroy has shown how (predominantly but not exclusively ‘white’) Britain’s current ‘xenophobic responses to the strangers who have intruded upon it’ are tied up with an (unacknowledged) ‘postimperial melancholia’ which has been at the heart of British political and cultural life for at least half a century. This ‘melancholia’ is, Gilroy argues, ‘an inability to face, never mind actually mourn’, both ‘the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige’, and the ‘hidden, shameful store of ... horrors’ of that imperial history itself.

Loïc Wacquant’s recent sociological study of the phenomenon of ‘advanced marginality’ in the black ghettos of Chicago and Paris’ ‘banlieue’ traces four further dynamics which have ‘jointly reshape[d] the features of urban poverty in rich societies and foster[ed] the multiplication of positions situated at or near the bottom of the social and spatial hierarchy’. These dynamics Wacquant names as the ‘macrosocial’ (rising inequality, an increasingly vulnerable low-paid workforce), the ‘economic’ (the ‘disappearance of millions of low-skilled jobs’, the shift towards ‘service’ industries and the ‘precariarization’ of basic conditions of employment), the ‘political’ (‘the retraction and disarticulation of the social welfare state’) and the ‘spatial’ (where development and planning policies fix a ‘suffusive territorial stigma’ to certain areas). For Wacquant this last dynamic is felt as a particularly sharp loss:

the neighbourhood no longer offers a shield against the insecurities and pressures of the outside world; it is no longer this familiar landscape, unified by a shared culture, which reassured and reaffirmed the residents in their collective meanings and forms of mutuality. It has mutated into an empty space of competition and conflict, a danger-filled battleground for the daily contest for subsistence, scarce collective resources (such as the use of public spaces and amenities) and, above all, for finding the means to escape. This weakening of territorially based communal bonds, nay their inversion into negative social and symbolic capital, in turn fuels a retreat into the sphere of privatized consumption and stimulates strategies of mutual distancing and denigration (“I am not one of them”) that further undermine local solidarities and confirm deprecatory perceptions of the neighbourhood.

At the largest structural scale, Saskia Sassen argues that we have, since the 1980s, been living through a global ‘rupture’ across diverse types of political economy (stretching from Keynesian to communist). That rupture, as yet still not completely visible, is a switch from a pre-1980s systemic tendency towards incorporation – a ‘logic of inclusion’ which sucked people into the economy,
primarily as workers and consumers – to a post-1980s world where the ‘dynamics that expel people from the economy and from society’ have not just strengthened, but have now become ‘hardwired into the normal functioning of these spheres’. While there were of course, before the 1980s, ‘social exclusions of all sorts’, Sassen acknowledges, we are now witnessing ‘predatory formations’ unprecedented in their complexity, ‘assemblages of elements, conditions, and mutually reinforcing dynamics’ within political economies across the world. These ‘formations’, she argues, actively seek to increase the economic profitability of the corporate sector, while simultaneously shrinking the space of what is recognised as ‘the economy’ by erasing from it those for whom these predatory formations can no longer find a use.\(^{21}\) A key question for this thesis will be to what extent the Christian church, in its theology and practice of engaging with its non-Christian neighbours, colludes with, or resists, such ‘predatory dynamics, whether of ‘incorporation’ or ‘expulsion’.

1.2 Who acts? Discourses of agency and interaction within the ‘urban margins’

While one necessary complement to structural analysis such as Wacquant’s and Sassen’s is to ask ‘who is responsible for these dynamics of exclusion?’\(^{22}\) another is to highlight forms of everyday ‘agency’ which are resistant to the dominant discourses of ‘othering’ the ‘excluded’. Ruth Lister’s has been a significant voice in British discussions of poverty over the last couple of decades, as she has sought to undermine those discourses which ‘reduce “the poor” to passive objects – in either the benign form of the helpless victim or the malign spectre of the lazy, work-shy, welfare dependent’. Lister offers a helpful taxonomy of different kinds of agency exercised by people living with poverty (see Fig. 1.2, below), outlining continua between the ‘everyday’ and the more ‘strategic’ (i.e. looking to make significant change in the direction of the person’s life), and between the ‘personal’ and the more ‘political’ – acting more consciously as a ‘citizen’ (or together as citizens) in relation to the systems in which people find themselves embedded.\(^{23}\)

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.9\textwidth]{Fig1-2.png}
\end{center}

\textit{Fig 1.2}
\textit{Forms of agency exercised by people living with poverty (Lister 2004:124)}

\(^{21}\) Sassen 2014:76-77, 211-221  
\(^{22}\) Snyder (2012:122) cautions against the opposing dangers of either ‘fall[ing] into the trap of making nobody responsible’ or ‘scapegoat[ing] one group – the public, politicians or the media – for all the ills’ which befall the ‘victims’ of exclusion.  
\(^{23}\) Lister 2004:124, 129 (see also Lister 2015).
For Lister, ‘getting by’ highlights the “‘fight to keep going’ in the face of adversity”, ‘informal modes of coping and helpseeking’, and the importance of (often heavily gendered) social networks of reciprocal support – despite the unequal distribution of, and access to, resources. Employment and education are widely seen, by both policy-makers and those living in poverty themselves, as ‘the main routes for getting out of poverty’, but often fail to account for a prevalent ‘rubber band’ effect (structured by economic, social and political processes) which tends to ‘constrict’ people’s trajectories and ‘pull them back in’.

Lister also discerns ‘everyday’ forms of ‘micro-resistance’ (a term adopted from James C. Scott) that she labels ‘getting (back) at’, which include ‘unrecorded work’ and ‘anti-employment careers’, and ‘dealing with welfare authorities’ either through ‘lying’, ‘concealment’ or ‘impression management’, or through ‘an exaggerated playing by the rules’ or a sometimes ‘ingenious’ interpretation of them.

Finally, Lister points to ‘strategic’ and ‘political’ forms of agency, ‘getting organized’, either through what Lister calls ‘collective self-help’ within communities of locality or interest, or through ‘more directly political activities’. Lister highlights significant barriers which inhibit the ability of people in poverty to ‘get organized’: in particular, firstly, the damage to a person’s ‘ontological identity’ (‘unique sense of self’) which produces or can reinforce ‘a sense of hopelessness, powerlessness and fatalism’, or a self-understanding cast ‘in individualized, self-blaming terms’; and secondly, the difficulty of finding a shared ‘categorical identity’, which might enable people in poverty to act collectively. “Proud to be poor” is not’, Lister observes, ‘a banner under which many are likely to march’; poverty is precisely that from which people want to escape. Furthermore, there are aspects of disadvantaged neighbourhoods which actively encourage social isolation (‘poor transport, lack of money, lack of safety, depressing environment, lack of facilities, being stuck at home’) and perpetuate what estate-born writer Lynsey Hanley calls ‘the wall in the head’.

Nevertheless, Lister suggests, ‘what is remarkable is the extent to which a minority of people in poverty does overcome the constraints and barriers and “get organized” to try to effect change’, creating a virtuous circle in which ‘[t]he very process of coming together... can transform subjectivities and identities so that political agency is developed and strengthened.’

This virtuous circle is precisely what I have observed at work in the Bromford Theatre Group: coming together, finding roles, acting the part, has enabled people to grow in confidence and connections, and find a voice that, at its best, ‘translates’ into other aspects of their lives. In contrast to theoretical and policy discussions of ‘engagement across difference’ which focus on the ‘public spaces’ of the city (cafes, parks, shopping malls and squares), or attempts to engineer mixing

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24 Lister 2004:130-133. Lister’s analysis has been picked up more recently by McKenzie, whose work has sought to show ‘how the practices within poor neighbourhoods’, often defined in negative terms of ‘lack’ and moral ‘deficiency’, are in reality ‘immensely complicated, complex and rich, creating local processes and understandings and setting up local value systems which are often misunderstood, demeaned and ignored by those on the “outside”’ (McKenzie 2015:17).

25 Lister 2004:145

26 Lister 2004:141-4. See e.g. Tyler 2013 for a thorough sociological study of diverse examples of what she calls ‘revolting subjects’.

27 Lister 2004:149

28 Lister 2004:150-152; Hanley 2007:148ff. See also Wacquant’s suggestion that ‘the “precariat” is a sort of stillborn group... since one can work to consolidate it only to help its members flee from it’ (2008:247), an assertion Jan Rehmann challenges (Rehmann 2013), and which I pick up in Chapter 2.

29 Lister 2004:153
through ‘mixed housing’ developments, however, the stories from the Theatre Group echo Ash Amin’s call to attend first and foremost to ‘micropublics’ (such as workplaces and schools, youth centres and community ventures), as both actual and potential sites of ‘prosaic negotiations’ and ‘banal multicultures’. Can local church communities play a role in nurturing such ‘micropublics’, even if they cannot (because their very Christian-ness presumably places some limits on their internal cultural diversity) be such themselves? Can the church contribute to healing the wounds in people’s ‘ontological identities’, and helping forge the ‘categorical identities’ necessary for collective action? These questions, again, gesture towards the central research question of this thesis.

1.3 Locating the church: questions of ecclesial agency within the urban margins

Issues of exclusion and agency within the ‘urban margins’, when explored from a Christian theological standpoint, inevitably raise questions of the location of the church: both within its neighbourhoods, and within the wider dynamics of exclusion that we have briefly surveyed above. They are questions which themselves find a place within current (internal) Christian conversations regarding the church’s mission, and its role within ‘the public sphere’, in a national context (Britain, and more particularly England) currently undergoing major changes – crises, even – in its makeup, its functioning, and its self-understanding. While such conversations are being had across mainstream Christian denominations in Britain, they are perhaps felt most sharply within my own denomination, the Church of England, as it comes to terms with these radical shifts from its distinct position as the ‘established’ Church in a society often described as ‘post-Christendom’.

Most obvious, and perhaps most prominent, in the church’s internal conversations is the issue of numerical decline in both church attendance and church affiliation – a decline which has direct implications for the resourcing (finances, staffing, buildings) of the church. Most recently this has been brought into sharp focus in the Church of England’s ‘Renewal & Reform’ programme, and has been highlighted as a particularly acute challenge for outer estate parishes. The Church of England is not just contending with less people going to church, however. Other, wider, changes in which the national church finds itself entangled include England’s increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, the deeply contentious question of national identity (in a post-colonial, multi-cultural England, which is now preparing to leave the European Union), and tensions between ‘secular’ and what have been called ‘post-secular’ (i.e. a complex mix of both secular and religious) tendencies in both individual

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30 Amin 2002; see also Gilroy’s (2004) reflections on the ‘spontaneous, convivial culture’ that can be seen emerging in many of Britain’s urban areas.
32 Church attendance figures are notoriously difficult to find consensus on. Peter Brierley, a prominent statistician of religion, charts a decrease in attendance in the Church of England from 1,370,400 (3.0% of the population) in 1980 to 660,000 (1.2%) in 2015. People identifying themselves as ‘belonging to the Church of England’ decreased from 40% of the population in 1983 to 17% in 2014 (British Social Attitudes Survey). See www.britishtrends.com/figures/
33 See www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform.aspx
34 See e.g. Bishop Philip North’s recent address to the national ‘Estates Evangelism Conference’ at Bishopthorpe, which suggested that ‘[m]inistry to the poor is increasingly being seen as a luxury that numerous Bishops, Archdeacons, Area Deans and Mission and Pastoral Committees are deciding we can no longer afford’, but that ‘[s]uch a withdrawal would be an utter catastrophe’. ‘If we abandon the poor, we abandon God,’ North concluded (North 2016:2, 7).
35 See e.g. Kenny 2012, MacPhee & Poddar 2010.
and institutional worldviews. Just as significant are a marked decline in people’s trust in institutions and traditional sites of authority (with those on lowest incomes trusting such institutions least), and the national fallout from the global financial crisis of 2007-8, including the accelerated dismantling of the welfare state, a widespread political commitment to fiscal austerity (hitting already poor communities disproportionately harder), and a further deepening of economic inequality.

1.3.1 Changes and tensions in missiology

In the academic field of missiology, where Christianity’s own colonial past (pace Gilroy, above) is hard to avoid, there has been a discernible movement in the last few decades ‘away from the idea of mission as “expansion” or “taking territory” and towards a new appreciation of mission as “encounter”’ and ‘embrace’, grounding the (limited) mission of the church within the all-encompassing missio dei. In practice, however, and within the Church of England more specifically, this supposed ‘paradigm shift’ turns out to be more contested, with missiologies focused on ‘presence and engagement’ (particularly within obviously multi-faith contexts) in tension with those which focused explicitly on church growth: a tension that has been noted both in the significant 2004 report Mission-Shaped Church (MSC), and in the current ‘Renewal and Reform’ agenda. While the missio dei was ‘fundamental to the rationale of Mission-Shaped Church’, as Jeremy Worthen has recently observed, that report was ‘also clear ... that church growth is the “normative” outcome of the church’s faithful participation in God’s mission’. Central to MSC was the call for the ‘planting’ and ‘growing’ of ‘fresh expressions of church’ which might embody ‘a new inculturation of the gospel within our society’, and it proposed a ‘mixed economy of parish churches and network churches’ operating across wider geographical areas. Responding from the Anglo-Catholic tradition, Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank criticised MSC’s proposals for ‘special interest groups’ (rather than ‘churches’), as ‘a massive redirection of mission and ecclesiology’ based on ‘a defective methodology’, ‘an inadequate theology’ and a ‘capitulation’ to ‘the very choice-led individualism from which Christianity should seek to liberate us’. Their call for a renewed attention to ‘place’ and ‘neighbourhood’ has even more recently been given added weight from North American voices, whose manifesto for ‘mission, discipleship and community’ bound to a rediscovery of the localism of ‘the parish’ has struck a chord in a British context, both within and beyond the denominational boundaries of the Church of England.

Hopeful, eirenic voices have highlighted a ‘new ecumenism’ across previously entrenched ‘cultural and theological silos’ (between ‘evangelism’ and ‘social action’ in particular), which has been ‘primarily driven by mission initiatives which have sought to serve the needs of the local community

36 We will explore the ‘post-secular’ description at greater length in Chapter 2.
37 See e.g. Richards, Smith & Hay 2014; Hosking 2014.
39 Pears & Cloke 2016:4-5. See Bosch 1991 for a comprehensive account of this ‘paradigm shift’.
41 Worthen 2016:2, cf Church of England 2004:93. Worthen goes on to reflect (in the context of ‘Renewal and Reform’) that the question of ‘how mission is or is not bound up with growth – and what such growth measures, and how it should be assessed – remains a critical one’ (Worthen 2016:2).
42 Church of England 2004:xi-xii
43 Davison & Milbank 2010:vii-viii
44 Sparks, Soerens & Friesen 2014
in practical and tangible ways’, or called for a ‘generous ecclesiology’ which can ‘affirm the connection’ between ‘inheritance and innovation’, ‘places’ and ‘networks’, worship and mission. Others, however, are less confident in the prospect of easy reconciliation between national church growth strategies and local forms of missional engagement, warning that we overlook at our peril the ‘integral relationship between culture, place and power’, and the dangers of certain ‘models and agendas’ for mission becoming ‘normative’, when those models and agendas have often been formed in places very different to the ‘marginal’ places within which the urban church lives and moves.

1.3.ii Changes and tensions in the church’s public role

While the Church of England’s numerical decline puts pressure on its missiological thinking, it also has a significant political impact on the way the church’s voice is heard ‘in public’. No longer can the church assume a ‘Christian literacy’ among the wider British public, and the church’s pronouncements in the public sphere can expect to be met with a mixed reception: sometimes warmly receptive, often uncomprehending or even hostile. Politicians’ recent appeals to ‘British values’ often look for grounding in the country’s ‘Christian heritage’ but are equally often charged, by church leaders and theologians, as being entangled with a ‘revisionist secularism’. Christian responses have ranged from a defensive insistence on ‘religious freedoms’ (often, but not always, lining up alongside those of other faiths), to bolder assertions that Christianity – in some cases, Anglicanism even – is ‘the answer’ to the crises of modernity. In between these two poles, some Anglicans have tentatively suggested that the church might have some wisdom to offer the world on how to ‘live together faithfully when we disagree about what is right’ – a suggestion emerging particularly from the Church of England’s recent experience of attempting to negotiate its internal disagreements over issues of gender and sexuality.

Alongside ‘going for growth’ and ‘reimagining ministry’, ‘contributing to the common good’ was identified by the Church of England’s central decision-making bodies, in 2011, as one of the core

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45 Kuhrt 2010. See also Spencer 2016.
46 Gittoes, Green & Heard 2013:3
47 Pears & Cloke 2016:5-7
48 As Anglican urban theologian Andrew Davey notes, ‘[m]ission and evangelism are core activities for Christians in urban areas, but models and agendas which become normative are often formed in very different communities. Theology is disentwined from place, often in danger of serving other masters. The Church can at times mirror or acquiesce with that inequality that is found deeply entrenched’ (Davey 2010:x).
49 We will return to this question in much more detail in the following chapter.
50 Currently defined by the British government as ‘democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’ (Department for Education 2014)
51 See e.g. Cameron 2011, Welby 2016.
52 See e.g. Hilton 2016. See also Milbank & Pabst’s assertion of ‘the extent to which the liberal state is not at all neutral or impartial, but, instead, pushes an aggressively secular agenda. If anything,’ they argue, ‘this reinforces the case for establishment and for an even more outspoken Church leadership working closely together with the laity, and people of other faiths and none who share similar concerns about secular aggression’ (2016:237).
54 Brown 2014:26
‘challenges’ for the church in the coming years. Just as ‘good disagreement’ has not always been obvious in the church’s discussions of gender and sexuality, however, neither has it been consistently shown in the political arena, the church’s relationship to the welfare state being a prime example. Some prominent Christian voices have seized on the opportunity presented by the Church’s ‘unique position’ to ‘fill the gap’ left by ‘failing’ public services, while others have angrily accused the institutional church of putting empathy for ‘the dilemmas which politicians face’ over empathy for people in poverty themselves. In turn, siding with those ‘at the margins of society’ itself exposes differences of emphasis among Christians, with some focusing on resistance to ‘sweeping public spending cuts’, and others questioning the paternalistic power-imbalances reinforced by ‘service-provision’ models of community action, emphasising instead the primary importance of community-building at a local level.

Here again, the church’s anxieties about its size, strength or impact can be counter-productive, as Pears and Cloke warn: ‘if the church’s presence [in marginalized neighbourhoods] is predicated on growth, whether growth in the numbers attending its food banks and social projects or growth in its congregations’, it is likely – however ‘unwittingly’ – to ‘embody assumptions about success that reinforce the barriers between the “haves” and “have-nots”’, and collude ‘with the very forces in society which privilege the powerful and disadvantage the vulnerable’. ‘It would be ironic indeed,’ they suggest, ‘if, in its own vulnerability, the Christian community found itself to be less empathetic with and compassionate towards the vulnerable in our society.’

1.3.iii A christological equivocation

To push the point a little further, but crucial for our investigation here, we might take a moment to reflect on two of the most often-quoted responses, from within the Christian tradition, to the question of the church’s role among its neighbours. The first comes from Teresa of Avila:

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55 Church of England 2011
56 Noyes & Blond 2013:3. See again Milbank & Pabst’s bold claims: ‘in very practical terms, it is the Anglican establishment that today uniquely sustains in Britain a parish system that helps to structure and coordinate local life in diverse ways. This system provides a ready-made platform for a great extension of such involvement in the future by reaching further out into the spheres of education, welfare, health, business and finance. Such extension can potentially start to qualify the control of either the centralised bureaucratic state or the profit-seeking free market, both of which began to become dominant in part because of the Church’s historical retreat from its civil role and social action... It is just this extension that can help to restore the Church’s spiritual mission, by vividly demonstrating religious relevance in terms of a link between belief, practice and consequence’ (2016:238).
58 See e.g. Common Wealth network 2010
59 See e.g. Eckley, Ruddick & Walker 2015; Bickley 2014; Barrett 2013:4.
60 Pears & Cloke 2016:4. I am reminded here of John V Taylor’s reading of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11), as the temptations to grasp the power of the ‘provider’ (turning stones into bread), the ‘performer’ (jumping off the Temple) and the ‘possessor’ (being given the kingdoms of the world), temptations rooted in the questioning of Jesus’ identity (‘If you are the Son of God...’) (Taylor 1992:161, cf Barrett 2014). These three temptations might justifiably be applied to the Church of England’s current anxieties about its responses to austerity and inequality, church decline, and its waning political influence, respectively. Seizing the ‘opportunity’ presented to ‘fill the gap’ left by ‘failing’ public services might be seen as the temptation to the power of the provider. The desire to develop ‘new initiatives’, ‘go for growth’ and ‘demonstrate impact’ is perhaps entwined with the temptation to the power of the performer. The re-assertion of the country’s ‘Christian heritage’, or the desire for an enduring place at the tables of power, comes close to the temptation to the power of the possessor. We will return to these temptations in our final chapter, below.
Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks in compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.61

The second response comes from the gospels, from ‘the King’ in Jesus’ ‘parable’ of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 (vv.35-36):

‘For 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.’

On the one hand, then, we (we Christians, we the church) are to be Christ’s body in and for ‘the world’; on the other hand, we are to ‘welcome’ Christ in the ‘stranger’. The history of the church suggests that we can, and have, thought and embodied both of these possibilities together, even if we have tended to lean more in one direction than the other. In neither version, however, is there much of a hint that the ‘others’, to whom we are drawn and respond, might have a positive agency of their own. In focusing on the church’s voice, the church’s actions, where is the voice of the ‘other’ that rings out in Maya Angelou’s feisty, challenging, defiant, ‘Still I Rise’?

1.4 Research question: developing a radically receptive ecclesiology in the urban margins

In the light of this brief overview of the dynamics of exclusion of, and agency among, people who live in the ‘urban margins’, and current missiological and political debates within the Church of England, I am now in a position to state my research question for this thesis:

How can we develop and embody an ecclesiology, in contexts of urban marginality, that is radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of the agency of our non-Christian neighbours, drawing on resources from political theologies, and in particular conversation with Graham Ward and Romand Coles?

To briefly explain how I have arrived at this formulation of the question, I will attend to each of its components, offering some preliminary working definitions of its key terms, as I begin to chart the course of the rest of the thesis.

‘How can we develop and embody an ecclesiology, in contexts of urban marginality, that is radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of the agency of our non-Christian neighbours...?’

By ‘urban marginality’, then, I mean to attend to urban contexts in which the dynamics of ‘othering’, ‘exclusion’ and ‘marginalization’ are felt most profoundly (developing section 1.1, above). Beginning from where I live and work myself, I have a primary concern with outer urban estates – on the

61 Quoted in Markham & Warder 2016:124, in a section entitled ‘The Christological Basis of Pastoral Care’. 
geographical ‘margins’ of the city – but I hope also both to be attentive to further marginalizing dynamics at work within my own neighbourhood (across lines of ethnicity, class and gender, for example), and to develop something meaningful to offer in conversation with people from other places, where marginality is felt differently but no less deeply.

In bringing together the quest to ‘embody an ecclesiology’ and an attention to ‘the agency of our non-Christian neighbours’62, I am interested in both ‘action’ and ‘interaction’, agency both identifiably ‘ecclesial’ (developing section 1.3, above) and clearly ‘non-church’ (as section 1.2), and also – perhaps especially – the ‘untidiness’ (as Rachel Muers and Thomas Britt call it) of that space where the two overlap: the “mixture of Christian stuff and secular stuff”, and the various other unsystematised “mixtures” and overlappings, in the enduring and changing context’ of my neighbourhood and parish.63

What I mean by the term ‘radically receptive’ I will develop at length in Chapters 5 and 6, taking on its deployment by Romand Coles and adding further theological and practical substance to it in the light of the preceding explorations. A preliminary working definition, however, might adopt the use of ‘radical’ offered by Jan Cohen-Cruz, as referring to ‘acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power’.64 A church which is ‘radically receptive to the gifts and challenges’ of the agency of others, therefore, would allow that agency (through initiatives such as Phil’s passion play, and voices such as Maya Angelou’s) to ‘question or re-envision’ the ‘arrangements of power’ at work in the church’s own identity, its ‘performances’, and its relationships with its ‘others’.65

‘...drawing on resources from political theologies...’

Finding a location for this exploration within a particular theological discipline has not been a straightforward process. As we have already explored briefly above, when seeking to locate the church in relation to those who live in the urban margins, both missiological and political questions immediately arise. Pears and Cloke’s underlining of the ‘integral relationship between culture, place and power’ (and its neglect by many missiologists), however, pushes my investigation towards the discipline of political theology (itself ‘complex and contested’, as Chapter 2 will explore in depth) to assist me to bring together questions of social, political, economic and cultural dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, with explorations of the church’s actions and interactions with a local, geographical context.

‘...and in particular conversation with Graham Ward and Romand Coles?’

62 I realise that even to use the term ‘non-Christian’ is to beg a question of definition which is highly contested. As so much of what follows pays attention to interactions on the ‘edges’ of church where such definitions are potentially most blurred, I use the term to include both those who identify as ‘non-Christian’, and those who might see themselves as Christian but ‘not part of any church’.

63 Muers & Britt 2012

64 Cohen-Cruz 1998:1

65 The term ‘radical’ itself will find a number of different uses over the course of this thesis, as an unsettling qualifier for both ‘orthodoxy’ (in Graham Ward’s work) and ‘democracy’ (in Coles’). Although in the work of both writers it refers to ‘roots’ (Lat., radix), in Ward’s work it carries more of a sense of a return to early, or ‘classic’, theological sources (the ‘ressourcement’ inspired by the mid-20th century ‘nouvelle théologie’ movement within the Roman Catholic church) (see e.g. Dyrness & Kärkkäinen 2008:725). In Coles’ writing, by contrast, ‘radical’ emerges ‘in the permanent tension between “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be”’, such that ‘radical democracy’ involves a ‘dynamic responsiveness’ to ‘a world that always exceeds our terms and settled institutional forms’ (Coles 2008d:286, Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:3 n.4).
I will seek more fully to justify my choice of Graham Ward and Romand Coles as my two main conversation-partners as my argument develops, but I offer a brief explanation here. Highly significant within contemporary political theology is that strand which has taken an explicitly ‘ecclesial turn’, attending primarily to the political nature of the church itself, and to the embodied practices of its life. Within this strand of what I here call ‘ecclesial political theology’ (EPT), Graham Ward is both a prominent representative of the influential ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ stream (Ward himself prefers the term ‘sensibility’ to ‘movement’ or ‘school’), and as one who, more than most, has given theological attention to the dynamics of the urban, and to forces of marginalization in our globalized world. Ward also stands out within the EPT strand as an advocate for ‘engaged’ theology that emphasises the importance of ‘reception’. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, however, these emphases are not without their limits, ambivalence and equivocation, and it is in examining these carefully that some of the most fruitful insights from our engagement with Ward will emerge. Romand Coles will appear later in this thesis (in Chapter 5) as a political theorist who both shares significant aspects of Ward’s ‘post-liberal’ outlook, but who emerges as a pre-eminent thinker of ‘the possible relationships between radical allegiance and radical receptivity to differences’. That Coles is both decidedly non-Christian, and yet generously attentive to the resources of the Christian tradition, offers us both the ‘gift and challenge’ of a ‘non-Christian’ other with which to help the church to be ‘radically receptive’, and a model (from the ‘other side’, as it were) of precisely such radical receptivity in action.

1.5 Locating myself

Before I briefly chart the main trajectories of this thesis, I need explicitly to locate myself as author, and the church to which I belong. The significance of this will emerge in the course of the following chapters, but for the moment it is important both as a declaration of interests and a brief fleshing-out of the ‘I’ and ‘we’ which will pepper the pages to come.

I am myself, as I have already hinted, a resident of the Firs & Bromford estate in east Birmingham, with my wife Janey and children Rafi (8) and Adia (5). I am one of those Christians, since 2004 (Janey and I have been there since 2010), who have moved to the estate quite intentionally, to be a ‘Christian presence’ there, to get to know our neighbours, to experiment together in seeking to live as a Christian community, and to get involved in wider energies for building community locally. I am also the local vicar, ordained deacon (2001) and priest (2002) in the Church of England, with the cure

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66 Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:10-11
67 For Graham Ward (as we will see in Chapter 3, below), the ‘location’ of the theologian – Ward fleshes out this term further using Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ – is inextricable from one of his own central questions, ‘from where does theology speak?’, and multiple questions which arise from this one: ‘does the theologian speak simply on the basis of self-appointment? Is the theologian one who is trained in the discipline of theology and, having reached a certain point, decides to ply that acquired skill in the market-place? Who is the theologian? Who designates this person or that as a theologian? On whose behalf does this theologian presume to speak? Who legitimates that speaking – calls it heresy or orthodoxy? Who positions that speaking alongside the speaking of other theologians, comparing this one to that, making critical judgements about the theological work done, situating the work with respect to schools of opinion or the tradition?’ (Ward 2005b:15-16). Ward’s questions are intimately connected to the complex relationship, noted above, between ‘culture, place and power’ in theological (and particularly ecclesiological and missiological) production (section 1.3.i, above). For Joerg Rieger (see section 4.4.ii (4), below), in addition, excavating the ‘habitus’ of the theologian is also necessary to expose her/his potential ‘blindspots’ – those positioned implicitly or explicitly as the theologian’s ‘others’ – a central concern of this thesis.
of souls for the parish of Hodge Hill (around 20,000 souls currently), and part of the team that seeks to shape, sustain and develop the life and work of Hodge Hill Church, a local ecumenical partnership between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church.

The church itself has an eventful history in the area. The first parish church building, built in the 1930s, was to the south of what was later to be the Firs & Bromford, and an invitation in the 1960s to relocate to a plot on the newly-built estate was turned down by the Diocese of Birmingham. When the second church building was deemed unsafe for ongoing use in 2008 (the first was destroyed by fire in the early 1960s), the Anglican congregation re-located to join the URC congregation in the latter’s building, again just off the estate, on the arterial Coleshill Road. Demographically, the combined congregation’s makeup is predominantly white, and largely middle-class (by profession if not necessarily by background), with only a few congregation members now living on the Firs & Bromford, even if a much larger number used to.

My own background is inescapably middle-class – brought up in Hampshire, Berkshire and Middlesex, educated for a time in a (state) grammar school, and with a Cambridge first degree and a number of subsequent ones. I am also male, and white. This combination of identity factors, within the dominant structures of the world we inhabit, means I come to local relationships in both church and neighbourhood, and to the task of theological reflection, with a multiplicity of privileges, of power imbalances tipped in my favour. It is not coincidental, therefore, that I seek through this thesis an ecclesiology for a church ‘radically receptive’ to the gifts and challenges of its ‘others’.

While recognising that the church of which I am a part (both locally in Hodge Hill, and the wider Church of England) often shares some of the same privileges which I have as an individual (and is profoundly shaped by them), I also attempt to be careful in this thesis not to identify ‘the church’ too neatly with such privileges – and thus any ecclesiological proposals developed here are meant to be tentative, conditional, seeking to avoid the temptation towards universalising prescription to which, among other characteristics of privilege, I attempt to give critical attention.

1.6 Charting the trajectory/ies: overview of chapters

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, then, I begin by wrestling with a definition of ‘the political’, before developing a taxonomy of three main strands of contemporary British political theology. In the ‘public theology’ strand I identify a desire to ‘speak truth to power’, and a ‘convocative’ quest to engage different voices in dialogue, within a common ‘public’ space. Within a ‘liberationist’ leaning which has sought to translate the commitments of Latin American liberation theology into a British context, I highlight a preferential attention to those on the margins of power, and a commitment to act for change alongside them. Finally, in a still-emerging ‘ecclesial political theology’ strand I draw out both criticisms of the preceding strands, and a fresh assertion of the political nature of the church itself, but expressed variously through the faithful witness of the ecclesial community, the narration of a ‘counter-ontology’ of participation in the life of God, and an evangelical summoning of earthly authorities to submit to the authority of Christ. Where the ‘public space’ of public theology

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68 Neither ‘male’ nor ‘white’ are unproblematic terms here. They are both products of dominant social constructions that falsely imply the possibility of straightforward binary classification. Nevertheless, they refer to identity markers that I find myself inhabiting, social positions which require critical examination.

69 By the church’s ‘others’, here, I mean both those who self-identify as ‘not part of any church’ (see n.61, above), and those who, in any particular interaction with a self-identified Christian, are treated as ‘other’. A line is often drawn by each party in an interaction – but not necessarily in the same place.
can be seen to be excluding of certain ‘others’, and the liberationist impulse risks slipping into a fragmented ‘identity politics’, the theological ‘confidence’ of the ecclesial strand also brings its own dangers. However, in all three strands I also seek to highlight possibilities for ‘dis-locating’ the theological voice, to make space for the theologian’s ‘others’ to be heard.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I attend in depth to the work of Graham Ward, a political theologian firmly in the ‘ecclesial’ strand, who is important for our investigation here not just because he develops in depth and complexity a theological conception of the political agency of the church (as ‘performing Christ’) in the postmodern city, but because his is (unlike some prominent among his colleagues) an explicitly ‘engaged theology’, that seeks to make space for the ‘disruptive grace’ of the theologians’ ‘others’. In Chapter 3 I focus primarily on Ward’s diagnosis of the ‘ailments’ of the postmodern city (first and foremost its distortions of its inhabitants’ desires), and his proposals for their healing, grounded in an ‘analogical worldview’, within which all bodies (physical, social, political and ecclesial) are understood ultimately to participate in the (eucharistically-constituted) body of Christ. That worldview is ‘performed’, for Ward, by the church, primarily through the act of eucharist itself, but also through its engagements in a ‘cultural politics’ that ‘reschools the cultural imaginary’, in inhabiting the eschatological ‘yearning’ of prayer, and in service of those ‘in need’. I seek to demonstrate here that the extent to which Ward’s church is open to the challenge of its ‘others’ is made somewhat precarious, largely because of his ambivalent description of the church itself. At times he describes a very ‘concrete’ ecclesial body, within which self-centred and divine desires are ‘commingled’, ‘humble’ in its judgments and ‘open-ended’ in its narrative. At other times, Ward’s ecclesiology is more ambitious, describing an ‘erotic community’ which ‘transgresses’ institutional boundaries and ‘incorporates’ its ‘others’ in its expansiveness. At Ward’s most confident, he comes close to identifying the concrete church with the ‘heavenly city’, and thus putting ‘church’ and ‘world’ into stark opposition.

Chapter 4 turns to examine in more detail the implications of Ward’s more ‘confident’ ecclesiological stances for the specific embodiment of the church’s engagements in the urban margins. At its most extreme, Ward’s ecclesiology is shown to have patriarchal and imperialist tendencies – which risk doing violence to the church’s ‘others’ – governed, as it seems to be, by a one-way logic of divine ‘flow’ with both implicit and explicit masculine, penetrative characteristics. In Ward’s more explicitly christological reflections – specifically in his ‘schizoid’ (and Markan) christology constituted in the interactions of desires, touch and flows – we find a promising ‘opening’ to the gifts and challenges of the ‘other’, but one which is rapidly foreclosed by his recurring return to the (more Johannine) ‘economy’ of God’s activity, a bounded, impermeable, and all-consuming ‘world’. This return, I demonstrate, precipitates multiple retreats in Ward’s writing: not only from the challenge of the other, but also from the materiality of Jesus, from the particularity of christology, from the engagement of praxis, from the negotiation of what Gillian Rose names the ‘broken middle’, and from Ward’s own embodied locatedness as a theologian. Moving beyond Ward’s limitations to a more radically receptive ecclesiology must, I suggest, involve finding additional resources which enable us to reverse these retreats.

In exploring the work of Romand Coles, in Chapter 5, I find just such resources. Coles, a non-Christian, post-liberal, radical democratic political theorist and practitioner, articulates both a deep
appreciation for the necessity of ‘traditioned’, ‘teleologically-oriented’ communities (such as Ward’s church), and a call to an essential, ‘ateleological’ vulnerability to the voice and actions of our ‘others’. These two might be animated in a creative tension, Coles argues, through the adoption of a ‘tragic sensibility’ which both strives towards a community’s ‘highest values’ but also seeks to acknowledge, articulate and ‘work at’ both its failures and the unintended suffering even its best intentions cause. Beyond the ‘paralysis’ of Ward’s retreat from praxis into ontology, Coles develops a ‘visionary pragmatism’ which is both rooted in ontological claims (the ‘fecundity’ of ‘edges’ and ‘borderlands’) and embodied in concrete practices of receptive engagement. Further developing Ward’s political and economic analysis of the significance of ‘flows’ (both material and non-material), Coles outlines how the receptive practices he proposes can nurture alternative ‘counter-flows’ to the ‘mega-circulations’ of neoliberal capitalism. Through Coles’ generously receptive readings of the theologies of John Howard Yoder, Rowan Williams and Jean Vanier in particular, he enables us, finally, to articulate ecclesially-rooted practices of radical receptivity, ‘held open’ by a christological equivocation between ‘performing’ a ‘receptive Christ’ and welcoming ‘Christ the stranger’. 

Finally, in Chapter 6, I develop an ‘ecology’ of ‘tactical theological stances’, ontological descriptions, and ecclesial practices, which together constitute trajectories towards a ‘radically receptive political theology’. What emerges seeks to incorporate the most virtuous leanings of all three strands of political theology surveyed in Chapter 2. Starting necessarily from an attentiveness to the theologian’s ‘location’ and embodied ‘habitus’, I argue for the necessity of a tactical ‘dis-location’ of the theologian’s particular relationships of privilege, through an engagement with the christologically-inflected insights of critical white theology. This ‘dis-location’ involves ‘flipping the christological axis’ from dominant identifications with an ‘active’ Christ (or generous gestures towards a ‘needy’ Christ), towards either (as in Coles’ work in Chapter 5) identifying with a ‘receptive Christ’, or dis-identifying with Christ so as to be able to receive his/her challenge to us. This in turn shifts our imagination towards expecting to discover abundance not primarily in our liturgical ‘centres’, but at and beyond the ‘edges’ of church. Finding ways to ‘let the ghosts speak’ names that re-awakening of our senses to those ‘others’ that we have either ‘repressed’ or ‘appropriated’, and via a (re-)consideration of the film The Full Monty, I develop the idea of the ‘constitutive outside’ as a way of imagining the practice of both ‘calling forth’ voice and agency in others, and being ‘called forth’ ourselves, by our ‘others’. Ontologically, I suggest that such radically receptive work can be understood as participating in divine receptivity, ‘hearing with God’s ears’, nurturing receptive, divine ‘counter-flows’ to the mega-circulations of the neoliberal economy. These flows, moreover, can be conceived as running between (rather than into and out of) bodies and – to deliberately subvert Ward’s own erotically charged language – lubricating and enlivening their ‘surface touch’ (rather than their interpenetration) with divine transcendence.

Turning finally to concrete practices, I suggest that we theologians – first ‘located’ and then ‘dis-located’ – might then find ourselves ‘re-located’ receptively, both ‘re-rooted’ and ‘re-routed’ to be able to attune ourselves to and learn from those around us. Such re-location, if it is to be truly receptive, requires the ‘art of pregnant waiting’, resisting the urge to re-take the initiative, and a receptively-inflected practice of ‘confession’, which opens us to be both ‘exorcised’ and ‘initiated’ by

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70 i.e. with a clear sense of direction
71 i.e. open to the unanticipatable
those others whom we have been complicit in marginalizing and excluding. Finding, or occasionally creating, spaces in which to practise such ‘confession’ with others might then itself lead to discoveries, negotiations and even contestations of our shared limits and exclusions, at best nurturing a ‘contagious receptivity’ through which our own efforts at receptivity to our neighbours ‘catches on’, and those ‘heard’ become ‘hearers’ of others in turn. While our engagements with Coles highlight the ‘concentric liturgical imaginary’ shaping Ward’s eucharistic ‘economy’, they also point us towards the possibility of receiving ‘communion’ at ‘tables’ and ‘places’ that are far from our own ecclesial ‘centres’. What Rowan Williams calls ‘para-liturgies’ names practised ways in which we might open ourselves to being ‘overwhelmed’ by the gifts of our neighbours – gifts which we might then, if we can make our own liturgies more receptive, bring back ‘into church’. Shifting our understanding of the church’s worship from ‘receiving to give’ to ‘formation for receptivity’, we might discover in that worship a new politically disruptive potential. Finally, we might re-conceive ‘prayer’ itself, firstly, as an alert receptivity to the abundance both around and far beyond where we are presently ‘rooted’, and secondly, as precisely that ‘perpetual reanimation’ which Coles urges, of the tension between an ‘eschatologically-stretched’, teleologically-informed ‘yearning’ for what is ‘not yet’, and a radical sense of ‘insufficiency’, of ‘thirsting’ for the unwonted disruptions and graces that come from our human and non-human others.

This thesis ends where it began, returning to the Bromford Passion Play, to see whether we can identify these aspects of a ‘radically receptive political theology’ in that particular ‘performance’. It concludes, in deliberately Markan style, with the beginnings of an Easter story, and some questioning trajectories that can only be developed beyond the scope of this present work. If, as Leonard Cohen sang, it is only through the ‘crack’, the ‘crack in everything’ that ‘the light gets in’, then this thesis will have done its (necessarily limited) work if it has opened up some of those ‘cracks’ just a little wider: in our political economies and ontologies, in our neighbourhoods, in the church, in the gospel.

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73 It is worth noting, in passing, that Ward’s newest book is in fact titled How The Light Gets In. In his acknowledgments, Ward explains that it was not the Cohen song that inspired the title, but a ‘daring novel by a former colleague’ (Ward 2016:xiii). I am grateful to my own colleague and PhD supervisor, Richard Sudworth, for suggesting that the quest of this thesis is to find precisely the ‘cracks’ in our ecclesiology which Ward does not, himself, quite embrace.
Chapter 2

Mapping the terrain: 
public, liberation and ecclesial 
political theologies
2.1 Introduction

In her 1996 book, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, published a year after her death, English Jewish political philosopher Gillian Rose reflects on the opposition, frequently set up by self-consciously ‘postmodern’ political philosophers and theologians, between ‘the rationalised, coercive modern state’\(^1\) (cast as ‘Athens, the city of rational politics’) and ‘the imaginary community’ of the ‘New Jerusalem’, whose citizens ‘dedicate themselves’ to ‘a new ethics’ of ‘difference ... otherness ... love’.\(^2\) Behind this opposition, and postmodern philosophy’s abandonment of the first in pilgrimage towards the second, is, Rose argues, ‘the city of Auschwitz’, seen as Athens’ ‘burning cousin’, modernity’s rationality taken to its logical conclusions.\(^3\) Auschwitz is Rose’s ‘fourth city’, and philosophy and theology’s fascination with it conceals ‘a deeper evasion’, she argues – that Auschwitz is not so much unique ‘end product and telos of modern rationality’ as, rather, a city that ‘ar[ose] out of, and ... f[ell] back into, the ambitions and the tensions, the utopianism and the violence, the reason and the muddle, which is the outcome of the struggle between the politics and the anti-politics’ of ‘the third city’ – the city in which we all live and with which we are too familiar.\(^4\)

I will return to Rose’s work in more detail later, in particular the sharp questions she asks of the ‘New Jerusalem’ trajectory in recent political theology.\(^5\) For the moment, however, her four ‘cities’ offer us something broader: a way in to mapping the terrain of political theologies in the context of contemporary urban Britain. This task must be accompanied by an immediate health warning: not only is the discipline, the label, of ‘political theology’ a relatively recent thing; its definition is also ambiguous and contested, as are the various attempts to subdivide it.\(^6\) Here, Rose’s analysis suggests a divide between the Athens of *public theology*, defending and developing Christian theology in dialogue in the ‘public square’, and the New Jerusalem of (what I am calling here) *ecclesial political theology*, attentive to the communal performance of the church as itself the truest kind of politics. These might be seen to correspond closely to the respective attention I paid, in Chapter 1, to the macro-political dynamics of exclusion, and the location and agency of the church. A third political theological site emerges when we attend to the agency of those within the urban margins themselves, seen most clearly in *liberation theology’s* attention to the poor and the oppressed, the dehumanised and the expelled. While not directly corresponding to Rose’s ‘Auschwitz’, the genealogy of liberation theology is nevertheless intertwined with post-Holocaust European political theology’s focus on those people on the receiving end of structural and political violence, and the desire for them to (re)discover their voice and agency. While my own three-fold division here inevitably tends towards a level of abstraction, describing ‘ideal types’ and thus potentially excluding significant forms of political theology that do not easily ‘fit’,\(^7\) Rose’s framework warns us to not wander too far from the ‘third city’: in the context of this thesis, the specificities of life at the margins of contemporary urban Britain.

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\(^1\) Rose 1996:20
\(^2\) Rose 1996:21
\(^3\) Rose 1996:27, 30
\(^4\) Rose 1996:34. See also Rowlands 2006; Lloyd 2011; Hyman 2013.
\(^5\) See sections 3.6, 4.5, below.
\(^6\) See e.g. Phillips 2012:5-6, 31ff.
\(^7\) We might note European post-war political theology itself as one of those excluded strands, and Catholic Social Teaching as another.
2.2 Political theology: in search of definition

Any discussion of ‘political theologies’ must, inevitably, wrestle with definitions of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. In an important sense, ‘political theologies’ might be understood as exactly that wrestling, within some kind of ‘theological framework’ (itself a matter for exploration and contestation). By the end of this thesis, a transformed understanding of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ will have emerged – but for the moment, I want to delineate a provisional definition, to enable us to clarify both the focus and the boundaries of this investigation.

In defining ‘the political’, then, we might helpfully distinguish between, on the one hand, Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh’s emphasis on *the use of structural power* to organize a society or community of people (rooted in Max Weber’s focus on ‘politics as seeking state power’, but including also ‘the self-governance of communities and individuals’),⁸ and on the other hand Luke Bretherton’s broader understanding of politics as ‘the ongoing process through which to maintain commonality and recognize and conciliate conflict (including the use of coercive force) in pursuit of shared, temporal goods’.⁹ This latter, more Aristotelian, conception Bretherton contrasts explicitly with ‘modern liberal and totalitarian forms of political organization all of which seek to substitute politics for some kind of legal, bureaucratic or market-based procedure’.¹⁰ Whereas Weber understood authentic politics as the essentially *hierarchical* activity of ‘deciding for others, commanding them, wielding power over them, and affecting the course of events’,¹¹ Bretherton leans much more towards Hannah Arendt’s *horizontal* understanding of ‘politics [as] action and ... action [as] speech in public about public affairs’.¹² Although Bretherton recognises the significance of *conflict* (and the fact, whether a necessity or not, of ‘coercive force’), he is less interested in Carl Schmitt’s emphasis on political action as ‘the struggle against the enemy’,¹³ than in Arendt’s attention to *commonality*. For the latter, the most significant effects of political action come about ‘where people are with others and neither for nor against them – that is in sheer human togetherness’.¹⁴ Politics is less about ‘what some do to others’, and more about ‘what all do together’.¹⁵

Arendt’s ‘all’, however, begs the question of who might be excluded from it – a central concern of this thesis. If the twin concerns of Bretherton’s political theology are the fostering of ‘just or right judgments’, on the one hand, and ‘neighbour love’, on the other, then the gospel question ‘who is my neighbour?’ must be central.¹⁶ Like Bretherton, Gavin Hyman helpfully uses the lens of ‘neighbour love’ in co-defining ‘the ethical’ (loving ‘this other’) and ‘the political’ (loving ‘other

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⁸ Cavanaugh & Scott 2004:2 (my emphasis).
⁹ Bretherton 2010:19
¹⁰ Bretherton 2009:4. See also Arne Rasmusson’s comparison of the ‘political theology’ of Jürgen Moltmann (politics as ‘the struggle for control over the processes of social change’) and the ‘theological politics’ of Stanley Hauerwas (politics as the ‘conversation necessary for a people to discover the goods they have in common’) (Rasmusson 1995:165, 188).
¹² Kateb 2000:132. ‘The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds.” Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it’ (Arendt 1998 [1958]:198; cf 25-6).
¹³ Schmitt 1996 [1927]:25-37
¹⁵ Kateb 2000:132
¹⁶ Bretherton 2010:19
others’) together: ‘[t]he question at the heart of the political is thus the question of how a common life may be structured in such a way that is consistent with and which extends the ethical injunction to love my neighbour as myself’. Hyman draws our attention not just to ‘all the activity pertaining to public life taking place within the legitimate parameters’ of ‘a community’s norms, procedures, and customs’, but also to ‘any thought and action that may serve to question or overturn these parameters.’

Drawing on the work of Bretherton and Hyman, then, I propose a working definition of ‘the political’ as ‘the ongoing actions and interactions through which forms of common life, and divisions between people, are both shaped and contested’. With this broad definition, however, I would want to return to Scott and Cavanaugh’s conception of the work of political theology, as the analysis of and critical reflection on ‘political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects)’ – and also, I would add, self-critical reflection on the ‘praxis’ of Christian involvement in ‘the political’ – within particular spatial and temporal contexts, ‘from the perspective of different interpretations’ (themselves open to question and change) ‘of God’s ways with the world’.

2.2.i Sharpening the focus

In the context of the urban margins of 21st century Britain, then, the ‘terrain’ I seek to map here is primarily that of contemporary and recent British political theology – situated, nevertheless, within a more extensive web of origins and influences, as well as critiques. Within each of the broad and overlapping strands (or better, ‘ideal types’) of ‘public theology’, ‘liberation theology’ and ‘ecclesial political theology’, I will seek to identify both the ‘speakers’ (who is the ‘theologian’) and the ‘listeners’ (the ‘audience’), but also which voices, beyond the theologian’s own, are ‘heard’ and attended to. This will highlight a variety of styles of engagement with, on the one hand, the structures and dynamics of ‘macro-political’ agents (e.g. governments and businesses, churches and social movements, where the power of those corporate agents operates to influence and shape the behaviour of many individuals) and, on the other hand, the interactions of ‘micro-political’ actors (i.e. between individual human beings). I will also attend to the particular role each strand assigns to the actions and engagements of the church. The discussion here will at times have a particularly Church of England flavour, as I seek to grapple here with some of the issues, identified towards the end of Chapter 1, that are facing my own denomination within its changing social and political context. Where I offer examples within each strand of political theology, then, I will often (although not always) be unapologetically Anglican, and English, in my choices – while being careful to remain attentive to the exclusions embedded in any particular conception of ‘agency’ and ‘power’, the ‘political’, the ‘public’, and the ‘church’.

2.3 Public Theology

Among our ‘ideal types’ of contemporary political theology, the tradition we might associate with ‘Athens’ generally goes by the title of ‘public theology’. Here Arendt’s understanding of the political

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17 Hyman 2013:103 (my emphasis).
19 Catholic Social Teaching, for example, has significant overlaps with both public theology and ecclesial political theology as I describe them here. See e.g. Anna Rowlands’ article on the ‘common trajectories’ of Anglican Social Theology and CST as ‘fraternal traditions’ (Rowlands 2014).
(as action and speech in public) comes to the fore, rooted in the division she finds in the ancient Greek city-state between the ‘public’ realm (the polis) of freedom, the ‘legally and institutionally articulated space in which equal citizens met for deliberation, debate, and decision on matters of common concern’, and the household (oikos), the ‘private’ realm of basic human necessities, where coercion was unavoidable.\textsuperscript{20} While such a division does not easily translate into 21st Century Britain, Arendt’s concept of the public realm has enduring significance for contemporary public theology. As Elaine Graham, one of its foremost current proponents in the UK, defines it, public theology is ‘the study of the public relevance of religious thought and practice’, ‘rooted’ within the Christian tradition, ‘but strongly in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions’.\textsuperscript{21} It is ‘public’ in at least a two-fold sense, Graham suggests: firstly, ‘it privileges the corporate, political and societal meanings of faith, in contrast to forms of religious belief and practice that confine faith to private and pietist intentions’; and secondly, ‘it reflects a commitment on the part of public theologians to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible and defensible’.\textsuperscript{22} These together contribute to a third sense of ‘publicness’: that of promoting, as Mary Doak puts it, a ‘societal commitment to maintaining the quality of our public life and to pursuing a common good’\textsuperscript{23} – a task resonant with Bretherton’s conception of politics we discussed earlier. None of this is new, Graham admits: the Church since its earliest days ‘has always been concerned with [its] relationship to the world, to political power, to economic problems, to governance, to moral questions, to citizenship and national identity’.\textsuperscript{24} What has changed, however, is the increasingly multiple, fluid and contested nature of the space(s) we call ‘public’,\textsuperscript{25} and with that, how theology conceives its engagement with that ‘public’ space: two central questions for any so-called ‘public’ theology.

2.3.i Defining the ‘public’: Who speaks? Who acts? Who hears? Who is heard?

In defining ‘public theology’ more fully, then, we need to further investigate the qualifier ‘public’, and who is imagined within its boundaries. This raises a set of interrelated questions: who ‘speaks’ public theology? whose ‘agency’ is public theology’s concern? who is public theology’s ‘audience’? and who is heard by the public theologian?

‘Foundational’ for ‘mainstream public theology’, Graham suggests, is the work of Roman Catholic, North American theologian David Tracy who famously identified three ‘publics’ to which all theology must both speak and be accountable: ‘the wider society, the academy and the church’.\textsuperscript{26} Tracy’s ‘publics’, overlapping but distinguishable, are presented primarily as theology’s ‘audiences’, each with different criteria for assessing discourse; but they also name different ‘centres of gravity’ (or ‘social locations’, to use Tracy’s term) from which the theologian might speak, and which are, all three, part of the theologian’s own identity.\textsuperscript{27} If all theologians, for Tracy, are imagined to have feet planted across all three camps, the particular strand of ‘public theology’ (or what Tracy calls ‘practical theology’) nevertheless has a distinctive concern to address, and be accountable to, the

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\textsuperscript{20} Villa 2000:9-10
\textsuperscript{21} Graham 2013:xviii-xix
\textsuperscript{23} Doak 2004:9 (cf Graham 2013:70)
\textsuperscript{24} Graham 2013:72
\textsuperscript{25} Graham 2013:88
\textsuperscript{26} Tracy 1981:5; Graham 2013:xx.
\textsuperscript{27} Tracy 1981:6, 26-31
\end{flushleft}
public of ‘wider society’. While some critics of Tracy’s work suggest that his theology too easily remains at the level of seeking ‘understanding’, rather than inspiring ‘action’, the public theology tradition is interested also in that second step: in the possibility, as Harold Breitenberg puts it, of ‘persuad[ing] and mov[ing] to action both Christians and non-Christians’.

In the British context, a paradigmatic example remains the publication in 1942 of Archbishop William Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order*, which set out the Church’s moral and theological mandate to ‘interfere’ in ‘matters of politics and economics’, in the interests of progress towards the common good. While accepting the ‘perfectly sound conviction that each main department of life is independent and autonomous’, Temple insisted that the Church was ‘bound to “interfere” because it is by vocation the agent of God’s purpose, outside the scope of which no human interest or activity can fail’. The Church ‘acting corporately should not commit itself to any particular policy’, he maintained, but its individual members as ‘citizens’ must nevertheless play their part in ‘shaping the political decisions which affect the national life and destiny’. Christian citizens may not have the requisite technical expertise to formulate a ‘programme of detailed action’, but they can ‘call upon the Government’ to pursue certain objectives over others. As a primate within the country’s established Church, Temple saw himself well-placed to shape ‘public opinion’, which in turn would influence government policy; but his approach was also stamped with a commitment – rooted in his Christian Socialism – to addressing social problems not as a detached observer, but ‘only in the closest relation with the experience of those who are exposed to the daily pressures of the economic and political struggle’.

Although the Church of England’s 1985 report *Faith in the City* drew explicitly on the ‘challenges’ coming from Latin American liberation theology (the second of our three ‘strands’ of political theology, discussed in section 2.4, below), in many ways it remained rooted in the Temple tradition. The report was subtitled ‘A Call for Action by Church and Nation’ and, alongside structural and policy recommendations to both government and Church of England, appealed to ‘Christians throughout the country [assumed largely to be middle-class] to listen to the voices of our neighbours who live in the UPAs, to receive the distinctive contribution that they ... can make to our common life, and to set an example to the nation by making our support and solidarity with the [my emphasis].’

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28 Tracy further subdivides ‘wider society’ into the realms of ‘technoeconomic structure’, ‘polity’, and ‘culture’ (Tracy 1981:7).
29 This specific critique is Werner Jeanrond’s (1991:45-47), quoted in Sanks 1993:726.
30 Breitenberg 2003:66. Before Tracy, North American public theology’s roots can be traced back to Reinhold Niebuhr’s ‘Christian Realism’ (in particular, ‘the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation which offer resistance to established norms into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power’), and before that, the late 19th Century ‘social gospel’ movement which reacted to *laissez-faire* capitalism and the individualism of American Protestantism with an emphasis on the political and social dimensions of the gospel (Niebuhr 1977 [1953]:119, Kamergrauzis 2001; Baker 2009:70ff.). In the UK context, both were also significant influences on William Temple, as well as the British tradition of Christian Socialism to which Temple was heir.  
31 Temple 1976 [1942]:29-30, 38, 40, 96  
33 ACUPA 1985:xvi (my emphasis). ‘UPAs’ refers to ‘Urban Priority Areas’, prioritised by the report due to their particularly high levels of multiple deprivation. As Elaine Graham has observed, the theology of *Faith in the City* is “[a]bove all ... an affirmation of the world – and specifically, even the neglected and marginalized realm of the secular city – as the place of encounter with the Divine: “We believe that God, though infinitely
from Temple, a similar role of ‘speaking truth to power’ through ‘prophetic advocacy ... with the poor and marginalized’, grounded in a ‘combination of local presence in every neighbourhood ... and the constitutional access to government granted by Establishment’, continues to be affirmed as ‘one of the most powerful examples of contemporary public theology’.34

While the concept of ‘the public’ often has universalizing pretentions, the work of both Arendt and, more recently, German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, also highlight its context-specificity. Where Arendt draws insights from the politics of ancient Greece, Habermas’ early studies focused on the emergence of ‘public opinion’ in 18th- and 19th Century bourgeois Western society, and led him to describe the ‘public sphere’ as a free space for interaction and deliberation between the spheres of ‘state’ and ‘market’, engaging with each, but resisting the pressures each seeks to exert on it.35 It was primarily towards this ‘public sphere’ that Temple sought to orient the Church in his Christianity and Social Order,36 and which has become increasingly significant, and increasingly nuanced in its conceptions, in the following decades. For Max Stackhouse in the USA, public theology should seek to engage not just with ‘a centralized government’, but also with ‘those religious, cultural, familial, economic and social traditions that are prior to government, and [to which] every government is, sooner or later, accountable’. Public theology, for Stackhouse, is therefore concerned with seeking to enable Christian ‘principles and purposes’ to ‘work their way through the convictions of the people and the policies of the multiple institutions of civil society where the people live and work and play, that make up the primary public realm’.37 Influenced in part by Stackhouse, the concept of civil society has become increasingly important in Graham’s work too, as she has sought (noted here by Will Storrar) to ‘make the democratic process and the powers of citizenship central to [her] reflections on public life, combining elements of institutional development and political dissent’.38

For Arendt, and Habermas for many years, as indeed for Temple, the ‘free space’ of the ‘public realm’ was also assumed to be a ‘secular’ space, defended from the incursions of ‘organised religion’. Arendt, moreover, believed that Christianity was itself fundamentally apolitical, with its insistence on founding ‘all human relationships on charity’, a bond which, for Arendt, ‘is incapable of founding a public realm’ but ‘is admirably fit to carry a group of essentially worldless people through transcendent, is also to be found, despite all appearances, in the apparent waste lands of our inner cities and housing estates...’” (Graham 1995:183, quoting ACUPA 1985:70). David Nicholls, writing in 1984 just before the publication of Faith in the City, was suspicious of the consensual tendencies of the Anglican ‘social theology’ tradition of which Temple might be seen as a founding father, and Faith in the City its supposedly ‘radical’ heir. ‘We often refuse to take seriously issues of power and conflict which are central to the activity of politics,’ he argues. “‘Social’ has a more gentle and consensual ring about it and, after all, is not Christianity all about caring and meaningful relationships?” Responding to the claim from one of his contemporaries (echoed, however, in a very recent and influential statement from Sam Wells) ‘that the whole Christian gospel can be summed up in the word “reconciliation”’, Nicholls reflects that ‘the only persons reconciled as a result of the ministry of Jesus were Herod and Pilate’ (Nicholls 1984:28, 31).

34 Graham 2013:225-7
36 While Temple had a largely benign view of the state, he followed John Neville Figgis in advocating for a limited state understood primarily as a ‘community of communities’, a network of ‘intermediate associations’ holding open a space between ‘individual independence’ and ‘state omnipotence’ (see e.g. Grimley 2004:70-1, Cavanough 2011:32).
Nevertheless, in more recent years Habermas (in the company of other thinkers such as Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova) has shifted his language from that of the ‘secular’ to that of the ‘post-secular’, to describe a space that is, in Graham’s words, both ‘more fragmented’, and ‘more global’, where ‘the contribution of religion to the well-being of communities is welcomed by some... but at the same time, the very legitimacy of faith to speak or contribute at all is contested as vigorously as ever’ by others. 21 Century Britain is no longer a ‘Christian nation’ where church and state are almost inseparable, but neither is its public sphere a completely ‘secular’ space: diverse, global ‘faith communities’ are widely acknowledged to play a prominent part, whether for good or ill, while commercial interests increasingly pervade both ‘public’ and supposedly ‘private’ spaces. Indeed, ‘the conventional demarcations of “public” and “private”, “secular” and “religious”’ are themselves ‘breaking down’ – and public theology is having to adjust to this increasing complexity, in the ‘audiences’ it seeks to speak to, the ‘actors’ it acknowledges and the voices it listens to.

2.3.ii Rules of engagement: how does theology ‘go public’?

Central to Graham’s argument is that public theology is, or should be, ‘a form of Christian apologetics’ – ‘justifying’, ‘defending’ and ‘articulating’, ‘in public’, theology’s ‘right to speak’, its ‘relevance’ and the ‘well-springs’ of its commitments.41 This involves, further, a particular ‘commitment’, adopted from Tracy’s work, ‘to a particular kind of theological method, which is prepared to submit to the procedural norms of public discourse’.42 This commitment, as Graham articulates it, goes to the contested heart of public theology, and is one of the primary reasons why other strands of political theology reject it. Who gets to define those ‘procedural norms’, we might well ask, and in whose interests? If Habermas is, as we have already noted, one key figure in this debate, then another is the equally influential theorist of ‘political liberalism’, John Rawls.

Both Rawls (in the USA) and Habermas (in Germany), in different ways, were responding to a sense of diversity and disagreement ‘at a very deep level’ in ‘our public political culture’ (as Rawls puts it), and seeking ways of achieving consensus, particularly around questions of ‘justice’ and ‘toleration’. For Rawls, at the root of our moral and political conflicts are the ‘transcendent elements’ of ‘comprehensive doctrines’ (any religious, philosophical or moral framework concerned with the fundamental questions of life) which refuse to admit compromise. While the diversity of such

39 Arendt 1998 [1958]:53 (see e.g. Breidenthal 1998:489)
40 Graham 2013:xvi (cf Habermas 2008 & 2011, Taylor 2010, Butler 2008, Casanova 1994, CULF 2006; see also Bretherton 2010:10-16), 65. For Bretherton, the ‘post-secular’ denotes ‘a period in which, for the first time, multiple modernities, each with their respective relationship to religious belief and practice, are overlapping and interacting within the same shared, predominantly urban spaces’ (Bretherton 2010:15). South Korean public theologian Sebastian Kim (currently based in York), for example, identifies ‘the main players in the public sphere’ as including ‘the state’, ‘the media’, ‘the market’, ‘religious bodies’, ‘the academy’, and ‘civil society’ (including voluntary and community organizations, both ‘secular’ and ‘faith-based’), recognising that ‘the relative power of each and the interrelations between them may vary from one society to another’. Noting that theology is situated both in the academy and in religious communities, Kim argues that public theology ‘deliberately expands its sources, audience and applications in the public sphere in association with the other four players’, depending on the particular issue in focus (Kim 2013:11-13; cf Graham 2013:85).
41 Graham 2013:xxiii
42 Graham 2013:71. For Tracy, ‘fundamental theology’ assumed ‘the most usual meaning of public discourse’: that which is ‘available (in principle) to all persons and explicated by appeals to one’s experience, intelligence, rationality and responsibility, and formulated in arguments where claims are stated with appropriate warrants, backings and rebuttal procedures’ (Tracy 1981:57; see also Graham 2013:xx, 98; Kamitsuka 1999:47, Schüssler-Fiorenza 1992:6, Hewitt 2004:466).
‘doctrines’ is ‘a permanent feature’ of modern democratic societies, the boundaries of ‘public reason’ must exclude citizens from presenting reasoning ‘rooted in their comprehensive doctrine’, unless they do so in ways that promote the consensus that public reason is intended to secure, and which are not at odds with, or exceed, political liberalism’s core principles of the liberty and equality of its individual citizens.  

While Rawls emphasises the _substantial convictions_ held in common within his conception of ‘public reason’, Habermas focuses on the commonly agreed _procedures for interaction_. Habermas’ theory of ‘communicative action’ proceeds from an understanding of human beings as essentially constituted by the ‘fundamental _reciprocity_ that is built into action oriented toward reaching understanding’.  

Like Rawls, Habermas’ goal is ‘consensus’ in the public sphere, but a consensus discovered only through reciprocal communication on shared and mutual terms – more immediately than ‘consensus’, then, Habermas seeks a non-coercive ‘_coordination_’ between different traditions. Rather than ‘merely ... repeat[ing] their own traditions’ positions, perhaps in each other’s hearing, but without agreed criteria for judging each other’s reasonings,’ as Nicholas Adams puts it, Habermas conceives a public sphere ‘where all participants agree on how argumentation is to take place’, and ‘where people willingly submit their substantial ethical commitments to criticism ... by other parties’.

While hanging on to what Charles Taylor calls an ‘epistemic distinction’ between what is assumed to be the ‘common language’ of ‘secular reason’ and the ‘special languages’ of ‘religious thought’ (‘which introduce extra assumptions that might even contradict those of ordinary secular reason’), Habermas especially has shifted his position considerably, acknowledging the ‘potential’ of the insights and intuitions of religious discourse to be ‘a serious vehicle for possible truth contents’.  

'[S]ecular citizens’ should not ‘publicly dismiss religious contributions ... from the start’, Habermas urges, so long as their religious counterparts are able, at some point in the conversation, to ‘translate’ their theological concepts into the terms of a commonly-accepted public language. ‘Translation’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘bilingualism’ have always been, Graham argues, at the heart of public theology’s method, as it has sought to draw ‘from the resources of its own tradition while listening

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43 Rawls 1996:9, xxviii, 36, 247. Robert Song, among others, highlights the (often unacknowledged) tension inherent even between these two core principles of political liberalism: ‘liberals have often been criticized, most naturally by Marxists and other socialists, for emphasizing the latter at the expense of the former... it is possible ... for a liberal to recommend inequalities, for the reason, for example, that they are necessary to economic growth. But the converse is rather less likely, that a liberal would urge egalitarian measures without any regard for the loss of liberty involved’ (Song 2006:45-6).

44 Habermas 1990:163 (my emphasis).


46 Adams 2006:4-5. Adams summarises Habermas’ principal conditions for ‘perfect communicative action’ (what Habermas calls the ‘ideal speech situation’) as:

1. ‘All potential parties have equal opportunity to initiate or continue discussion.
2. All participants have equal opportunity to make claims, question them, clarify them, defend them and so forth.
3. All participants must make their attitudes, feelings and intentions transparent to each other.
4. All participants must have equal opportunities to perform what Austin calls “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” acts: ordering and resisting, permitting or forbidding, making promises, giving or demanding accounts etc.’ (Adams 2006:29).


48 Habermas 2011:26 (see Graham 2013:48). Graham notes that Rawls too has made significant concessions, ‘suggesting that citizens should be entitled to draw upon their own genuine convictions, in the interests of ... an “overlapping consensus”’ (Graham 2013:17; cf xiv). See also Coles 2005a:10.
to, and being comprehensible by, non-theological disciplines'. At the heart of David Tracy’s approach in the 1980s was the pursuit of a dialogue between ‘religious classics’ and ‘common human experience and language’, for the forging of ‘mutually critical correlations between two sets of interpretation: an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of contemporary experience’. Such work of correlation might expose relationships across the religious-secular divide of identity, analogy (‘similarity-in-difference’) or indeed conflict, Tracy suggested.

Drawing on the Thomist ‘natural law’ tradition, William Temple forty years earlier, and J.H. Oldham before him, were formulating ‘middle axioms’: ‘heuristic, provisional and “derivative” principles which sat between “primary Christian social principles” and the specific and practical judgments that need to be made in shaping or criticising particular policies or programmes – an approach carried on and developed by Ronald Preston, among others, and evident in *Faith in the City* and a succession of Church of England reports since.

### 2.3.iii Public theology in a post-secular context: gifts and challenges

One of public theology’s most prominent virtues, we might say, is its inclusivity: all of life is within its remit, and it aims towards ‘public’ conversations in which all can participate meaningfully. As Arendt highlighted of ancient Greece, however, the very notion of ‘the public’ draws lines of exclusion (women, children and slaves consigned to the *oikos*), just as it seeks to delineate a shared space. In so-called ‘public’ spaces, as Stephen Burns and Anita Monro observe, ‘[t]here are always limitations on the “public” who may enter, speak, act, and the roles that they are allowed to play there, and “public theology” is no exception: assertions of “publicness” risk either dismissing certain activities as “not public” (as has often been the case for “women, non-Anglo-Europeans and other marginalized people groups”), or “claim[ing] for itself a privileged position” precisely in its claim to “speak for the marginalized”.’ It is not sufficient to advocate ‘for’ those excluded from a supposedly ‘public’ sphere: those ‘others’ need to find spaces and voices in which they can speak for themselves. This is one of the central criticisms of public theology from the direction of liberation theology, to which we will turn shortly. Nicola Slee argues, as a feminist theologian, that it is ‘precisely because of their particularity and contextuality’, and not *despite* of them, that theologies

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49 Graham 2013:99. In contrast to the austere rationalism of the secular political theorists of his day, Tracy’s was an early voice for ‘a more comprehensive understanding of rationality, in a discourse rationally and responsibly informed ... by the symbolic resources of art, philosophy and religion’ (1981:31).


52 See e.g. Graham 2013:87, Bretherton 2010:18, 48.

53 Nicola Slee expands on this point: ‘From its early days, second-wave feminism has challenged simplistic and binary notions of the public/private or public/domestic divide. “The personal is political” is a well-worn rallying cry of early feminism that seems no less necessary to assert today. ... If by “public” what is really meant is the worlds and contexts within which male concerns and interests continue to dominate, then public theology will perpetuate the invisibility of women’s (and children’s) lives in the theological arena...’ (Slee 2015:18)

54 Burns & Monro 2015:1, 8 (emphasis mine). Similar criticisms are levelled at Habermas’ work, namely its tendencies towards bourgeois class-specificity, an idealism which ignores its repressive (as well as emancipatory) elements, a patriarchal gender-blindness, a rationalism and universalism which excludes or overlooks non-rational and ‘subaltern counterpublics’, and a false dichotomy of ‘public / private’ (Susen 2011). See also Bretherton 2010:50-52 for a critique of Rawls, including his avoidance of conflict, his misplaced fear of religion, his exclusion from public debate of ‘people’s most basic reasons for acting’, and his overt narrowing of ‘what constitutes public deliberation’ which ‘excludes nonverbal and non-rational forms of contribution’.
grounded in particular lived experiences ‘are capable of speaking beyond their own particular contexts’:

Rather than search in quest of some universal, non-specific, non-marked global-speak that is capable of addressing everyone, a theology that seeks to be public has more chance of being heard when it speaks honestly and concretely from its own location and experience. Speaking with the dialects, inflections and rhythms of our own unmistakeable voices is the only way we have of speaking to each other, even if that requires an ever-increasing willingness on the part of us all to learn to listen and to speak many languages which are not our own. ... This willingness to claim our own voices (a strong theme in feminist writings of the 1970s and 1980s) and, at the same time, to listen to and across profound difference (an increasing theme in more recent feminist, post-colonial and post-feminist discourses) is, I believe, a precondition of any theology that hopes to speak into the public realm, whatever we might mean by such a notion.  

From a different direction, a parallel critique of public theology comes from those who would protest against its exclusion of the very particularities of the Christian tradition itself. These theologians – represented by our third strand, the ‘ecclesial political theology’ tradition – ‘eschew ... the dialogical approach’, as Graham puts it, ‘on the grounds that it constitutes too ready an accommodation to secular modernity’, ‘an approach too much in thrall to “the ruling definition of the social” to meet [the] criteria of Christian orthodoxy’. There is too much of fundamental importance that is, in Graham’s words, ‘lost in translation’, when the Church’s own calling as eschatological community is overlooked: ‘public theology is simply not public enough’, William Cavanaugh argues, reminding us that Church as ekklesia is not an ‘association ... gathered around particular interests’, but ‘an assembly of the whole’, where ‘those who are by definition excluded from being citizens of the polis and consigned to the oikos – women, children, slaves – are given full membership through baptism’.

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55 Slee 2015:16. Allison Fenton argues that even for Elaine Graham (who has herself written extensively on the gendered nature of practical theology), the shift to public theology (and particularly to asking the question, ‘what makes a good city?’) seems to have lost ‘the distinctive voice of women’, lost an alertness to ‘women’s stories’, and lost an understanding ‘that the city is a gendered place’ (Fenton 2015:118; cf. Graham & Lowe 2009). ‘Graham’s writing on public theology’ Fenton suggests, ‘is keen that the “church” continues to be offered a seat at the table of the powerful... Public theology is not yet in a position to “dismantle systems of domination and hierarchy”: it is still asking to join in’. ‘Perhaps ... rather than asking “What makes a good city?”, it would be more relevant and fresher for public theology to ask how the church might better live with the tension of raising those unheard voices into a public domain in which it is often considered irrelevant’ (Fenton 2015:124).

56 Graham 2004a:2, quoting Stephen Long. Long (2000:10) is in turn quoting Raymond Williams, to argue that in what the former calls the ‘dominant tradition’ of theology, ‘what counts as “social” is self-referential. Members of those institutions, movements and formations that currently constitute the “social” define it so that what counts as “social” fits with those ruling definitions. Then, by definition, what doesn’t fit cannot be social. It can have only the status of the sectarian, utopian, irrational, personal or private.’

57 Cavanaugh 2001:117-18, quoted in Burns & Monro 2015:10. See also Luke Bretherton’s concern to defend the church from being ‘shaped by conceptualizations and forces external to Christian belief and practice’, in particular the dynamics of state and market he labels as ‘co-option’ (where the state sets the terms and conditions of, and thence controls, the relationship), ‘competition’ (where the church becomes ‘just another minority identity group demanding recognition for its way of life’) and ‘commodification’ (where Christianity
At their best, public theologians might be understood as seeking to embody the virtue of *humility*, as they engage in spaces they do not control, and open themselves to the insights and the challenges of non-theological speakers. As Duncan Forrester claims, public theology ‘seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church’, and ‘often takes “the world’s agenda”, or parts of it, as its own agenda’. Nevertheless — and here is one of its central dilemmas — within its dialogical engagements it ‘strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already’.\(^{58}\) In wrestling with this dilemma, public theology has repeatedly demonstrated its pragmatic effectiveness (seen not least in Temple’s influence on Beveridge’s ‘welfare state’, and both the political conversations and the practical action sparked by *Faith in the City*). In a quest for that more ‘distinctive’ voice, however, a new generation of public theologians has sought to re-frame their discipline in terms of the vision, virtues and practices of the church which contribute to ‘the formation of good citizens’,\(^{59}\) the narratives of the church and the marginalized which challenge both social and ecclesial hegemony,\(^{60}\) or (in Graham’s case) as an ‘apologetics of presence’, which articulates how the purposeful action and enduring presence of the church demonstrate ‘that authentic faith leads to transformation’.\(^{61}\) We will return to Graham’s re-framing of public theology in Chapter 6, where I seek both to develop its best instincts, and set it within a more explicitly theological framework. What is clear from our investigation here is that, like Bretherton’s definition of politics as ongoing process, public theology’s ‘commitment to a shared realm of political and civic action’,\(^{62}\) describes less a *present reality* and more something to be *sought* – an eschatological goal, even. A ‘post-secular’ public theology places at the centre of its work a ‘*convocative*’ or ‘*community-building*’ task, as Rosemary Carbine puts it, to ‘theologically envision’, ‘cultivate’ and ‘enliven’ a ‘common political order’ that can ‘conjoin disparate groups’ into an ‘ultimate public’.\(^{63}\)

### 2.4 Liberation Theology

Where ‘public theology’ inherently has a strong urge towards building consensus, our second strand of contemporary political theology is unapologetically partial. God does indeed ‘take sides’, liberation theology insists, and God’s ‘preferential option’ is for ‘the poor’ and ‘the oppressed’.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{58}\) Forrester 2004:6 (‘seek[ing] the welfare of the city’ is a reference to Jeremiah 29:7).  
\(^{59}\) Thiemann 1991, Carbine 2006  
\(^{60}\) Chopp 1999, Carbine 2010  
\(^{62}\) Graham 2013:98  
\(^{63}\) Carbine 2006:436; Cady 1987:194 (quoted in Burns & Monro 2015:9). In *Christianity and Social Order*, Temple advocated a similar approach, acknowledging that while the Church ‘cannot undertake to give judgment between contending parties’, it may, as a ‘promoter of goodwill, try to bring the contending parties together’ (Temple 1976 [1942]:44).  
\(^{64}\) See e.g. Boff & Boff 1987:50-51; Gutierrez 1983:7-8. As North American theologian Robert McAfee Brown explains, ‘[t]o speak of “a preferential option for the poor” is *not* to speak of an “exclusive option for the poor,” as though God loved only the poor and hated everybody else, especially the rich... What *is* being claimed is that in responding to the long-range concern God has for all people, one starts with an immediate concern for, and involvement with, the poor. To the degree that the cries of the poor are heard, and are given priority over the complaints of the rich, there can be movement toward a more just society. As the poor are liberated from their scandalous poverty, new conditions will be created in which the rich will no longer be able to act as oppressors, and new relationships will be possible in a community in which all can share. To start with a preferential option for the poor is finally to include the rich as well. To start at the opposite end with a
While the crucible that forged the movement called liberation theology was the Latin America of the 1960s and '70s (and the life of the rural poor as much, if not more, than that of the slum-dwellers of the cities), the shadow of Rose’s ‘fourth city’ of Auschwitz also hangs over its beginnings. “Where was God in Auschwitz?” asked theologians labouring in that shadow. “With the victims,” concluded Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle and others, in Germany particularly, who sought to confront the horrors of the Holocaust that had been allowed to happen within their own country. 

Latin American liberation theology and post-war German political theology have entangled and co-generating roots, particularly in their shared understanding of divine solidarity with the suffering, an eschatologically-grounded theology of hope ‘fundamentally conditioned by the expectation of the future’, and a taking up of the developing tools of ‘critical theory’ (again primarily in Germany) which were intended not just to interpret the world but to change it (as Marx put it). Added to these the shift in Roman Catholic theology, marked by the Second Vatican Council, towards a more ‘integralist’ stance where ‘the frontiers between the life of faith and temporal works, between Church and world, become more fluid’ and an uprising of popular movements of resistance and liberation across Latin America, and we have begun to sketch the preferential option for the rich, as the church did for centuries, cuts the church off from the poor, for the concern of the rich will always be to keep the poor from threatening them, and creative relationship will be impossible (Brown 1990:60).

We must acknowledge here also the importance of the traditions of feminist theology and black theology (especially in North America), both movements which also developed dramatically, in parallel with Latin American liberation theology (and with some cross-pollination), in the 1960s and '70s. As with Catholic Social Teaching (in relation to public theology), the scope of this thesis does not allow for consideration of either of these as distinct strands of political theology. My attention here to the urban margins leads me to prioritise, for the moment, the socio-economic lens which comes to clearest focus in (Latin American-rooted) liberation theology, and its developments and translations in British contexts. There is, however, clearly urgent work to be done, not least by white and male theologians, to be more radically receptive to the voices of black theology and feminist theology, within the shared project of political theology. ‘We all have stories. Our problem is that we lack listeners,’ Michael Jagessar notes, in a review of Mukti Barton’s book (Jagessar 2006, cf Barton 2005). Ken Leech (e.g. 1988) is one of the few white theologians within the Church of England who has been a consistently attentive ‘listener’ to black voices (and Chris Shannahan, as a white British Methodist, one of the few beyond the C of E). This thesis seeks to offer a rationale for that work of listening (see Chapter 6, especially), even if it is limited in the extent to which it can put it into practice. In the following chapters I engage more with feminist theology, as an ‘other voice’, than with black theology. For further reading on black voices within the Church of England, see e.g. Pityana 1989; Grimley 2013; Barton 2005; Isiorho 2007. From beyond an Anglican context see e.g. Jagessar & Reddie 2007.

See e.g. Moltmann 1974:273-4; Metz 1980. Sölle, 10 herself at the beginning of the Second World War, turns the question around on the questioners: ‘How could it happen? Where were you when the transports were put together? Didn’t you smell the gas?’ (Sölle 1982, quoted in Kirwan 2008:136-7). See also Phillips 2012:42ff.

See e.g. Gustavo Gutierrez’s critically appreciative comments, in A Theology of Liberation, on Moltmann’s Theology of Hope (Gutierrez 1973:124-5). Jon Sobrino’s Christology at the Crossroads refers extensively to Moltmann’s work (1978:28-33 & passim). In turn, Moltmann’s final chapter of The Crucified God ‘takes up the discussion of political theology again and connects it with the idea of a theology of liberation which has been developed especially in Latin America’, referring to Gutierrez, Alves and Assmann particularly (Moltmann 1974:338 n.1).

For the Frankfurt School of ‘critical theorists’, theory was ultimately a practical activity, ‘a “force” within history “to stimulate change”’, shaped by Marx’s dictum: ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world ... the point is to change it’ (Horkheimer 1978:45, Horkheimer 1972:215, Marx and Engels 1976:5, all quoted in Hewitt 2004:458-60).

For the Frankfurt School of ‘critical theorists’, theory was ultimately a practical activity, ‘a “force” within history “to stimulate change”’, shaped by Marx’s dictum: ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world ... the point is to change it’ (Horkheimer 1978:45, Horkheimer 1972:215, Marx and Engels 1976:5, all quoted in Hewitt 2004:458-60).

Gutierrez 1983:44-5 (cf 29ff). In particular Gutierrez acknowledges the work of Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Maurice Blondel and Edward Schillebeeckx.

See e.g. Goizueta 2004:289
foundations on which liberation theology built its fundamental commitments: to be in ‘solidarity with the poor’, to ‘come to grips with [their] concrete life situation’ and to ‘undertake the radical transformation’ of the society that oppressed and impoverished them.\textsuperscript{72} In fact, much liberation theology pushes even further the question of agency: it is not enough for there to be, as Temple put it, ‘the closest relation’ between the church and the poor; the church itself must become, in Roberto Goizueta’s words ‘not only a church \textit{for} the poor, and not only a church \textit{with} the poor; it must become a church \textit{of} the poor’.\textsuperscript{73} As Timothy Gorringe notes, such a theology ‘implies a quite different understanding of power, a move from the passive – the victims, who are acted upon – to the active, where unity is strength. It licenses a reading of history which is not the history of “great men” (sic) but of peoples’ movements, constantly put down, constantly arising in another place and another form.’\textsuperscript{74} How, then, has liberation theology understood the distinctiveness of its approach, how has that found itself ‘translated’ into a British context, and what are the main targets of its critics? These are the questions we will address in the following sections.


Fundamental to Latin American liberation theology, argued Argentine theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, was a series of ‘theological dislocations’, which ‘introduce[d] new subjects and different experiences’ into the practice of theology.\textsuperscript{75} It was a ‘decolonisation’ of theology,\textsuperscript{76} recognising, as Christopher Rowland puts it, that ‘[t]he apparent absence of partiality in “Northern” academic [theology] should not lead us to suppose that there may be no interest at stake’,\textsuperscript{77} and proposing a ‘geographical theological model’ of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ for understanding power dynamics in international (North-South) economics, but also in politics, Church and theology. Specifically, early liberation theologians worked from the assumption that those at the powerful ‘centre’ consistently trapped those at the ‘periphery’ in relationships of dependence and exploitation.\textsuperscript{78} ‘\textit{Cui bono}?’ – ‘in whose interests?’ – became, in fact, a central question for theology. Against the prevailing ‘centre –

\textsuperscript{72} Gutierrez 1983:51, 96
\textsuperscript{73} Goizueta 2004:290. For Gutierrez, there could be no ‘authentic development for Latin America’ unless there was ‘liberation from the domination exercised by the great capitalist countries, and especially by the most powerful, the United States of America’. ‘Liberation’ was the right word, he asserted, because it demanded ‘a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break [Latin America’s] dependence [and] allow for a change to a new society, a socialist society’ (Gutierrez 1973:54, 17). For Gutierrez ‘total liberation’ – ‘economic’, ‘social’, ‘political’, ‘liberation of the human being from all manner of servitude’ and ‘liberation from sin’ – was ‘a single process’ (Gutierrez 1983:144).
\textsuperscript{74} Gorringe 2004:373-4. It is important to distinguish two related terms here. As Tim Noble notes, the understanding of the poor as ‘\textit{sujeto histórico}’ (‘subjects of their own history’) has been a contested one, even within liberation theology – with Hugo Assmann, one of those who first introduced the term, recognizing that his earlier optimism in using the term ‘was misplaced and had no support from the scriptures’ (Noble 2013:20). The assertion that ‘the poor are not simply objects of the church’s activity ... but [its] agents’, who evangelize not just ‘other poor people, and their oppressors’, but evangelize also ‘the Church’ itself, is clearer, Noble suggests, but also ‘[not] entirely free of problems’ (31).
\textsuperscript{75} Althaus-Reid 2006b:250
\textsuperscript{76} Segovia 2006:35, in Vincent 2013b:46
\textsuperscript{77} Rowland 1999:10
\textsuperscript{78} Althaus-Reid 2006b:251. As Elizabeth Phillips notes, the economic version of ‘dependency theory’ played a significant role particularly in early liberation theology, claiming specifically that ‘instead of being led through stages of development, these [so-called ‘developing’] nations were actually trapped in relations of dependence upon wealthier nations’ (Phillips 2012:165 n.35; see further McGovern 1989).
periphery’ dynamic, then, liberation theology dislocated first the focus of theology (1), with an attention to ‘the poor’ and ‘lo cotidiano’, the concerns of ‘everyday life’, rather than more ecclesiocentric or seemingly ‘abstract’ theological questions. The ‘organization of the Churches’ (2) was itself dislocated, secondly, with a shift of attention to the ‘Basic Ecclesial Communities’ which were springing up ‘at the margins of parishes and congregations’ as ‘alternative centres of reflection and decision making’. Thirdly, then, ‘the theologian’ him/herself (3) was dislocated, from being an assumed ‘objective neutral observer’ to being the ‘theologian at the margins’, ‘someone who takes sides, someone who ... has a relationship with the community and articulates their concerns’. In the classic definition offered by Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, liberation theology takes place not just on the levels of the ‘professional’ (academic theologians) and the ‘pastoral’ (clergy), but also the ‘popular’,79 understanding the poor themselves as, in Althaus-Reid’s words, ‘the implicit readers of, believers in’ but also ‘producers of theology’. Fourthly, liberation theology dislocated the discipline of theology itself (4), as orthodoxy (right belief) was subjected to orthopraxis (right action), and ‘Christian dogmas’ were required to be ‘verified in action, in action related to critical reality’.80 To Althaus-Reid’s four dislocations, we should add a fifth: as we have already noted, it is not just the subject of theology that is dislocated, but the subject of history itself (5). For a theology profoundly rooted not just in the Christian faith of the Latin American poor, but in the popular movements of resistance and liberation that were emerging across that continent,81 liberation theology did not look to those in positions of structural power to bring change for ‘the people’ – it looked to topple those very structures.

2.4.ii Liberation Theology UK?

If Western public theology’s dialogical engagement with the ‘secular’ world – albeit within a complex, ‘post-secular’ society – is in part a quest to find common ground with the ‘nonbeliever’, then Latin American liberation theology was, as Gustavo Gutierrez famously put it, responding to the ‘challenge’ that came ‘from the nonperson’: from ‘the person whom the prevailing social order fails to recognize as a person’.82 In this contrast is both the potential, and one of the critical challenges, for those who wish to ‘translate’ liberation theology into a (much more ‘secular’, even if ‘post-secular’) British context. While Gutierrez’s term resonates with the sociological analyses of ‘social exclusion’, ‘symbolic violence’ and ‘expulsion’ we explored briefly in Chapter One, the problem is that in 21st Century Britain, unlike Gutierrez’s Brazil of the latter end of the 20th Century, a large number of those deemed ‘nonpersons’ are also (and have been for several decades, at least) either ‘nonbelievers’, or believers of other non-Christian faith traditions. This and other differences of context, both cultural and ecclesial, cannot be underestimated, despite high profile (and institutional) engagements with liberation theology such as the Faith in the City report. As Malcolm Brown (currently Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England) notes, ‘[i]t was, even in the mid 1980s, quite a stretch to see how a mode of theological reflection that evolved among “base communities” in impoverished Latin American villages, living under brutal and militarily oppressive regimes and steeped in Roman Catholic thinking, would translate into the unchurched working-class communities of the UK or into a Church that remained

79 Boff and Boff 1987:11-21
80 Althaus-Reid 2006b:251-2, 255
81 See e.g. Goizueta 2004:289
82 Gutierrez 1983:57, quoted in Graham 2013:216
predominantly middle class and wedded (for its own ecclesiological reasons as much as for reasons of political inertia) to a consensual polity in which conflict of all kinds was suspect. 83

Brown’s analysis is echoed in part by British urban practitioner-theologians Andrew Davey (Anglican) and John Vincent (Methodist). Vincent notes that there is no significant, coherent “‘movement’ of the poor’ in Britain, and wonders if this is because, among other reasons, the poor are ‘a minority’ of British society, ‘[t]hey live where others do not go’, and they are ‘divided’ (by ethnicity, employment status, etc) 84 – observations which resonate with Wacquant’s more recent analysis. 85 Davey cannot see any equivalent of the Latin American ‘mass movement’ of the Base Ecclesial Communities in the significantly more ‘privatised’ culture of the ‘first-world’, 86 and Vincent (with Davey, Brown and others), highlights the largely middle-class nature of British Christianity itself, at least in the mainline denominations, which at best include some ‘small local congregations of the poor ... and a few poor here and there within the congregations of the non-poor’. 87 Of liberation theology’s five ‘dislocations’ considered above, then, we might say (following the judgments of Liberation Theology’s own prominent advocates in Britain), firstly, that the ‘focus’ of theology (to ‘the poor’) has shifted, but that focus is more disparate (1), and there is little evidence of a coherent ‘movement of the poor’ for social change (5). Secondly, it seems that ‘the organization of churches’ remains dominated by the middle-class mainstream (2), and so while there is evidence of liberation theology happening at ‘professional’ and ‘pastoral’ levels, there are only isolated examples of the ‘popular’ production of theology (3). 88

Davey for one suggests, therefore, that many British theologian-practitioners working in areas with high levels of material deprivation ‘would prefer to describe ourselves as learning from rather than doing something which carries the label Liberation Theology’. 89 Nevertheless, the commitment to doing theology ‘at the margins’ (3) and prioritising ‘orthopraxis’ (4) have gained considerable traction among ‘first-world’ theologians since the earliest days of liberation theology, recognising that there is at the very least a methodology within it which can be translatable: ‘we who claim to understand and concur with their basic assertions must discern our own context, respond with our own practice and reflect critically on that’, as Ched Myers puts it. 90 Vincent, recognizing the ‘suburban or middle class captivity of theology’, committed himself to change his context, and called on his fellow middle-class Christians to do likewise: to ‘live, work, and act’ in places where they can ‘stand alongside and learn from the poor’; to pursue what Vincent has often called ‘the journey

83 Brown 2014:10
84 Vincent 1995:24
85 Wacquant (2008:245-7) notes the ‘social fragmentation and symbolic splintering’ of the ‘precariat’ in Western societies, who find themselves ‘disconnected from the traditional instruments of mobilization and representation of constituted groups and, as a consequence, deprived of a language, a repertoire of shared images and signs through which ... to project possible alternative futures’.
86 Davey 1995:62
88 Davey notes a contradiction here, however, in that surveying the literature for ‘popular’ theology is likely to miss most theological production that remains ‘unpublished’: ‘[t]hrough practice theology has happened, occasionally being committed to the written and printed page, offering glimpses of faithfulness, transformation and new possibilities’ (Davey 2010:ix). Vincent also suggests that most urban practitioner-theologians are too busy ‘working practically’ to write down most of their theological reflections (2013b:45).
89 Davey 1995:62
downwards’.\footnote{Duffield 1997:15-17, Vincent 1982:110-12, and the wider work of the Urban Theology Unit that Vincent founded.} From a more ‘institutional’ theological location, another church report, \textit{Faithful Cities}, sought in 2006 to take up the gauntlet laid down by its predecessor \textit{Faith in the City}, ‘to develop a theology’ not just ‘for the poor’ but ‘to make space for the development of a theology of and from those experiencing poverty’ – although now such a liberationist commitment finds itself competing for space alongside a (more public theology-oriented) argument for the value of ‘partnerships’ with both ‘the state’ and ‘the private sector’ in the cause of ‘urban regeneration’.\footnote{CULF 2006:13, 75. Chris Baker’s recent ‘third space ecclesiology’ also deploys the language of ‘partnership’ (with ‘market’ and ‘state’), while also seeking to move the Niebuhrian ‘Christian realism’ tradition (which strongly influenced Temple) in a more ‘radical’ direction – in particular drawing on Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory to suggest that processes of ‘hybridization’ and ‘translation’ might have the potential to ‘upset the existing power structures and so bring about more substantial change’ (Baker 2009:108, 70ff., 132-3).} In theology less wedded to the church’s institutions, there is also still a central place for the critical analysis of power relations, and of the ‘interests’ served by both social structures and theology itself, as Laurie Green (Anglican priest and more recently bishop) argues\footnote{Green 2013:40-1. See also Shannahan 2010:12-13; Davey 2010:ix-x.} – even if, unlike its Latin American cousin, the British version has traditionally ‘pa[id] little attention to Marxist theory’.\footnote{While it was the ‘Marxist’ label (from a Conservative government minister) that ‘did much to make [the 1985 Church of England report] \textit{Faith in the City} the best-seller that it became’, Malcolm Brown notes, one of the main reasons ‘Liberation Theology UK’ has failed to take root is that Britain remains ‘a country with a deep cultural suspicion of ideologies, such as Marxism, perceived as “foreign”’ (Brown 2014:10-11).} Although for much British liberation theology, the language of ‘centre’ and ‘margins’ still offers much of value,\footnote{See e.g. Davey 1995, Shannahan 2010, Ford 2013:77.} liberation theologians across the world are, as Chris Shannahan (a British Methodist minister and academic) has recently highlighted, increasingly understanding oppression as ‘multidimensional’ (‘on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religion, as well as economics’) and the world itself as more ‘multi-polar’ and ‘interconnected’ than ever before. A ‘critical appropriation of liberation theology’ for ‘twenty-first century [Western] urban societ[y]’ is needed, he argues; one which recognises both the ‘limits’ of the former, and the complexity of the latter.\footnote{Shannahan 2010:8-9. For Shannahan, a key informant is radical urban planner Leonie Sandercock who, drawing on the work of political philosopher Iris Marion Young ‘points to five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence, noting that “no single form of oppression can be assigned causal or moral primacy”’ (Shannahan 2010:29-30, quoting Sandercock 1998:184). It is worth noting, however, that there appears to be no further consideration of gender in Shannahan’s book apart from a brief mention at 2010:130-1.} Globally, however, reports of liberation theology’s demise have been, to misquote Mark Twain, greatly exaggerated. While a number of significant criticisms of its general trajectory (from both within and without) have, to a large extent, found their mark, liberation theology has, as Thia Cooper has recently put it ‘not die[d]’, but ‘regrouped’, ‘expanded out[wards]’ (from Latin America) and continued to evolve.\footnote{Cooper 2013:2-3} We turn now to consider some of the most significant of those evolutionary trajectories.

\section*{2.4.iii Recent developments and critical questions within liberation theology}

Although Malcolm Brown (among others) has claimed that liberation theology’s apparent ‘waning’ is inextricable from the end of Soviet communism and the consequent ‘relegation of Marxism to the

\footnote{Duffield 1997:15-17, Vincent 1982:110-12, and the wider work of the Urban Theology Unit that Vincent founded.}
fringe of political irrelevancy’, as well as the changing political and religious face of Latin America itself, for many in a new generation of liberation theologians, the critical tools drawn from Marxism are far from exhausted. For some years Alistair Kee and Denys Turner have been prominent among voices arguing that liberation theology’s failure has been not ‘in being too Marxist ... but in not being Marxist enough’, namely, that ‘surprisingly little attention is paid to Marx’s criticisms of religion’ itself. ‘[W]hole interests are being served,’ Kee asks, ‘when theologians protect their own religion from scrutiny by the most acute social critic of the modern world’. More recently, Argentine ‘indecent theologian’ Marcella Althaus-Reid has noted the irony that ‘the main task of liberationists has been to remove Christian passivity and attitudes of resignation which were precisely brought to our people’s lives by centuries of Christian theology’. In a Latin American context especially, liberation theology has been ‘progressive’ in relation to ‘class issues’, but has ‘betray[ed] any liberationist standpoints’, when it has addressed matters of gender and sexual ethics, ‘with a heavy patriarchal understanding of life and society’. Boff and Boff’s ‘class division’ of theological labour itself set up an (implicit or explicit) ‘hierarchy of knowledge’ between (largely male) ‘professional [and pastoral] theologians’ and ‘people’s theology’, and even the latter – limited by its sense of ‘decency’ – has largely failed to hear, for example, the experience of the ‘rebellious poor urban women’ who sell lemons on the streets of Buenos Aires ‘without using underwear’. Alongside exposing the power differentials within theology itself, a renewed attention to Marxism in liberation theology also warns practitioners against settling for ‘mak[ing] the intolerable tolerable’ by ‘prov[iding] the poor an interpretation of their own poverty’ rather than changing the world for the better. Liberation theology has been fatally ‘debilitated’, Ivan Petrella argues, if it has slipped into ‘ingenious, credulous ... wishful thinking and/or poetic rapture in which rhetoric is pumped up to mask an absence of ideas’. One of the ‘conditions’ of such debilitation, for Petrella, is a paralysing ‘gigantism’, where ‘the causes of oppression’ are perceived as being ‘of such magnitude that they seem practically insurmountable’: seeing ‘capitalism [or ‘globalization’] everywhere and as responsible for everything’, Petrella observes, makes ‘envisioning a means of negative resistance ... a close to impossible task’. Petrella’s warning is a vital one for the argument of this thesis: a warning against both the reification of ‘the system’ (or ‘the economy’) as a closed, immutable totality, and the assertion (or assumption) of the overwhelming power of ‘macro’ forces over the possibilities of ‘micro’ agency. For Petrella, the way forward lies firstly in cultivating an ‘institutional imagination’ which views the world not in terms of ‘monolithic wholes’ but ‘as partial, incomplete and open to piece-by-piece change’, and secondly, in a return to ‘the construction of historical projects’ which

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98 Brown notes that in Latin America, liberation theology has largely ‘give[n] way ... to an expansionist Pentecostalism of a distinctly North American flavour’ (Brown 2014:10-11).
101 Kee 1990:259-60
103 Petrella 2008:112, quoting Kee 2000:34. Kee continues: ‘[liberation theology] has given [poverty] meaning and value. It has even given the poor status. God has chosen the poor. They are the Chosen people with whom He is well pleased. Their suffering now has a place in the grand scheme of liberation.’ Tim Noble, similarly, examines in depth the danger within liberation theology of turning ‘the poor’ into an ‘idol’ (Noble 2013).
104 Petrella 2008:100-111
bring concrete, socio-economic change. Petrella sets out an agenda for the ‘undercover liberation theologian’, who would work to transform ‘secular’ disciplines (he names economics, political science, sociology, law and medical anthropology among others) from within. Beyond theology’s own limits, such ‘undercover’ practitioners nevertheless hold onto three commitments from the heart of liberation theology: the ‘epistemological’ commitment to do theology from the standpoint of the oppressed; the ‘practical/moral’ commitment ‘to thinking about ideals by thinking about institutions’; and the ‘metaphysical’ critique which exposes the ‘idolatrous theologies’ which ‘lurk’ within the supposedly ‘secular’ world – ‘idolatrous because the world is governed by ways of thinking that justify human sacrifices’. In this last point Petrella comes very close to one of the core assertions of the *ecclesial* political theologians to whom we will shortly turn. Whether Petrella can legitimately abstract such ‘commitments’ from their original theological framework, however, would be a question on which they would, as we shall see, emphatically diverge.

A third and final area in which liberation theology is returning to Marxist analysis is in a renewed focus on *class* itself. While Petrella castigates some liberation theologies for their ‘forgetfulness of the centrality of poverty and social liberation’ in turning towards culture and ethnicity, for (US Methodist) Joerg Rieger an understanding of class (particularly in a first-world context) must go further: ‘beyond common references to poverty or social stratification’, income or deprivation, and the ‘standard ... efforts to “raise up” the lower classes through charity or advocacy’. Rieger argues for a return to a Marxist conception of class in terms of ‘relationships of power’ – as expressed in the classic distinction between those who ‘produce’, and those who own or control ‘the means of production’ and are able to appropriate ‘the bulk of [the former’s] productive labour’ – which, he suggests, allows for ‘new political alignments’ which recognize that ‘even the middle class might have more in common with the poor than with the rich’.

Where ‘identity politics’ risks creating ‘false alliances within racial and ethnic groups’ (with ‘white workers feel[ing] they are more closely related to their white bosses’, for example), an attention to class can help create solidarities across racial and ethnic divides, and highlight the rarely-acknowledged predicaments of ‘lower- and working-class white people, whose lives are significantly affected by oppressive forces’: ‘failure to discuss oppression along the lines of class makes it appear as if when white males end up at the bottom it is their own fault, because they enjoy white male privilege, and when others end up at the bottom, the sole reason is gender, race, or ethnicity’.

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105 Petrella 2006:111, 149. Vincent cites Petrella in support of his (Vincent’s) long-standing insistence on creating ‘projects’ which respond to the local ‘situation’ in the light of reflection on the ‘gospel’. For Vincent, such projects ‘seek to continue and be consistent with the Project of Jesus, ... the Messianic work ... to set up and constitute the Realm / Kingdom / Commonwealth of God’ (Vincent 2013a:30-1, 66-68).

106 Petrella 2013:145-8

107 Petrella 2008:84-100

108 For Rieger (and colleagues including Kwok Pui-Lan, Nestor Miguez and Jung Mo Sung), ‘empire’ describes the ‘massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life and which cannot be controlled by any
Jan Rehmann suggests, to ‘huge potentials for transformative politics’. Charging Wacquant’s analysis (of the ‘social fragmentation’ of the ‘precariat’) with ‘implicitly romanticizing’ a supposedly coherent ‘working class’ of the past, Rehmann cautions against ‘exoticizing’ poverty – ‘as if poor people were substantially different from “us” (e.g. from the authors and readers of scholarly texts on poverty)’ – and recalls Marx’s belief that ‘class alignments’ can indeed ‘open up new chances for collective agency’.  

Contemporary efforts at ‘reclaiming liberation theology’ for a 21st Century world, then, return us to the central dilemma with which the public theology also wrestles: how much does the quest to find or establish commonalities conflict with the attention to particularities? As Thia Cooper observes, much of liberation theology’s recent history has been a story of ever greater division, with different so-called ‘contextual theologies’ being granted ‘academic niches’, and thus ‘atomized, given a small space on the margins to exist, competing with each other for that small space’. There is thus a ‘convocative’ vocation within liberation theology, ‘to cross borders of disciplines, of contexts, and wherever walls have been built’, and ‘not to be a niche within theology but to transform theology itself into liberating rather than oppressive practices. Liberation theologies need to talk with each other and act together.’

There is at least a different of emphasis, however, between Rieger and Rehmann’s efforts to re-forge ‘class solidarities’ against the ‘outrageous power differentials’ produced by ‘the forces of empire’, and Althaus-Reid’s insistence on the need for ‘[w]omen and all the oppressed and marginalized people of our world’ to discover ‘the dialogical process of conscientization’ (as Paolo Freire put it). For Althaus-Reid (as for Nicola Slee in our discussion of the limits of public theology), it is in the particularity of women’s bodies and desires that the ‘moment of entry’ into the hermeneutical circle (of ‘acting-reflecting-acting’) is to be found. Significant here also is the work of Chris Shannahan who, like Rieger, is suspicious of the dangers of ‘hybridity’ – that it risks ‘subsuming’ difference rather than acknowledging it to be potentially liberative in its own right – and argues for ‘new patterns of urban resistance and urban theology’ that emphasise ‘liberative dialogue’. Shannahan (a white, middle-class male) takes up Gramsci’s idea of the ‘organic intellectual’ who moves from the academic sidelines into ‘active

one actor alone. The forces of empire combine dominant economic, political, cultural, religious, intellectual, and emotional powers in order to shape the world and its inhabitants to the core’ (Rieger 2013b:20, my emphasis).

111 Rehmann 2013:145, 151-3. Rehmann notes that both Rancière’s politics of ‘the irruption of those “who have no part”’, and Miguez, Rieger and Sung’s employment of the Greek term laos (as distinguished from demos) ‘to describe the poor, precariatized, and excluded as “laocratic power”,’ ‘take up a thread that was already a constitutive component of Marx’s analysis’ (2013:152).

112 Petrella and Althaus-Reid, until the latter’s death in 2009, co-edited a series with this title.

113 Petrella agrees: designating liberation theologies as ‘contextual’ or ‘particular’ is ‘the new way to take the edge off their critique’, when they are in fact ‘a fundamentally different discourse from the bulk of theology’, interested in ‘making ... transcendence not simply ‘interpreting’ its ‘meaning’. ‘By grounding themselves in the perspective of the oppressed’, liberation theologies are in fact ‘grounded in the broadest context available today and so come as close as possible to being the first truly global theologies’ (Petrella 2008:132-5).

114 Cooper 2013:3

115 (see section 2.3.iii, above)

116 Althaus-Reid 2004:12-15. To anticipate our later engagements, for Althaus-Reid such a dialogue is explicitly christological: women ‘do not need a Christ-Emperor [or a male theologian] to instruct them’; instead, they enter into a ‘dialogue with Christ’ which is ‘open and in process’, in which Jesus’ ‘who do you say I am?’ is met by the women’s ‘who do you think we are?’ (2004:44-46).

117 Shannahan 2010:184
participation in practical life’ as ‘organiser’ and ‘persuader’, seeking a ‘proactive solidarity without belonging’. Acknowledging – following postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy – the significant role ‘race’ plays in the ‘grievances’ and divisions within British cities, he opens himself intentionally to the critical and constructive voices coming from British Black theology (namely Robert Beckford and Anthony Reddie), and engages with the tools provided by ‘critical whiteness studies’ to expose the ‘invisible whiteness’ historically aligned with economic, political and cultural power.

Although it largely remains implicit within Shannahan’s writing, we see at least the beginnings of a trajectory that we might call, after Althaus-Reid, the ‘self-dislocation’ of the theologian: that self-critical naming and renouncing of power and status in seeking solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed that perhaps comes closest to being a ‘cardinal virtue’ of liberation theology, at least as it is practised by both ‘professional’ and ‘pastoral’ theologians (to use Boff and Boff’s categories). More subtle than Vincent’s ‘journey downwards’, such practised ‘self-dislocation’ might encompass an awareness of the complex of power differentials (and not all tipped in the same direction) between the theologian and their ‘marginalized’ neighbours, not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but also class and gender, and perhaps other forms of power-relation too. [120] [1]n truth,’ Cooper acknowledges, ‘some of us [liberation theologians] need to be liberated from our own oppressive practices’, [121] if we are but able to recognize them. This, I will argue, is one of the gifts liberation theology continues to offer to other strands of political theology, as well as continuing to discover it for its own ongoing work.

2.4.iv Critical questions to liberation theology: a (re)turn to the church

If for Malcolm Brown liberation theology has waned into irrelevance, for our final strand of political theology – what I have labelled ‘ecclesial political theology’ – liberation theology is still deemed significant enough to merit thorough critique. Ecclesial political theology itself will shortly be the focus of our attention, but here we can summarise its main problems with liberation theology: making ‘praxis’ central displaces ‘obedience’ to divine ‘authority’; a hermeneutic of ‘universal suspicion’ eclipses an affirmative vision; and allowing autonomy to ‘the secular’ (or ‘naturalizing the supernatural’) both neuters any theological critique of society and overlooks the political nature of the church itself – in short, its critics argue, liberation theology is simply not theological enough. We will outline each of these arguments in turn.

(a) ‘praxis’ and ‘obedience’

Firstly, then, ecclesial political theologians question the ‘praxis’ method of liberation theology. For Oliver O’Donovan, ‘reflection upon praxis’ ‘collapses ... into one moment’ what should be two

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119 Shannahan 2010:124ff (see e.g. Beckford 1998, 2004; Reddie 2008), 228ff. Petrella too seeks to ‘open up a space to question the status of whiteness as a normative and thus neutral and uninterrogated category’ (2008:142).
120 A parallel trajectory here can be seen in Myers 1994, where Myers seeks ‘to be explicit [on the one hand] about [his] own social location of dominant cultural privilege’ – which he labels the “space of empire”, characterised by ‘hegemonic capitalism’, the “geopolitical control of the periphery by the centre”, and an ‘unacknowledged’ sense of ‘entitlement’ – and on the other hand, to describe his own ‘struggle for dislocation’ (1994:xxvi, 15-17).
121 Cooper 2013:3
distinct moments – a ‘practical reasoning towards action’ and a ‘reflection upon action’ – and
‘squeezes out’ a necessary ‘moment of transcendent criticism’ between those two, ‘a moment of
obedient attention to God’s word’. Instead, '[o]ur practical engagements now seem to yield all the
understanding that we need’, ‘our action becomes the predetermining “matrix” for anything which
God may wish to say to us, ensuring that we hear nothing from him but the echo of our own
practical energies’. Here O'Donovan finds himself in the surprising company of Elaine Graham,
who highlights the ‘danger of local theologies collapsing into a liberationist incarnationalism’ (as the
flip-side of an ‘establishment incarnationalism’) ‘which cannot differentiate between world and
Kingdom, not so much because of its corruption by power and establishment, but because of its
total identification with specific human projects’.122

(b) ‘universal suspicion’ and ‘affirmative vision’

O'Donovan’s second criticism is that liberation theology’s reliance on ‘the deconstructive cui bono?
[‘in whose interests?’] question to empower its rejection of liberal secularism’ leaves it ‘with an
unsustainable combination of political affirmation and universal suspicion’, ‘tied in to ... eternally
inconclusive exchanges’ in which ‘allegations of sectional interest’ are ‘volleyed to and fro across the
net, never to be ruled out of court’. The question has ‘a distinct but strictly limited usefulness’, says
O'Donovan, ‘alert[ing] us to the fact that political theories are related to the actual political
commitments of those who hold them,’ but not telling us ‘whether those commitments are good or
bad, generous or mean-spirited, true or false’; ‘it cannot provide a vision of reality which could direct
or encourage anyone’. ‘True prophets’ must ‘rebuke the inauthentic speech of false prophets’, but
are ‘not allowed the luxury of perpetual subversion': they must also ‘affirm’ that history, ‘as the
context in which politics and ethics take form’, ‘is the history of God’s action, not sheer contingency
but consistent purpose’.124

(c) secular autonomy, theological critique and the political nature of the church

A third criticism comes most directly from John Milbank, co-founder of the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’
stream of contemporary theology. Milbank homes in on Gutierrez’ claim that liberation theology
was made possible by ‘the “integralist revolution”’ championed by the second Vatican Council, ‘the
view that in concrete, historical humanity there is no such thing as a state of “pure nature”: rather,
every person has always already been worked upon by divine grace, with the consequence that one

122 O'Donovan 1999:142. Liberation theology finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place here,
O'Donovan argues: if ‘knowledge won in action’ succumbs to the ‘technological’ influence of ‘Western
doctrines of progress’ and the ‘naked exercise of will’, then its counterpart, ‘knowledge won from suffering’
turns theology towards a ‘romantic, world-renouncing’ tradition which ‘cut[s] its nerve for action’ (1999:143)
– a danger close to that identified by Petrella’s neo-Marxist critique, discussed above. O'Donovan’s argument
here is paralleled by John Milbank’s critique of ‘the “foundational praxis” of political and liberation theology,
which appeals either to an impossible practice “without theory”, or else to a specifically “political” practice,
which is a practice outside Christian tradition’. Milbank rejects the idea ‘that there is some sort of
“spontaneous”, pre-theorized practice to be found’, in contrast to essentially ‘abstract’ theoretical discourses
like theology. There is, for Milbank, ‘no priority of praxis, but instead a single, seamless, theory/practice which
has one privileged canonical moment, one canonical binding in words, and many lesser normative points of
reference’ (Milbank 1990:209, 249, 251).
123 Graham 1995:188
124 O'Donovan 1999:243-4
cannot analytically separate “natural” and “supernatural” contributions to this integral unity.”

From this ‘integralist’ stance, says Milbank, liberation theology has argued for the impossibility of ‘separat[ing] political and social concerns from the “spiritual” concerns of salvation’ – the so-called ‘distinction of planes’ which claims a ‘proper autonomy under God’ for ‘the secular sphere’, and defends it against ‘interference[nce]’ from the church. But ‘where does the ecclesiastical end, and the political begin,’ Milbank asks, in the Latin American experience of forging ‘base communities’ in the face of ‘legalized terror’? The ‘distinction of planes’ model breaks down, as Gutierrez himself argues.

Beyond this point, however, Milbank suggests liberation theologians ‘go profoundly wrong’, ‘without exception’ following the ‘German’ tradition of integralism (after Karl Rahner) rather than the ‘French’ version (‘derived from the nouvelle théologie’ of Henri de Lubac, Maurice Blondel and others). Crudely, Milbank suggests, the distinction can be made between the former’s ‘naturaliz[ing] the supernatural’, and the latter’s ‘supernaturaliz[ing] the natural’. Whereas the latter depends on a specifically theological account of ‘reality’ (seeing ‘the Christianized person as the fully real person’, and action itself, rather than contemplation, ‘as the mode of ingress for the concrete, supernatural life’), the former ‘secularizes’ all of life (and ‘interiorizes’ divine grace) – implicitly reintroducing the ‘distinction of planes’ – and therefore looks to secular ‘social theory’ (sociology and/or Marxism) to ‘disclose the “essence” of human being and ... historical becoming’. The consequence, Milbank argues, is that ‘a theological critique of society becomes impossible’ and liberation theology is rendered ‘simply another effort to reinterpret Christianity in terms of a dominant secular discourse of our day.’

The consequences of this captivity to ‘secular reason’, ecclesial political theologians claim, are many and grave. For O’Donovan, the turn to ‘social theory’ abstracts theology from questions of ‘government’ and ‘authority’ (and centrally, for O’Donovan, questions of moral judgment), often narrowing it to a concern for ‘economic matters’ alone, and sometimes rejecting the idea of authority completely. For Daniel Bell, in common with Milbank, the biggest concern is that the Church ‘retreat[s] to [an] apolitical space’ and ‘the state [therefore] assumes control of the temporal realm’. Quoting Pablo Richard, Bell notes liberation theology’s turn towards ‘civil society’ as the space not for ‘seizing power, but rather of constructing a new power, from the social movements, with a logic distinct from that of the market’, a space from which the state can be ‘reconstruct[ed]’ for ‘the service of the common good’. But neither the state nor ‘civil society’ are neutral, Bell argues, with both ‘increasingly reveal[ing] their true nature as vassals of the capitalist order’, which ‘exercises dominion by capturing and distorting desire’. Resistance to capitalism must go deeper than looking to the Church, at best, to ‘inspire or motivate Christians under the force of the value of love or the preferential option for the poor to move into the real world of social conflict’. Resistance must reject both ‘the desacralization of politics’ and the depoliticization of the Church and

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125 Milbank is careful to distinguish this view from ‘earlier “integrist” politics’ which ‘had insisted upon a clerical and hierarchic dominance over all the affairs of secular life, founded upon a “totalizing” theology which presents a complete system, whose details cannot be questioned without compromising the whole’ (Milbank 1990:206).
127 Milbank 1990:207-8
128 O’Donovan quotes Dorothee Sölle’s suggestion that political theology is concerned with ‘the conditions under which authority can be seen through, controlled and ultimately destroyed’ (O’Donovan 1999:245, quoting Sölle 1974:67).
rediscover the latter as ‘an immediately political agent’: not just ‘another interest group in civil society’ (which can be ‘surreptitiously ... disciplin[ed] ... discipined’, rendered ‘innocuous’, ‘incorporat[ed] ... into the capitalist order’) but ‘a public in its own right’, an ‘uncivil society’, a community which practises ‘an alternative way of life that counters capitalism by liberating and healing desire’. The irony for Latin American liberation theologians, Bell suggests, is that they ‘have in their midst’ precisely such ‘communities of Christian practice that are avowedly anticapitalist while avoiding politics as statecraft’, in the form of the Base Ecclesial Communities.  

To explore the positive development of such arguments (before more critically examining them in the following chapters), we turn now to examine our third and final strand, ‘ecclesial political theology’, in more detail.

2.5 Ecclesial political theology

Although Gillian Rose’s four ‘cities’ are all in an important sense ‘ideal types’, only the second of the four bears no reference to a historical and geographical location. The ‘New Jerusalem’ is described in the book of Revelation as ‘coming down out of heaven from God’ (Rev. 21:2) – an image taken up most thoroughly by Augustine of Hippo, who contrasted the ‘earthly’ city (civitas terrena), ‘created by love of self’ (amor sui) and embodied in the fundamentally antisocial (privates) ‘lust for domination’ (dominandi libido), with the ‘heavenly’ city (civitas dei), created by ‘love of God’ (amor dei) and the ground of ‘sociability’ (socialis) and ‘mutual service’ (serviunt inuicem in caritate). One of the most significant tensions within ecclesial political theology (EPT) is in the extent to which the ‘heavenly city’ is identified with the ‘earthly church’ (we will examine this in depth in Chapter 3), but Augustine’s theological ‘grammar’ is clear: on earth prior to the eschaton (that is, in the ‘saeculum’, the ‘in-between time’), the civitas terrena and the civitas dei are thoroughly ‘mingled together’

130 Bell 2001:74, 71-2. See also e.g. Milbank 1990:245-6.
131 ‘[I]t does appear that some of the base communities are, in the words of Leonardo Boff, “reinventing the Church,” generating a new ecclesiology that neither heeds the modern boundaries between religion and politics nor succumbs to the allure of the state. These communities display in their life together the intrinsically social, political, economic nature of the Christian faith. As poor Christians come together in non-hierarchical, participatory gatherings to celebrate informal liturgies, as they reflect on Scripture, as they share food, visit the sick, establish a cooperative or undertake a joint work project, and occasionally engage in some form of protest or petition the ruling powers, they are clearly about politics. They are engaged in a long revolution, a struggle with the dominant order that is fought on all fronts, that recognizes no neat division of life into autonomous realms. Indeed, any doubt that these communities – this way of being the Church – embody a political alternative to the state vanishes as we recall the uncooperative and sometimes brutal response of the state to these activities’ (Bell 2001:73-4). Milbank makes a similar observation (1990:408). See Petrella’s critique of Bell’s argument in Petrella 2006:128-32.
132 Differing terminology is worth noting here. Elizabeth Phillips refers to postliberalism, Radical Orthodoxy and a second phase of self-consciously ‘contextual’ theologies (such as queer theology) collectively as ‘second generation’ political theologies (Phillips 2012:50ff.) – as opposed to a ‘first generation’ which includes (German-rooted) ‘political theology’, liberation theology and public theology. Stephen Long, himself located within the Radical Orthodoxy ‘stream’, labels liberation theology as an ‘emergent tradition’, and the strand I have identified here as EPT as the ‘residual tradition’ (Long: 2000). I choose to use the term ‘ecclesial political theology’ on the one hand to acknowledge the persistence and evolution of public and liberation theologies (contra Phillips), and on the other hand to recognize both the continuity of, and the recent explosion of interest in, a more explicitly ecclesiologically-focused political theology.
The two cities are not ‘place-markers’ for ‘state’ and ‘church’, even if the latter is understood to be on the way to becoming, eschatologically, the civitas dei.

Having said that, one very obvious characteristic of EPT, almost by definition, is the central, political role it accords to the church, as the true ‘polis’.134 ‘Only the church,’ writes Milbank for example, ‘has the theoretical and practical power to challenge the global hegemony of capital and to create a viable politico-economic alternative’.135 On the flip side of the same coin, ecclesial political theologians also share – albeit in differing degrees – a suspicion of the institution of ‘the state’, and ‘a desire to “unthink” the necessity of the kind of centralized political sovereignty and secular power that the modern nation-state embodies’.136 What is crucial, to return to Augustine, is that the ‘complex ... political space’ which we all inhabit is ‘crossed by multiple, overlapping, and competing authorities’. Although ecclesial political theologians sometimes succumb to territorial thinking (as we will see), what characterises the EPT strand is not so much that the church is, as Bell puts it, ‘distinguishable as a separate and distinct political actor controlling a well-defined space in the modern Webersian sense’, but rather that it is ‘characterized by a certain performance’ – a response faithful to the love and authority of God – within a space also ‘populated by other political agents enacting other performances’.137

EPT’s characteristic approach to ‘church as polis’ does not rest solely on a retrieval of Augustine. In fact, as the work of Eric Gregory highlights, Augustine has also been drawn on extensively and appreciatively (if not uncritically) by those who would locate themselves in the tradition of ‘political liberalism’, Hannah Arendt among them.138 There are other formative influences which shape various threads of ecclesial political theology, not all of which co-habit in comfortable harmony, and it is to these various threads that we now turn.

2.5.i Communities of faithful witness: MacIntyre, Barth and ‘Hauerwasian’ political theologians

If Augustine’s ‘two cities’ offer ecclesial political theology its ontological grounding, the much more recent, Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre gave it much of its distinctive orientation within our contemporary context. Directly contesting the central trajectory of public theology, in MacIntyre’s After Virtue he argues that ‘there is in our society no established way of deciding between’ competing moral claims based on competing, and ‘conceptual[ly] incommensurable’ moral premises: ‘[f]rom our rival conclusions we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.’139 This deadlock is the inevitable consequence, says MacIntyre, of the ‘failure of the Enlightenment project’, of the ‘culture of bureaucratic individualism’, ‘freed from hierarchy and teleology’, that ends up with endless competitions between one person’s ‘rights’ and someone else’s ‘utility’.140 MacIntyre’s proposal, drawn from

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133 Augustine 1972:XIV.28, XVIII.54. See e.g. Milbank 1990:389ff, 2003:195; Bretherton 2010:16, 81ff.; Gregory 2008:97 (‘the secular is the “not yet” dimension of an eschatological point of view’).
134 See Rasmusson 1995.
135 Milbank 2009:xi
138 See e.g. Gregory 2008.
139 MacIntyre 1985:8-10
140 MacIntyre 1985:62, 71
Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy, is for the recovery of an understanding of ‘virtue’, rooted in the specificity of a ‘tradition’, and embodied in concrete ‘practices’. After Virtue ends with a rallying cry, drawing parallels ‘between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages’:

A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman imperium and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that imperium. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness. ... This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. ... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.

Taking up MacIntyre’s challenge, Stanley Hauerwas (writing in the USA) has repeatedly insisted that, contrary to ‘the liberal account of the world’ that claims ‘that we are free to make up our own story’, it is ‘the story of God’ which is ‘the truthful account of our existence’, and ‘the first task of the church’ is simply ‘to be herself’: ‘to exhibit in our common life the kind of community possible when trust, and not fear, rules our lives’. The church is thus ‘a school for virtue’, but uniquely one which is learning – and in its learning, witnesses to – ‘the strenuous lesson of God’s lordship through Jesus’ cross’. This is, for Hauerwas, the primary form of ‘politics’ in which the church is engaged: that ‘between Christians committed to imitating Christ as a community’.

Here Hauerwas shows his debt (in large part mediated via the Mennonite John Howard Yoder) to Karl Barth, who in the context of 1930s Germany insisted that Christian theology, far from being a ‘free’ academic science, was only ‘possible and sensible’ when ‘bound to the sphere of the Church’, the latter understood as ‘the community of faithful obedience to God’. The task of the Church, as Barth would repeatedly insist, is no more and no less than to witness to Christ, and to know itself – pre-eminently, of all forms of what Barth calls ‘religion’ – continuously under the judgment of Christ.

\[141\] MacIntyre defines a practice as ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and good involved, are systematically extended’ (MacIntyre 1985:187). See Healy 2003:289ff for a careful critique of the translation of ‘practice’ to theology.

\[142\] MacIntyre 1985:263
\[143\] Hauerwas 1981:84-5
\[144\] Wells 1998:99
\[145\] Barth 1932:ix
\[146\] Wilmer 2004:125. Haddon Wilmer notes Barth’s response, in 1933, to urgings to take a political stance against the Third Reich, by declaring that he would continue doing ‘only theology as though nothing had happened’ (Barth 1984 [1933]:26, in Wilmer 2004:124).

\[147\] Barth 1956 [1938] §17 (cf Greggs 2008:83-84). In May 1934, the ‘Confessing Church’ Synod of Barmen agreed a brief 5-paragraph theological statement, drafted by Barth, which simultaneously proclaims a ‘Yes’ to ‘Jesus Christ [as] the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death’, and a ‘No’ to ‘the false doctrine[s]’ which acknowledged other ‘events and powers ... as God’s revelation’ (para I), and suggested ‘there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords’ (para II). The Church is not to be ‘an organ of the State’ (para V), but servant only of the...
Often criticised as advocating a ‘sectarian retreat’ from the world, Hauerwas has repeatedly insisted that it is the demand for ‘translation’ into a supposed ‘common language’ (as in our discussion of public theology, above) that needs to be resisted, not the possibility of engagement as such: ‘I have never sought to justify Christian withdrawal from social and political involvement; I have just wanted us to be involved as Christians’; “[i]f this is a “pluralist” society, a description I find far too complimentary, then I see no reason that Christians (any more than Jews or secularists) should be asked to put their convictions in some allegedly neutral language in order to talk with one another’. Where Barth would emphasise the hearing and proclamation of ‘the word’, however, Hauerwas (and the many who have followed him in this strand of EPT) tends to broaden the focus to a wide range of embodied, ecclesial practices (in the MacIntyrean sense of that term), such as those Daniel Bell discerned in the Base Ecclesial Communities in our discussion above. These ‘body politics’ of the church (Yoder’s phrase) are, as Sam Wells (one of Hauerwas’ students and an English Anglican priest) repeatedly emphasises, concerned with ‘the formation, development, and renewal of a sacred people’ as God’s ‘witness in his world and ... companion in the kingdom’, and are found first and foremost in the church’s worship, in which God gives the church ‘all it needs to continue to be [Christ’s] body in the world’.

2.5.ii Radical Orthodoxy: ontology, participation and ‘transcendent’ authority

If the ‘Hauerwasian’ school of EPT focuses on the ‘faithful witness’ of the Christian community, then the theological stream that calls itself ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ (RO) represents a conception of ecclesial performance which is much more ambitious. RO addresses itself not merely to the church, ‘but to the imploding world of secular reasoning’ itself, to a culture RO sees as increasingly losing its essential grounding in its Christian heritage — and which thus needs Christian theology to speak afresh. While advocating ‘a distinctly theological engagement with the world’, RO characteristically (and particularly in John Milbank’s work) rejects ‘dialogue’ with ‘secular’ disciplines, dismissing secular modernity as inherently ‘nihilist’, ‘violent’ and socially

‘unfettered’ Word of God (para VI), and ‘to testify in the midst of a sinful world’ that it is ‘solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance’ (para III) (in Cochrane 1962:237-42).

148 Jeffrey Stout has been a leading critic of Hauerwas’ alleged ‘sectarianism’. See Stout 2004:148ff. for a nuanced version of this argument.

149 Hauerwas 2000:24, 27 (see Troxell 2012:162). See also e.g. Biggar 2000. Wells identifies this as Hauerwas’ ‘second’ form of politics: in which ‘the Church interacts with the world in which it lives’. ‘Hauerwas can be seen as sectarian here, ... since he insists that the Church should always be present as the Church, and should be cautious about translating its distinctive narrative into supposedly common ethical foundations’. A third form of politics, for Wells, is concerned with ‘how different parties in the world outside the Church relate to one another’. This, he suggests, does not particularly interest Hauerwas’ (or indeed his followers) (Wells 1998:99). This reticent disinterest is less applicable to other forms of EPT, as we will see below.

150 (section 2.4.iv (c), above)

151 Yoder 1992

152 Wells 2004:54, 37. See also Wells 2006.

153 Ward 2003c:116


155 Smith 2004:69

156 ‘Radical Orthodoxy defers to no experts and engages in no dialogues because it does not recognize other valid points of view outside the theological’ (Milbank 2000, thesis 5).
destructive. In the place of ‘dialogue’, Milbank calls for the Christian theologian to ‘persuade people – for reasons of “literary taste” – that Christianity offers a much better story’ than the alternatives. The theologian must seek to ‘out-narrate’ other stories (including the ‘secular story’) with a ‘counter-history’, a ‘counter-ethics’ and a ‘counter-ontology’ which assert (with Augustine) ‘the ontological priority of peace over conflict’ and the participation of all things in the life of God. As with the Hauerwasian stream above, the Christian ‘metanarrative’ is not simply ‘told’: it is embodied in the life of the Church, ‘which itself claims to exhibit the exemplary form of human community’, and which (beyond the Hauerwasian version) is thus ‘able to read, criticize, say what is going on in other human societies’.

Distinctive of the RO stream of EPT are these emphases on ontology and participation. As we have seen already in Milbank’s critique of liberation theology, these are grounded in an ‘integralism’ which ‘suspends the material’ within a theological account of reality. While its philosophical roots go back as far as Plato, RO acknowledges a particular theological debt to Henri de Lubac and the nouvelle théologie movement of the first half of the 20th Century. Milbank acclaims de Lubac as ‘a greater theological revolutionary than Karl Barth, because in questioning a hierarchical duality of grace and nature as discrete stages, he transcended, unlike Barth, the shared background assumption of all modern theology’, and suggested, albeit cautiously, that ‘faith and reason are not essentially distinct, since both are but differing degrees of participation in the mind of God’. For de Lubac, contesting with some of the dominant voices within the Roman Catholic Thomist tradition – a tradition which he himself embraced, and sought to re-work – rather than seeking to ‘protect’ Church teaching and practice by insulating it within a separate realm of ‘faith’ or ‘the supernatural’, the ‘order of grace’ should instead be understood as grounding, ‘contain[ing] and perfect[ing]’ the ‘order of nature’. ‘Obedience’ thus involves becoming ‘a channel for the graced action of God in the world’, but in truth all human living is constantly dependent on God’s grace: so many modern people are ‘absent from each other’ precisely because ‘they have abandoned this Eternal which alone establishes them in being and enables them to communicate with one another’. Pre-eminently in the ‘focal ... intensity’ of the Eucharist, not only is the Church being realized and oriented towards

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157 Milbank intends the term in the technical, Augustinian (and ultimately tautological) sense that ‘without God, created things can only be perceived as nothing since they are, indeed, in themselves nothing’ (Milbank 1999:26). See Smith 2004:102.

158 For Milbank, modernity has an intrinsic ‘ontology of violence’ which ‘construes human intersubjective relationships as governed by power and war’ (Smith 2004:71; see Milbank 1990:278-325).

159 The “modernity” of liberalism has only delivered mass poverty, inequality, erosion of freely associating bodies beneath the level of the state and ecological dereliction of the earth – and now, without the compensating threat of communism, it has abolished the rights and dignity of the worker, ensured that women are workplace as well as domestic and erotic slaves, undermined working-class family structure, and finally started to remove the ancient rights of the individual which long precede the creed of liberalism itself (such as habeus corpus in Anglo-Saxon law) and are grounded in the dignity of the person rather than the “self-ownership” of the autonomous liberal man (sic)’ (Milbank 2009:249-50).

160 Milbank 1990:330, 381, 390, 388

161 (section 2.4.iv (c), above)

162 James Smith suggests that, within the diverse interpretations of Plato, RO might be seen as closest to the ‘theurgical Neoplatonism’ of Iamblichus (c. AD 250-325), and of Augustine, rather than the ‘dualistic’ Neoplatonism of Plotinus (Smith 2004:104; cf Davison 2013:85ff).

163 Milbank 2000:35

164 de Lubac 1998:26, see also Grumett 2007:13-14

the future, but all creation is being transformed into the heavenly city. The Church is, in a certain sense, ‘nothing else than the human race itself’, oriented towards Christ and ‘quickened by his spirit’.\footnote{166} The missionary task, therefore, as David Grumett interprets de Lubac, ‘is to bring all people to a more explicit acknowledgment of their participation in the mystical body of Christ’:\footnote{167} a task taken on enthusiastically by many ecclesial political theologians.

Politically, RO is also indebted to a much more ambivalent figure: the German jurist Carl Schmitt. Hailed by some as the ‘twentieth-century godfather of political theology’,\footnote{168} one of Schmitt’s central claims was that, historically, ‘all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’,\footnote{169} and more specifically, that the legitimation of a political order lay not in its content, but in the authority ‘from above’ which decreed it.\footnote{170} In contrast to the ‘purely horizontal’, and thus ‘depoliticized’, institutions of modern (liberal democratic) parliaments, which are ‘posited on an absolute separation between visible and invisible realms’, for Schmitt the Church was guaranteed ‘authentic political force’ since it derived its authority not ‘from the people, but rather “from above”’, from its ‘vertical, “transcendent” dimension’\footnote{171}. The ‘political form’ of the public, visible institution of the Church was therefore (politically) necessary, in Schmitt’s view, to counteract the dominance of the sphere of modern economic rationalism.\footnote{172} From Schmitt, then, RO theologians draw the possibility of identifying (and tracing the genealogy of) ‘heretical’ secular ‘theologies’ (a possibility raised earlier by Petrella), as well as the political importance of the institutional Church (undergirded by a theology of ‘transcendence’) in a ‘depoliticised’ world (a significant question for our ongoing exploration). The potential for polarisation found in Schmitt’s grounding of ‘the political’ in ‘the distinction of friend and enemy’,\footnote{173} however, and the colonising implications of Schmitt’s linkage of (divinely-given) ‘law’ (nomos) and ‘territory’,\footnote{174} will resurface...
problematically later on (as we consider in depth the work of Milbank’s RO co-founder, Graham Ward). The quasi-theological legitimations of Hitler’s rise to power, in Schmitt’s writing in the early 1930s should already, however, raise for us significant concerns about the ultimately totalitarian conception of sovereignty embedded in his thought.

Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy, unlike Schmitt’s political theory, ‘recognizes no original violence’ but conceives Christianity itself as ‘the coding of transcendental difference as peace’.\(^{175}\) It does, however, still leave a role for the state, and calls for ‘extremely hazy’ boundaries ‘between Church and state, so that a “social” existence of many complex and interlocking powers may emerge’.\(^{176}\) Furthermore, as Mary Doak notes, Milbank expects Christians to seek, ‘in the overlap of authorities and communities ... to bring the policies of the state into conformity with Christian practices as far as the continued need for coercive rule [of the state] allows, while at the same time the church increasingly absorbs and hence redeems social functions and interactions (including economic exchanges) that are currently assigned to secular society and overseen by the state’.\(^{177}\) If for the postliberal George Lindbeck ‘the [biblical] text, so to speak ... absorbs the world’,\(^{178}\) then for Milbank and RO colleagues, it seems it is the church which increasingly (albeit non-violently) ‘absorbs the world’. Is it a church which can enable the (faithful) agency of those whom mainstream society has marginalized? Bell, as we noted earlier, celebrates the ‘long revolution’ he perceives as being enacted through the ‘non-hierarchical, participatory gatherings’ of Latin American Base Ecclesial Communities,\(^{179}\) but for Milbank, it is more complex. As Elizabeth Phillips observes, while he can be read at times as ‘a radical new form of socialist’\(^{180}\) at other times he appears to be ‘an unreconstructed premodern’,\(^{181}\) and he ‘endorses a complex mixture of democracy, aristocracy, monarchy and socialism which arises from an equally complex mixture of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Stoicism, Augustinianism, Thomism and Catholic Social Teaching’.\(^{182}\) What is striking in relation to overtones to the nomos and territory link, since it helped him to justify Nazi annexation policies: “The great primal acts of law ... remain earthbound locations (orientations). These are land appropriations, the founding of cities and colonies” (Kirwan 2009:98, quoting Schmitt). For these reasons, Schmitt has been called ‘the German Hobbes of the twentieth century’,\(^{175}\) understanding the state, as Hobbes did, as the ‘Leviathan’, restraining and holding together warring humanity, but recovering the theological background that Hobbes dispensed with (see further Kirwan 2008:25-33).

\(^{175}\) Milbank 1990:5-6
\(^{176}\) Milbank 1990:408 (see also Milbank’s article ‘On Complex Space’, in Milbank 1997:268-92). It should be noted that this is not too different to the ‘community of communities’ advocated by J.N. Figgis and William Temple (see section 2.3.i, above).
\(^{177}\) Doak 2007:373, cf Milbank 1990:422. See also Milbank 2009:xviii: ‘one needs the Church as an organisation in continuous excess of the state to coordinate, without suppressing, the diverse activities of intermediate associations’.
\(^{178}\) Lindbeck 1984:118
\(^{179}\) (see section 2.4.iv (c), above) Bell writes under the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ banner but in many ways is closer to the ‘Hauerwasian’ strand than to a Milbankian RO.
\(^{180}\) Phillips quotes from Milbank’s ‘Liberality versus Liberalism’ (Milbank 2009:249-50).
\(^{181}\) Phillips quotes again from ‘Liberality versus Liberalism’: ‘Democracy, which is the “rule of the Many,” can only function without manipulation of opinion if it is balanced by an “aristocratic” element of the pursuit of truth and virtue for their own sake on the part of some people whose role is legitimate even if they remain only “the Few,” although they should ideally be themselves the Many. Democracy equally requires the “monarchic” sense of an architectonic imposition of intrinsic justice by a transcendent “One,” however constituted, that is unmoved by either the prejudices of the Few or those of the Many’ (Milbank 2009:245).
\(^{182}\) Phillips 2012:119 (see e.g. Milbank 2009:xx, and more recently Milbank & Pabst 2016, which advocates, for example, for ‘the “democratisation” of the aristocratic principle’ (223), and ‘an education into virtue of potential leaders – however properly meritocratically recruited – and even the sense that they have been
Milbank, and something we will explore in much more detail in Ward’s version of RO, are the apparent political effects of his focus on ecclesiology to the point of eclipsing christology. As Angus Paddison argues in ‘a Yoderian critique of Radical Orthodoxy’, Milbank’s refusal to work through the particularities of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection leaves his insistence on the politics of ‘out-narration’ in danger of reproducing the kind of coercive violence that it claims to oppose.\(^{183}\) As others have noted, he ends up both ‘burden[ing] the church with a load it cannot bear’ and also ‘render[ing] Jesus incapable of judgment’.\(^{184}\) It is this last point, the judgment of Christ, that our third strand of EPT is at pains to assert.

2.5.iii The authority of Christ’s judgment: a mix of Barthian and Schmittian trajectories?

A third trajectory within contemporary ecclesial political theology, then, takes the Barthian emphasis on Christ’s judgment (on both world and church) that we saw in the ‘Hauerwasian’ strand (strongly influenced by Yoder), with a Schmittian confidence in the Church as an ‘authentic political force’.\(^{185}\) Exemplary here is the work of Oliver O’Donovan: while asserting the ‘ecclesiological mode’ of political theology, taking seriously ‘the true character of the church as a political society’, and insisting that the church ‘recapitulates the Christ-event in itself, and so proclaims the Christ-event to the world’, nevertheless for the Barthian O’Donovan (in contrast to Milbank and RO colleagues) it is ‘the Christ-event’ which is ‘the structuring principle for all ecclesiology’, rather than the other way round. The church, for O’Donovan, ‘is ruled and authorised by the ascended Christ alone and supremely’. Only in its being ruled by Christ does the church ‘have its own authority’, but authority it does have: to proclaim the judgment of God through its proclamation of the Gospel.\(^{186}\)

O’Donovan explicitly rejects the ‘political Jesuology’ of Yoder and his Hauerwasian successors as a ‘helpful illusion’: ‘let us model ourselves on Jesus, ignoring Caiaphas and Pilate; then we will at least achieve something, even if it is not what we hope to achieve’. Instead, he argues, ‘[a] secure political theology must base itself on “the hidden counsel of God” which worked also through Caiaphas and Pilate’.\(^{187}\) At stake between O’Donovan and Yoderians, as Rusty Reno identifies, are differing conceptions of power, drawn from differing readings of the biblical narrative: the former emphasises the centrality in the Hebrew Scriptures of divinely-sanctioned government, while the

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\(^{183}\) Paddison 2012:149-156. Drawing on the work of Daniel Barber (2010), Paddison goes on to argue that Milbank’s ‘polemic’ against secularism and capitalism in fact ends up being ‘over-determined’ by that which it seeks to oppose (Paddison 2012:157).

\(^{184}\) Bauerschmidt 1999:426, Hollon 2009:143-4. For Bauerschmidt, in contrast to Milbank, ‘[t]he depiction of Jesus receives a certain canonical intractability in the four gospels that requires Christians constantly to return to these stubborn texts and, as it were, to place themselves under their judgement’ (1999:427).

\(^{185}\) See references in e.g. O’Donovan 1996:4 (to Schmitt) and 1996:186, 213-4 (to Barth), although O’Donovan’s own work of historical excavation roots his work in a ‘High Tradition’ of political theology dating back to the period 1100-1650 (1996:4).

\(^{186}\) O’Donovan 1996:123, 159, 174. Prior to the exaltation of Jesus in the Ascension, the cross and resurrection must be read, O’Donovan argues, as a ‘double event’, with the former representing ‘the overthrow of God’s cause at the hands of rebellious Israel’, and the latter as ‘the reassertion of God’s triumph’ and the establishment of ‘the authority of the new life’ (O’Donovan 1996:128-9). It is ‘the victory of Christ’, in other words, which ‘creates the church’ (Doerksen 2004:447 n.57).


\(^{188}\) Reno 2004:302ff.
latter embraces biblical images of ‘wandering, pilgrimage, exile, and resident alien status’. While O’Donovan accepts the ‘remarkable extent’ of the Hebrew Scriptures’ criticisms of ‘the exercise of government’, he ultimately refuses to accept what he calls the ‘construction’ of ‘a subversive counter-history, a history beneath the surface which defies and challenges the official history of Israel’. Such a ‘counter-history’ cannot be, he insists, ‘the history of the people, but (at best) of a class within the people or (at worst) of a purely suppositious class that they [Yoderians] are inclined to think ought to have existed’.

As we saw earlier, O’Donovan has little time for the ‘strictly limited usefulness’ of the cui bono? question of liberation theology. His affirmative stance towards hierarchical (and often nationally-defined) ‘authority’, alongside his dismissal of a more liberationist understanding of ‘el pueblo’, leads him to a more positive understanding of the relationship between church and state, arguing both that the church ‘needs’ some kind of supportive state (some kind of ‘Establishment’, even), and that secular rulers have an important, but limited, task. ‘If the mission of the church needs a certain social space, for men and women of every nation to be drawn into the governed community of God’s Kingdom, then secular authority is authorised to provide and ensure that space’. As in Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy, the Schmittian linkage of ‘law (nomos) and ‘territory’ surfaces again, with O’Donovan going as far as contemplating the possibility (but not the theological necessity) of conceiving that ‘something Christendom-like may emerge at the point where rulers seek to bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ’. The latter proviso marks a crucial difference to Schmitt’s project, however, as for O’Donovan ‘[t]he reign of Christ’ leaves the ‘secular princes of this earth, shorn of pretensions to our loyalty and worship, ... with the sole function of judging between innocent and guilty’. O’Donovan’s church is to be ‘a watchman’: ‘in a society that simultaneously bears the marks of Christian mission and subverts Christian teaching’, the church must discern both ‘the hidden counsel of God’ and ‘the marks of the Antichrist’ within the workings of ‘the prevailing social and political order’.

2.5.iv An ecclesial receptivity within EPT?

Fundamental to the recent development of ecclesial political theology is an assertion (or reassertion) of the particularity of the voice, politics and practices of the church, and therefore, almost by definition, less attention to the voices and actions of those beyond the ecclesial community. While less central and coherent than within public and liberation theologies, however, within the EPT strand there are also voices advocating diverse forms of ecclesial receptivity. The Barthian emphasis on the church’s submission to Christ’s judgment (as seen differently in O’Donovan and the Hauerwasians) is one such expression of receptivity. As O’Donovan’s work is taken up by Luke Bretherton, however, ecclesial receptivity is embodied not just in listening to Scripture — which offers resources for the ‘re-framing’ and ‘critique’ of political action — but also in listening to our neighbours, especially to those often ‘excluded from the decision-making process[es] that affect

189 Cavanaugh 2004:403; see also Phillips 2012:19-22.
190 O’Donovan 1996:28 (my emphasis)
191 (section 2.4.iv (b), above)
192 O’Donovan 1996:146 (my emphasis)
193 Bretherton 2010:70 n.129; see e.g. O’Donovan 1996:212ff., 231.
194 O’Donovan 2004:208; see also Bretherton 2010:56.
them — most specifically through the practices of ‘broad-based community organising’ (BBCO). The ‘act of double listening’ becomes, for Bretherton, ‘a primary form of faithful witness to the Christ-event within political life’, which ‘positions the church in relation to others, whether they are poor or powerful, as one of active contemplation’. Addressing O’Donovan’s critiques of liberation theology, for Bretherton ‘double listening’ both locates ‘contemplation of God and others as the beginning point of public action’ and offers what Bernd Wannenwetsch calls ‘a “therapy for the hermeneutics of suspicion”’. In contrast also to the core assumption of public theology, Bretherton’s ‘double listening’ does not simply ‘presume’ but actively ‘intends and embodies’ a ‘common realm of shared action and meaning’ which has been established, theologically, through ‘Christ’s life, death and resurrection’. In practice, such listening enables an attention to the ad hoc commensurability (i.e. both ‘the analogies and disanalogies’) ‘between Christian and non-Christian conceptions of the good, especially as these come to be manifested in common action’. It also builds an essential element of self-critique into an ongoing process of ‘coming to judgment’, as Christians seek to ‘recognize when they are motivated more by pride or self-love than by love of God and neighbour.’

From the ‘Hauerwasian’ camp of EPT, Sam Wells makes much of an understanding of receptivity drawn from the theory of theatrical improvisation. With the term ‘overaccepting’ Wells names the attitude of consistently treating the actions of others (however dull, awkward, incomprehensible or even hostile) as ‘offers’ to be ‘accepted’ (rather than ‘blocked’ or refused). With explicit echoes both of Lindbeck’s ‘world-absorbing’ Scriptural text and Milbank’s politics of ‘outnarration’, Wells urges the Christian community to choose actively to ‘receive’ offers ‘in the light of a larger story’ which ‘stretches from creation to eschaton’. Critically for our investigation here, Wells describes such an attitude as ‘a way of accepting without losing the initiative’. How much this counts as genuine receptivity is a question to which we will return in Chapter 5. A more recent emphasis in Wells’ work, however, is less ambivalent, as he attends to God’s way in the world (embodied definitively in Jesus, and to be imitated by the church) as one more profoundly of ‘being with’ than of ‘working for’, ‘being for’ or ‘working with’. For Wells, ‘being with’ points to ‘the abundance’ that comes from those usually labelled ‘needy’, and invites the church to identify not with the ‘Good Samaritan’ in Jesus’ parable, but with ‘the man by the side of the road’. We are not the answer to

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196 Bretherton 2010:73
199 Bretherton 2010:4-5
200 Wells 2004:106-8
201 Wells 2004:131, 133 (my emphasis).
202 In terms of human relationships with people experiencing poverty, Wells describes ‘working for’ as ‘relying on one’s own resources and skills to address a person’s problems on their behalf’; ‘being for’ as ‘orienting one’s life toward the well-being of others’, but ‘without making direct contact’ with them or engaging in any discernible action; and ‘working with’ as ‘seeking to help others address their problems by using critical awareness to activate a coalition between one’s own skills and resources, the skills and resources of those in need, and the skills and resources of third parties with an interest in these issues and their outcomes’. By contrast, ‘being with’ is ‘an approach that is never in isolation from the person in question (and thus is not for), never defines a person or situation as a problem (and thus is not immediately working), but seeks only as a goal but also as a means to enjoy the particularity of the person and see that person themselves as the principal source and activator of their own well-being’ (Wells 2015:100).
the prayers of ‘the despised and rejected of the world’; they are the answer to ours. ‘Do not assume others will see Jesus’ face in you: go, and expect to see Jesus’ face in them’.204

Finally, in the extensive and diverse work of Rowan Williams – influential on Milbank, among many other students – there can be discerned a recurring theme which has been variously labelled as ‘decentering’, ‘dislocation’, ‘displacement’ and ‘dispossession’ of the individual and collective (ecclesial) ego.205 This ‘decentering’ combines (among other things) a profound contemplation of the created world,206 the monastic (and profoundly relational) wisdom of the Desert Fathers,207 and a Barthian openness to the judgment of Christ which critiques an easy ‘incarnationalism’ to which Anglo-Catholic theology (including Radical Orthodoxy) can sometimes fall prey.208 In contrast to those ecclesial political theologians who insist confidently on the (Schmittian) political ‘territoriality’ of the church, Williams claims that it is precisely in ‘inhabit[ing] the place where Jesus’ [own] priesthood has been exercised’ that ‘a rigorous collective self-displacement’ is required of the church: the christological space ‘where competition and anxiety and violence are exposed as meaningless’ summons the church to ‘a readiness constantly to question itself as to how far it has yielded to the temptation of territorial anxiety’.209 Williams’ emphasis on ‘dislocation’ and ‘self-questioning’, resonant with the ‘self-dislocation’ we saw emerging in our discussion of liberation theology,210 offers a promising resource with which to critique, ‘from the inside’, the EPT strand of political theology, and we will return to it in detail in chapter 5 – alongside a detailed exploration of the role of listening, taking up Bretherton’s suggestion – through our engagement with the work of Rom Coles.

2.6 Political theologies and the urban margins: discerning a way forward

In this chapter I have sought to map the terrain constituted by the divergent strands of ‘public’, ‘liberation’ and ‘ecclesial’ political theologies in the context of contemporary Britain, with a particular attention to the different role each strand gives to the church’s speaking and acting, and the diverse ways in which each strand seeks to engage both the ‘macro’ forces which shape all our lives, and the ‘micro’ agencies to be found at the level of individuals, neighbourhoods, and grassroots movements.

204 Wells 2015:116, 91-97. Writing just over 30 years ago, David Nicholls was sharply critical of the ‘odour of condescension’ in ‘the assumption of almost all anglo-catholics ... that we, as Christians, are (and it is natural that in some way we should be) the ones called on to perform acts of caring and concern ... rather than in the position of one in need of help’ (Nicholls 1984:36-7). This criticism is one we will need to stay alert to, as we go on to examine the work of Graham Ward in chapters 3 and 4.
205 See e.g. Conrad 2013, Myers 2012, Rowlands 2014:161-5.
206 e.g. Williams 1990:180
207 e.g. Williams 2003:32.
208 ‘The question “Do you believe in “the Incarnation”?“ is a quite futile one in itself unless it has something to do with the serious question, “How do you proclaim, and how do you hear proclaimed, the judgement of Christ?” Anglican theology, with its long-standing enthusiasm about the incarnational principle, has often risked blurring the outline of this ... question, because the image of incarnation, the fusion of heaven and earth, the spiritualizing of matter, has proved so wonderfully resourceful a tool for making sense of a sacramental community with a social conscience and a cultural homeland. ... Such theology can lose sight of ... the radical testing of human “sense” before the tribunal of Jesus’ (Williams 2000a:85).
209 Williams 2008:176-7
210 (see section 2.4.iii, above)
In the ‘public theology’ strand (located in Gillian Rose’s ‘Athens’), I have identified the desire to ‘speak truth to power’, and its ‘convocative’ quest to ‘envision’ and ‘cultivate’ a common space where different voices are able to engage in dialogue together. I have emphasised an ecclesial ‘humility’ within this strand, as public theologians engage in spaces they do not control, and open themselves to the insights and the challenges of non-theological speakers, ‘seeking the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church’, as Duncan Forrester put it. I have also highlighted some of the ways in which the language of ‘common space’ risks producing exclusions, and encouraging a desire to control such space. Within the ‘liberation theology’ strand (emerging from the shadow of ‘Auschwitz’) I have identified not just a preferential attention to those people on the ‘margins’ of power, but a commitment to action for change, alongside those people and in solidarity with them. These in turn highlighted the need for a ‘convocative’ task, similar to that of public theology, to forge solidarities across differences; and a conscious practice of ‘self-dislocation’ on the part of ‘non-marginal’ theologians. Finally, from the ‘ecclesial political theology’ strand (looking to a ‘New Jerusalem’ seen through largely Augustinian eyes) I have drawn out robust critiques of both public and liberation theologies, in particular of their tendencies to ‘neutralize’ theological critique of the allegedly ‘secular’ world, and to underestimate the political nature of the church itself. Within this final strand I have identified three distinct trajectories emphasising, firstly, the ‘faithful witness’ of the ecclesial community; secondly, the church’s narration of a ‘counter-ontology’ through which all things participate in the life of God; and thirdly, the summoning of earthly authorities to submit to the authority of Christ. Alongside such renewed confidence in the church’s own ‘performance’, however, I have also begun to identify some resources within the EPT strand which emphasise both the performance of forms of ecclesial receptivity, and a ‘self-dislocation’ resembling that required of the liberation theologian.

How should the church (inter)act in the urban margins, then? For public theology, the church should find the ‘public square’, within which the political conversation is happening, and seek to bring its resources (appropriately ‘translated’) to that ‘table’. If there is no local ‘public square’, then the church has a role in creating one. If the relevant ‘public square’ is distanced from the locality, or occupied mostly by secular ‘professionals’, then that is regrettable, but it is still the place to start the conversation. For liberation theology, on the other hand, the church should seek to locate itself firmly within the urban margins, from which to challenge the unjust structures of society and act in solidarity with the marginalized. For EPT, lastly, the church should simply be present in the urban margins as church, and should concentrate first and foremost on ‘making eucharist’ and/or ‘proclaiming Christ’ there.

While EPT is, of the three strands, naturally least influenced by the particular contexts in which the church is set, it finds at least echoes in Vincent’s call ‘to find ways to embody a politics and a community which ... inwardly subverts the authorities, tries to pioneer an alternative society, and meanwhile allows us to live differently’. Elaine Graham’s efforts to develop a post-secular public theology as an ‘apologetics of presence’ also represents an engagement with the trajectory of EPT, as does Faithful Cities in its confident proclamations of the church’s ‘extensive “on the ground” presence’ and the ‘alternative performance’ it offers based on its ‘distinctive’ values (while uneasily self-limiting in regard to evangelism, for example). In discerning a way forward for

211 Vincent 2013:69
212 CULF 2006:75, 66ff. (my emphasis)
‘developing and embodying’, as our research question has stated it, ‘an ecclesiology that is radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of the agency of our non-Christian neighbours’, then, I am seeking to take up EPT’s concern for a distinctive, embodied ‘performance’ of ‘community’ and ‘politics’, whilst not losing sight of public theology’s ‘convocative’, ‘dialogical’ task, nor of liberation theology’s commitment to action-in-solidarity with the marginalized and excluded. In exploring a representative example of EPT’s specifically theological critique of the contemporary city (Rose’s ‘third city’ within which ‘politics and anti-politics’ struggle together), and of the claims EPT makes for the theological vision of the ‘New Jerusalem’, I will remain attentive to the commitment (which we have seen developed in different ways across the three strands above) to the receptivity to others which is at the heart of our investigation.
Chapter 3

*Engaging Graham Ward as ecclesial political theologian*
Why choose Graham Ward as the central conversation-partner of this thesis? Firstly, because he is a prominent representative of what Luke Bretherton has called the ‘ecclesial turn’, one of a growing number of theologians who are determined to ‘emphasize that the first task of the church is to be [the] church’, that the church’s ‘understanding of its political vision’ cannot simply be derived ‘from outside of Christian belief and practice’, and that ‘different aspects of Christian worship’ should be seen ‘as a counter-performance of social and political relationships to those conditioned by the modern state and the capitalist economy’. Within the British theological context, Ward is well-known as one of the three co-editors (alongside John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock) of the book Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology, and of the series of books subsequently published under that banner. As such, he functions here as in some sense an ‘ideal type’ for the ecclesial turn in a British context – but not without his particular nuances (and sometimes, in fact, contradictions), some of which make him especially suited to our discussion here. Preferring the term ‘sensibility’ to ‘movement’ for Radical Orthodoxy, and emphatically resisting any sense of a coherent ‘ideology’, Ward seeks to distance himself from Milbank’s work, particularly, resisting the latter’s language of ‘outnarrating’ other voices and preferring to talk of ‘engaged’ theology. Here is my second reason for choosing to focus on Ward, then: he engages with voices and thinkers beyond the disciplinary boundaries of theology, while refusing to abide by the rules of a supposedly neutral ‘politeness’ which he, in common with other ‘ecclesial’ political theologians, would associate with the anti-religious constrictions of ‘liberal tolerance’. His is no ‘public theology’ in the conventionally-understood sense, but it is determined to engage in ‘what remains of the public sphere’, in a way which enables ‘difference’ to be ‘heard’ and ‘articulated’ and which ‘invites and encourages contestation’. In contrast to either a depoliticized reticence of religion within the public sphere or a ‘retreat’ into ‘privatised’, ‘neo-tribal’ communities, Ward urges ‘theologians of all faiths’ to both an ‘impolite’ speaking and a ‘listening to one another’s impoliteness’, in ways which might just possibly enable ‘common understandings of ourselves, one another, and the threats and possibilities that pervade the cultures in which we are situated.’ A third reason for focusing on Ward is his commitment to ‘reading the signs of the times’, specifically within the ‘new terrain’ of ‘the postmodern city’.

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1 It might, arguably, be helpful to ‘locate’ Ward here, just as I did myself in section 1.5, above. As a key aspect of my argument is that Ward’s theology in fact falls down in his retreats from his own social and embodied locatedness, I leave the locating of Ward mostly to section 4.6, below. Those readers who prefer to engage with Ward’s theology with that locatedness in mind from the beginning, may wish to glance ahead!


3 Milbank, Pickstock & Ward 1999

4 Ward & Hoelzl 2008:158

5 Ward 2015; see also Ward 2009:15: ‘By an “engaged systematic theology” I mean a logically coherent account of the faith that is continually reflecting on the situation in which the writing takes place, the global city.’

6 Ward is scathing of ‘public theology’ for its weak theological articulations and apparent decline in visibility since its emergence from Christian socialism’ (2009:154 n.86).


8 Ward 2000a:5
today’s city theologically?’ he asks, and his interdisciplinary analysis of economic, cultural, political and religious trends in urbanization is as thorough and far-reaching as much theology in the ‘public theology’ school, albeit located (for Ward) firmly within a normative theological framework. Any theological reflection located, as mine is, ‘in the urban margins’, needs to take such analysis as seriously as Ward does. His analysis, fourthly, is shaped by a commitment, shared with more explicitly liberationist theologies, ‘not just to interpret the world but also to change it’ (Marx). How successful he is in achieving this aim remains to be seen, but nevertheless, Ward is determined to attend carefully to the bodies that are too often ‘broken’ or ‘disappeared’ within the postmodern city: ‘the disabled, the sick, the racked, the torn, the diseased, the pained’, alongside ‘the bodies of workers in countries and continents that do not appear on maps of global operations’, ‘the bodies of the disenfranchised within our own societies’, the bodies of ‘the homeless’, and of that ‘new class of slaves’ labouring in a multiplicity of minimum wage service industries. Ward’s is a ‘body theology’ to challenge the increasing ‘invisibility’ of bodies, which for Ward is inextricable from the ‘depoliticization’ of bodies. Finally, then, Ward’s work has particular promise for our investigation here because he repeatedly, and creatively, turns to christological reflection in his work, and places the church firmly within a ‘christological space’ – as ‘the body of Christ’. As we will see, as we get into the detail of his political theology, Ward constantly runs the risk of so closely identifying Christ and church that the latter eclipses the former; nevertheless, I will argue, in Ward’s christology there remain pregnant ‘openings’ which resist such eclipsing, and offer a space within which we might make fruitful theological sense of faithful Christian political (inter)action in the urban margins, which does justice both to the possibilities of ecclesial performance and to the gifts and challenges of the non-Christian neighbour.

3.1 The ailments of the postmodern city

‘The city’, for Ward, refers both to actual cities – Manchester and Los Angeles most prominently – but also, following Michel de Certeau, ‘a text that demands to be read’, ‘humankind’s most sophisticated image of order’, a preeminent ‘trope’ within the ‘economy’ of signs and metaphors that Ward names ‘culture’. ‘The city itself,’ he says, is ‘writing par excellence: the public inscription of several million upon its pavements and upon the lives of each other,’ ‘a writing within which all other writings are circumscribed.’ Ward’s analysis of ‘the city’, then, is on the one hand deeply materialist, attending to the economic changes that have both been driven by, and driven the transformation of, the environment and the inhabitants of the urban conglomerations which are now labelled ‘post-Fordist’, ‘post-industrial’, ‘global’ cities. On the other hand, Ward is a theologian

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9 Ward 2009:15ff
10 Ward 2000a:28
11 Ward 2009:16
12 Ward 2000a:81-2, 95-6, 2005b:179, 2009:220. When Ward ‘announce[s] a theology for the disabled, [etc]’ (2000a:96, my emphasis), perhaps we glimpse the beginning of his divergence from liberation theologies, which are resolutely ‘theologies from’...
13 Cities of God, says Ward in his Introduction, ‘was conceived in New Orleans and brought to birth in Manchester. In between there were flirtations with Sydney, Bonn, Amsterdam, Cape Town, San Francisco, and Jerusalem. ... [M]y first glance of New Orleans, coming over the freeway from the airport, opened my eyes to the excitement of the city.’ (2000a:1). Ward returns repeatedly, in Cities of God, to Los Angeles in particular, as the epitome of the ‘postmodern city’.
14 Ward 2000a:261 n.6 cf. de Certeau 1984:91-110
15 Ward 2000a:2, 4
of culture par excellence, and is most profoundly interested in ‘uncover[ing] ... the cultural imaginary of the contemporary city’ – that is, the dominant discourses and activities whereby people living in the city make sense of their experience; the imagined possibilities that shape their understanding of themselves and inform their moral, political, and religious beliefs’. 16 Crucial for Ward’s work is his refusal to draw ‘deterministic’ connections between ‘economic and cultural productivity’ by making ‘capitalism the substructure for social change’ – a charge he levels at ‘[u]rban and economic geographers, like David Harvey’. Such determinism, says Ward, ‘leaves little room for resistance’ and social transformation. Instead, Ward is attentive, with Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens and others, to ‘the fluidity of social structures, the multiplicity of forces which construct and reconstruct ... the social and the economic’, 17 and recognises that ‘the political’ – which he defines most basically as ‘that [which] entails power’, 18 but less explicitly also includes those relationships which mediate differences of power and spaces within which the distribution of power is negotiated 19 – is in a symbiotic relationship with the social, the economic and the cultural. 20 While economic forces undoubtedly shape culture and society, cultures can also be critiqued and transformed from within, and in turn transform economic as well as social arrangements. In this ‘cultural politics’ Ward places his hope that ‘change is possible’, 21 and he makes it central to his theological project. The ‘political’ issues of the city, therefore, are for Ward not simply economic, but also – in fact, pre-eminently – cultural. We will consider each of these three dimensions in turn.

3.1.i The economic

Under the ‘economic’ label, then, Ward points to the demise of traditional industry and the ‘decentralising’ of manufacturing, ‘the growth of multinational corporations’ in search of ‘superprofits’, the ‘erosion of Keynesian welfare systems and historically developed social contracts between governments, corporations and organised labour’, and the development of ‘flexible’, ‘migratory’ and unstable employment. 22 Echoing the analysis of Wacquant, Sassen and others (see Chapter 1), Ward highlights the ‘dramatic dismemberment of the social and industrial body’ 23 which has also ‘dismembered’ the city itself, separating highly-surveillanced sites of consumerism and entertainment, and luxury housing in gated communities for the affluent, from the places where those who service them (‘pools of cheap labour in low-skilled, low-paid jobs’) are able to live, a polarisation which also ‘maps onto class, gender, ethnic and racial divisions’. Such ‘[s]egmentation, segregation, polarisation, ghettoisation’ and ‘a sharp increase in homelessness’ are, Ward argues following Sassen, ‘the flip side of a new gentrification’ with its ‘ideology of consumption’, and its

16 Ward 2009:17 (my emphasis)
17 Ward 2000a:54 (my emphasis). Tim Gorringe questions Ward’s ‘dismiss[al]’ of Harvey as determinist, arguing that ‘Harvey’s description of the world, always closely tied to social and economic analysis, corresponds far more closely to my experience than the world Castells describes [as ‘ahistorical space of flows’], and which Ward accepts’ (Gorringe 2000:235). Gorringe’s own urban theology is much more attentive than Ward to the ‘built environment’ that shapes much human interaction (see his comments on Ward’s Cities of God in Gorringe 2002:21 n.73; 186 n.92).
18 Ward 2009:27
19 See e.g. Ward 2005b:87, and implicit in Ward’s concerns about ‘depoliticization’ (see below).
20 Ward 2009:29
21 Ward 2000b:103ff, 2000a:54
22 Ward 2000a:55
23 Ward 2000a:55
'massive appropriation of public resources and urban space'. This is the world of ‘late-capitalism’, in which ‘consumption outstrips production, credit or virtual money outstrips real reserves, and the market is becoming increasingly deregularised so that in certain parts of this world anything can be bought: frozen sperm, ballistic missiles, stolen organ parts, a boy, a girl, the life of an enemy.'

3.1.ii The cultural

‘The market,’ then, ‘turns us all into consumers who produce only to afford to be more powerful consumers.’ This is, for Ward, a central claim, and it functions as a significant ‘boundary marker’ in his shift from economic to cultural analysis, his attempts to ‘read the signs of the times’, particularly by attending to ‘the cultural imaginary’ of ‘the postmodern city’. Key informants for Ward here are Jean Baudrillard for his analysis of ‘hyperreality’ and the ‘order of the simulacra’, and Manuel Castells’ ‘network society’. In this new form of the city, Ward argues, time is reduced to the euphoria of present consumption, and the ‘territorial particularity’ of place – encompassing such ideas as ‘local cultures’ and ‘rootedness’ – is ‘overcome’, or ‘absorbed’, into the space of flows: ‘flows of capital, flows of information, flows of technology, flows of organisational interaction, flows of images, sounds, and symbols.’ In fact, the very idea of ‘distinct places’ is ‘dispersed into a sea of universal placelessness ... leading always to a single, human subject, the monadic consumer’. With these transformations of ‘time’ and ‘place’, our relationship even to matter itself is also transformed, with the emergence of ‘virtual reality’ and the hegemony of ‘immaterial labour’ over ‘the older industrial production of material goods’: ‘knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response’ have become the most prized commodities to be created and consumed, accompanied by an ‘active desire to be ignorant’, on the part of the consumer, of the human and environmental costs of production. ‘Society’, says Ward is now ‘simply imaginary – a representation being peddled in the market-place’ in which ‘[c]ommunity and social participation’ have been ‘telescoped’ into nothing more than ‘shared emotional moments’. Here is one of the crucial conditions of Ward’s diagnosis: this monadic drive to consume, this ‘ruthless pursuit of the present’, has produced a ‘dismemberment’, a ‘social atomism’ at the core of our culture, that both effects and depends on a ‘disembodiment’, not just of social bodies but of physical human bodies too, reducing them to ‘mere flesh’ or rendering them entirely invisible.

25 Ward 2000a:50-51
26 Ward 2000a:55-56 (cf Ward 2009:96). In the rhetorical flourish of Ward’s ‘all’ here (with more than a hint of the ‘determinism’ for which he has reproved Harvey), there lies both one of Ward’s central cultural claims, and also one of his critical weaknesses – to which we will return later. It is worth noting here that Harvey himself rejects such universalising claims: central to his own analysis is a theorising of the ‘uneven geographical development’ of global capitalism (Harvey 2006).
29 Ward 2009:103-4, 83
30 Ward 2000a:59, 61 (see also e.g. Ward 2000a:i, ix, 28, 70, 75, 86, 114, 228, 259 & passim; 2005b:12, 77 & passim; 2009:71, 163, 219, 225 & passim)
31 See e.g. Ward 2005b:179, 2009:222-5
3.1.iii The political

These twin cultural conditions, of social atomism and disembodiment, lie for Ward at the root of depoliticization – a concern he inherits from political theorist Carl Schmitt.32 ‘The body as mere flesh is a radically depoliticized body,’ Ward argues. Referring to the work of medical ethnographer Annemarie Mol, Ward offers us perhaps the most succinct summary of his political theological project: “[b]odies only speak if and when they are made heavy with meaning,” he quotes Mol; deprived of their transcendent meaning, they are deprived also of the possibility of ‘effective political agency’, ‘and a depoliticized body is a body waiting to be controlled, coerced, and manipulated by the political, economic, and cultural powers that play with it.”33 We should note two crucial connections in Ward’s logic that he forges here: firstly, ‘speaking’ and ‘effective political agency’ are tied tightly together, such that the possibility of agency without speech is occluded; and secondly, the making heavy with transcendent meaning is presented as the condition both necessary and sufficient for speech, discounting the importance of receptivity, of spaces in which bodies are listened to. We will return to these two themes in significant depth when we turn to the prescriptive dimension of Ward’s therapeutic cultural politics. Here, we need further to unpack Ward’s diagnosis of ‘depoliticization’, which draws on Schmitt’s concerns, but also, more extensively, on Colin Crouch’s recent analysis of the ‘postdemocratic condition’, which Ward breaks down into four interrelated dimensions.

First, then, is the ‘aestheticization of politics’, where politics is dominated by the myth-generation of ‘media presentation’, and ‘the will of the people is not obtained but created by various means of persuasion’ (my emphasis). The social and the political have become the cultural, a shift which heralds a ‘self-determined disenfranchisement in favour of leisure, personal consumption, and entertainment’.34 Second is the collapse of the political and social into the economic, with the rise of, on the one hand, a ‘market-oriented authoritarianism’ (Fukuyama) – combining liberal economics and authoritarian politics – which views democracy as, if anything, ‘a drag on economic efficiency’; and on the other, a ‘self-referential political class’ which is ‘more concerned with forging links with wealthy business interests than with pursuing political programs’, and which frequently profits from the outsourcing and privatisation of public-service delivery.35 A third dimension, drawing explicitly on Schmitt, understands depoliticization as ‘begin[ning] with the social atomization that laissez-faire capitalism – committed to the freedoms of the individual and the encouragement of the entrepreneur, the risk taker, the ambitious, and the competitive – necessarily engenders’. Priority is given, systemically and culturally, ‘to the customer or the client rather than the citizen’, at the same time as traditional forms of ‘intermediate’ political institution (political parties, unions and churches in particular) have seen steep decline,36 a combination which results in what Antonio Negri calls “zero degree dialectic”, the disappearance of spaces for ‘dialogue’, ‘discussion’ and ‘contestation’. Finally, as Ward reads Crouch’s analysis, there is ‘a crisis of representation’ such that ‘powerful

32 Ward 2009:69-70
34 Ward 2009:66-67
36 Ward acknowledges that some social scientists point to ‘levels of stability’ in ‘softer’ forms of social capital, such as ‘participation in voluntary associations and informal sociability’, but these are, he suggests (quoting Robert Putnam), “narrower, less bridging, and less focused on collective or public-regarding purpose” (Ward 2009:65-6).
minority interests obtain far more attention than their numbers would secure in a ballot’, ‘intermediate levels of political engagement are diminishing and government becomes increasingly opaque’, and ‘the poor and [economically] marginalized’ are further marginalized politically, as the group “most susceptible to manipulation owing to the absence of an autonomous political profile ... whilst being the most rapidly expanding sector in Western societies.”  

Furthermore, the geographical segregation by economic status that we have already noted is often accompanied, Ward notes, by a rhetorical segregation, particularly in the politics of social welfare, “that calculates the interests of the urban poor and the middle-class as a zero-sum game”.  

For Ward, then, as for Saskia Sassen, cities emerge “not only as objects of study” in their own right, “but also as strategic sites for the theorisation of a broad array of social, economic, and political [and, Ward would add, cultural] processes central to the current era.” Consumption and segregation, atomism and disembodiment, dematerialization and depoliticization, all come to expression in, and are generated by, the spaces and flows of the postmodern city, and all constitute dimensions of the challenge, as Ward has put it, to ‘think about today’s city theologically’ and – in, through and beyond ‘thinking’ – to change it (remembering Ward’s adoption of Marx’s dictum). If the characteristics of ‘depoliticization’ coalesce into a central concern for Ward, then we might re-state the challenge in positive terms as reversing those characteristics: shifting from the individual ‘consumption’ to the collective ‘production’ of politics; releasing the ‘political’ and the ‘social’ from their captivity to the ‘economic’ (or radically re-thinking the language of the ‘economic’ itself); addressing ‘social atomism’, and economic and geographical ‘segregation’, and re-creating shared spaces (what Castells calls ‘cultural and physical bridges’ between ‘places’ and the ‘space of flows’) for ‘dialogue’ and ‘contestation’; attending closely to (and if possible, energizing) the political agency of ‘the poor and marginalized’; and, finally, bringing to visibility such political agency as embodied, reversing the ‘disembodiment’ that Ward diagnoses at depoliticization’s roots. As ‘embodiment’ is central to both Ward’s ‘diagnosis’ and his proposed ‘therapy’, therefore, let us now focus in on a particular, embodied example of the challenges with which Ward seeks to wrestle.

3.2 An embodied challenge: on Manchester’s Oxford Road

This embodied challenge comes early in the last chapter of Cities of God (2000), and then reappears repeatedly – almost ‘haunts’ Ward – to the final page of the book. Placed where it is, we might see it as a ‘test case’, for Ward, of both the critical and constructive work he has carried out in the body of the book – and indeed Ward himself seems to view it that way, particularly with the advantage of hindsight gained by the time he writes The Politics of Discipleship (2009), which contains at least an oblique reference back to that ‘personal experience’ of Ward’s ‘one morning in May’, on...
‘Millennial’ Manchester’s Oxford Road. Here we will let Ward articulate it in his own words, and make some initial connections with his analysis of the postmodern city. As we then proceed to examine Ward’s proposed theological ‘therapy’, we will return to the challenge embodied here, to see if Ward fully responds to it.

‘I was on my way to deliver a 9 o’clock lecture,’ Ward begins. At the time of writing (the turn of the millennium), the main arterial route that is Oxford Road was ‘caught ... between the ferocious urban decay that Manchester experienced when manufacturing industry came to an end and the new urban developments’ associated with the ‘renewal and rebuilding of Manchester City for the new millennium’, as proclaimed by the Manchester Millennium Taskforce.

I was passing through a cruddy bit ... It was an ugly wet morning, when I came across a body stretched out in the doorway of a functional branch of the UK’s leading international bank. Nothing unusual in that – someone sleeping rough. One day walking from one end of Oxford Road to the other I counted seventeen people asking for money, all below thirty years old, some not even in their teens. ... But what held my attention with this person – who was so completely dug down into a filthy sleeping-bag that there was no telling whether it was a man or a woman, alive or dead – what held my attention here were two objects at the side of the figure. One was a half-finished bottle of Chianti and the other was an old copy of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.42

Here already we see some of Ward’s key themes unfolding: the segregation of the city between ‘decay’ and ‘renewal’, between international banking and the destitute; the ‘atomist’ perspective (elsewhere he will call it ‘digital’) that enables Ward (himself caught up in such a way of viewing the world) to count and categorise people begging but not know their names; and the ‘disembodiment’, the disappearance of a human body into unspeaking ‘mere flesh’, and ‘so completely dug down into a filthy sleeping-bag’, that meant that ‘there was no telling whether it was a man or a woman, alive or dead’. Significant too is ‘what held [Ward’s] attention’: the objects by the side of the inert but inhabited sleeping-bag.

it would not alter the significance of my immediate response if it did turn out that the objects had been placed there deliberately to win the attention of people like myself approaching the University of Manchester. What held my attention was not that this figure might have been me... No, what held my attention was the fact that this scene summed up an enormous cultural fragmentation – bits of life that came from various places seemed tossed together randomly. Everything could be catalogued, itemised, but nothing made sense. An undefined body in a dirty sleeping-bag, a bottle of okay Italian wine, a philosophical classic all out there on the pavement framed by dereliction on the one hand,
and international finance on the other, all reduced to the same level not just of banality, but disrespect, degradation.  

Here is the perspective of someone deeply immersed in the intellectual work of reading signs: who can not just appreciate ‘a philosophical classic’ when he sees one (and indeed rate the quality of a bottle of wine), but in ‘cataloguing’, ‘itemising’ the scene – the body (‘undefined’), the sleeping-bag (‘dirty’), the wine (‘okay’), the book (a ‘classic’) – is able to identify the scene as both ‘framed’ within the much larger cartographies of urban planning and global economics, and also as ‘summ[ing] up an enormous cultural fragmentation’. Ward’s first response is not primarily empathetic (he seems relatively untroubled by the thought ‘that this figure might have been me’), but that of the cultural critic: here is an embodied parable of what is wrong with our world. Textually, the encounter seems to have served its purpose and he moves on (to a discussion of Saskia Sassen’s analysis of Manchester as a ‘global city’). On that morning on the Oxford Road he moves on too, to reach his 9 o’clock lecture, rather like the priest and the Levite in another well-known parable.

The figure in the sleeping bag does return, however. After two and a half pages of analysis from Sassen, Ward implicitly acknowledges his self-distancing from the homeless person on the Oxford Road, his own part in the ‘fragmentation’ of the postmodern city, and the seductiveness of its opportunities to consume:

The poor, the destitute, the socially and economically and culturally damaged – there are many. And, given the analogical world-view, the Christian cosmology, I have been outlining throughout this book, I am neither innocent nor myself undamaged. The smell of poverty in certain parts of Manchester makes me retch. The hardened features of the desperate, the indifferent and the ones who cannot bear to look is both brutal and brutalising. My briefcase swinging at my side, I head for the halogen lights, fluorescent colours, plastics, tinsels and giant video screens of the Arndale Shopping Centre. I head for the perfumed warmth of the department stores, the smells of rich continental coffees, the racks of fine wines and fine foods on offer in Tesco and Marks and Spencer.

Acknowledging once again the ‘fragmentation’ and ‘appalling forgetfulness’ of ‘the polis’, ‘surveying the international scene, speculating here and there on its future aggrandisement’ and at the same time increasingly ‘unmindful of those below, of those who are left behind, of those it cannot retrain, of those it cannot force into new labour disciplines, of those who lack the energies required to turn and turn about in the market’, Ward then enters the simulated world of The Matrix (the 1999 film) and contemplates the possibility of cyberspace’s redemption. He returns, however, one final time, in the very last paragraph of his Epilogue, to ‘[t]hat body on the street of Manchester’: still, he confesses, it ‘accuses me, calls out, not like the blood of Abel, for vengeance, but like the blood of Christ for justice, for righteousness, for a new relationality.’ Twice here Ward repeats that ‘[a]lone I

43 Ward 2000a:238-239
44 Ward 2000a:241
45 Ward has already acknowledged, earlier in Cities of God, Emmanuel Levinas’ construal of the self as ‘being accused for the other’, and rejected its ‘violence towards the self’ and its inevitable paralysis of ethical judgment: ‘being infinitely responsible ... is without content. I freeze before the endless possibilities for putting that responsibility into action, knowing that by being responsible here, for this, I am not able to be responsible there, with respect to that. Ethical action, as such, becomes arbitrary because its universalism overrides the particularity of where I am and the bodies I am more responsible for because of where I am’ (2000a:175).
have no answer to give my accuser’: the first time out of a sense of his own helplessness — because ‘I cannot begin to conceive how I alone can change the economic, the political and the cultural promotion of social atomism’ and ‘I am as seduced as the next person’ — and the second time because of the helplessness of the person themselves — ‘because of his or her own silence, his or her own degradation, then I can pass by and, muttering an apology, pat my pockets of loose change.’ On both sides of this small chasm, ‘relationality’ is paralysed. ‘But,’ says Ward, ‘something in me dies with such a denial. And so I must find a way not to be alone before that accusation. I must find a way of not being paralysed by the accusation, and frozen into the condition of being permanently accused. I must speak. I must respond. I must not be afraid of the differences. And I must find a way of joining with those who are also ashamed. There is the beginning...’

Ward ends *Cities of God* no longer simply an academic observer of the tangible human symptoms of ‘social atomism’ and ‘cultural fragmentation’: he ends by acknowledging his own implication in it all, his seduction by consumerism, his dis-ease at being ‘accused’, ‘called’ to ‘a new relationality’ — and being unable to respond. He ends with a string of imperatives to himself — ‘I must...’ — and with a (re)statement of the task before him as a theologian: ‘[t]he theologian’s task cannot be one which provides the solutions’, he states — the ‘matrices of power’ are too ‘complex’ for that. Instead, the theologian’s task is to ‘prophesy’, to ‘amplify the voice of the accuser’, and to ‘keep alive’ and ‘work to clarify’ and ‘promote’ the ‘vision of better things — of justice, salvation and the common good’. ‘But the theologian is also,’ he reminds himself, ‘mother, brother, lover, son, child, church-member, neighbour, friend, cousin, taxpayer, resident, employer, colleague.’ He is clear that he must ‘join with’ those others, with whom he is already in relationship (relationships, many of which have just a whiff of middle-class comfort about them), so that they might respond together — but it is the nature of the response that is less clear. There is no hint of any immediate, practical response to that particular homeless person on the Oxford Road, no sense of Ward possibly returning to that spot, responding to that call to a ‘new relationality’ with the one who had silently ‘accused’ him. Equally, Ward has dismissed ‘providing] solutions’, presumably at a political level, as being too ‘complex’ a task (for the theologian, at least). What is left for Ward as theologian is to ‘prophesy’. Ward is convinced he ‘must speak’ — he must articulate the theological vision that he has set out in *Cities of God* and that we are about to examine here. But it is not at all clear that this would be to ‘amplify the voice of the accuser’ — the voice that has remained silent, the ‘accuser’ who has remained invisible, faceless, shrouded inside a ‘filthy sleeping-bag’. How is Ward to ‘amplify’ that ‘voice’ (rather than merely his own) if he has not yet heard what that ‘other’ voice has to say? Bodies may well, as he has asserted, only be able to ‘speak’, to have the possibility of ‘effective political agency’, if and when they are ‘made heavy with meaning’, but that is surely only one of a number of conditions for such speech and agency: another, equally necessary if not more so, is that there are spaces in which such bodies can be *listened to*. Having articulated one of the central challenges of this thesis, then, we now turn to Ward’s theological response to the postmodern city’s ailments.

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Ward’s repeated use of the language of ‘accusation’ at the end of *Cities* suggests that Levinas still haunts him too — and we will return to that haunting in due course.

46 Ward 2000a:259-260

47 Ward 2000a:260
3.3 Diagnosis: two cities, two economies, two desires

It is perhaps not surprising that Ward, an English Anglican priest, should begin his own version of urban theology with *Faith in the City*, the Church of England’s landmark report, in 1985, which announced ‘a Christian commitment to the city’ and ‘the need for a theology’ amidst ‘a disintegrating cityscape’. Ward joins his voice to those of other critics, however, in suggesting not just that the report of the Archbishop’s Commission ‘did not provide the theology it called for,’ but that it was ‘simply misreading the signs of the times’ and ‘misunderstood that cities as they believed in them were rapidly changing.’ It was over-confident, Ward alleges, in its affirmation of cities as ‘still flourishing centres of social, economic and political life’ within a ‘settled, harmonious social order’, in its appeal ‘for state intervention’, and in the ‘unique position’ and ‘resources’ of the Church of England itself to be “responsible for the whole of society” to “care for the weak”, and to be in “solidarity with all”. It failed to take ‘conservative capitalism’ seriously enough, says Ward, ‘[i]t never asked whether the social atomism of city-life had moved beyond being able to collaborate’, and it didn’t sufficiently acknowledge the unstoppable withdrawal of the state from welfare concerns, the erosion of the concept of nation by the forces of globalisation, and the increasingly marginal status of the Church of England itself: ‘[t]he Church, albeit in a different way, is as marginal as so many of the poor it portrayed,’ he exclaims, with apparent exasperation.48 Whether the Church’s ‘marginality’ and that of ‘the poor’ are comparable, and whether that common ground might enable (rather than hinder) ecclesial receptivity, are crucial questions, to which we will return in the following chapters.

3.3.i Surveying the terrain

‘How then,’ asks Ward, ‘do we begin to think about today’s city theologically?’ Ward charts four options from the various schools of twentieth-century theology:

1. ‘Theology can simply retreat, and see itself as irrelevant... It can embrace the “truth” that there is nothing transcending or outside this world...’ (an ‘atheological’ response)
2. ‘Christian theology can advocate a natural theology. That is, see the orders of human reason ... reflected in the created orders of the world and trace the names of the creator in creation,’ an approach with discernible resonances with the utopian, aesthetic ‘spirituality’ of ‘visionary urban planners’.
3. Christian theology can correlate the cultural and the sacred,’ treating ‘the specifics of the Christian faith’ as ‘metaphors or symbols’, ‘all expressing this one transcendental ground of Being’ (an approach he associates elsewhere with the ‘theological liberalism’ of Paul Tillich49). Such a ‘liberal’ theological approach could be seen, Ward suggests, ‘as a theology enabling conversation and integration between a multitude of different neighbours in any residential quarter of the city’, precisely through erasing the distinctiveness of any particular faith community.50

49 Ward 2005b:196-7, where Ward quotes Hegel, approvingly, as he ‘rails against those who collapse God into World’ and ‘accuses such thinkers of stupidity, falsification, and misconception, foreseeing the outcome as “the secularity of things”.’
50 While Ward identifies Harvey Cox’s ‘secular theology’ as ‘correlationist’ in the sense outlined here, Gorringe argues that Ward ‘miss[es] Cox’s insistence on prophecy’ (Gorringe 2002:15 n.51). Gorringe also insists, contra Ward here, that ‘[t]here is a difference between reducing incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection to metaphors,
4. ‘Christian theology can emphatically reject this earthly, secular city, denounce its atheism, repudiate its values, and appeal to a radically other city, a heteropolis, yet to be revealed’, an approach Ward associates with Karl Barth.\(^{51}\)

Having laid out the terrain, Ward then locates his own approach. Rejecting the ‘atheological’ option as ‘nihilist’, the natural theology approach as unrealistically optimistic\(^{52}\) and liberal theology as capitulating to ‘the values of consumer capitalism’ (Ward has Harvey Cox’s *The Secular City* in his sights), Ward’s sympathies, if anywhere, seem to lie closest to the last option, which he sees exemplified in Jacques Ellul’s *The Meaning of the City* (1970 in English translation). For Ward, however, Ellul’s unremitting negativity tends towards a form of ‘Christian apartheid’: the biblical ‘ambivalence’ about the city is collapsed towards ‘a profound divine judgment against [them]’ and the ‘murderous aspiration in the face of God’ that they symbolise. “‘Urban civilization is a warring civilization,’” insists Ellul,\(^{53}\) and the only ‘godly response’ is ‘separation on the basis of repentance’. As Ward explains, this ‘does not mean leaving the city’, but rather ‘defending God’s counter-creation within the city and living out the eschatological promise of reconciliation. ... The urban dwelling advocated must continually announce the disappearance of cities, the dehumanisation of technology, and the establishment of God’s own building, the living body of Christ.’ There is ‘no other function for theology in the city’ other than ‘prophesying its ruination’. This is too hopeless a vision for Ward, the discontinuity between the earthly and heavenly cities – the ‘polarisation of the two kingdoms’ – too stark. There is no place in Ellul’s theology, he complains, for ‘dialogue’ between these two cities; no place ‘for the central value of living theologically: incarnational embodiment’: Ellul’s ‘new city’ is ‘a transcendent one with no part in the cities built by human beings.’ This is a different kind of ‘nihilism’, and a ‘profoundly antimodern’ one, Ward claims, ‘in a manner similar to the various religious fundamentalisms of the twentieth century’: a nihilism ‘with respect to creation and human beings formed in the image of God’. There is also a ‘disturbing gendering of the city’ in Ellul’s work, as he casts the metropolis as ‘barren mother’ (who can “‘neither produce nor maintain anything whatever’” but simply, “‘[l]ike a vampire ... devours men’’).\(^{54}\)

So while rejecting the ‘liberal, humanist approach’ which ‘dissolve[s] Christian events like incarnation and resurrection into myths and metaphors’, just as the postmodern city dissolves ‘the singularities of the given into empty signs’, so also Ward will not countenance an Ellulian ‘neo-tribalism’ that ‘leave[s] the secular to rot, retrograding into privatised communities’. Christianity cannot simply renounce the ‘secular world’, he argues: not just because, as sociological fact, ‘Christians are part of [it], they work in it, with it’, but because, *theologically*, Christianity’s ‘teachings on creation and incarnation stand opposed to such Manicheanism’, and *politically* and *missiologically* (we might say), such a retreat ignores the call to ‘redeem the secular’, to ‘bring healing, salvation, and the conviction of what is sinful and what is good.’ What is required, Ward insists, is a response which relates

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\(^{51}\) Ward 2000a:43-44

\(^{52}\) Ward notes wryly that the optimism of both second and third options comes at the same time as a ‘growing tide of urban violence ... in American cities’, when American urban planners were realising ‘that their work had done nothing to ameliorate the dismemberment of inner-city communities’ (Ward 2000a:47).


‘positively and also critically to the postmodern city’, a response both ‘within and beyond postmodernism’.

3.3.ii An ‘analogical worldview’

To counter the ‘advanced atomism’ of the postmodern city, Ward asserts, ‘Christian theology has to respond with a strong doctrine of participation ... but it also needs to locate this divine participation in the particular and the social. For this it requires a doctrine of analogue relations networking the several bodies – physical, social, political, ecclesial, eucharistic, Christic, and divine.’ Here Ward is indebted to a strand of theological thought, fundamental to the ‘sensibility’ of Radical Orthodoxy (as we noted in Chapter 2), which rejects modern theology’s ‘hierarchical duality of grace and nature, ... faith and reason’ and with it the idea of a division between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ – a strand which can be traced back via the *nouvelle théologie* of Henri de Lubac, through Thomas Aquinas, to roots not just in neo-Platonism, Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers (Ward draws particularly on Gregory of Nyssa), but in the Bible itself. Like the Scriptures, the created world is a ‘book’ to be ‘read’ (allegorically), the latter through the former, as Ward explains. In fact, he goes further. Like the Scriptures, the created world *speaks*. ‘Creation voices. It has never been silent. From the beginning creation announced to God its goodness. Neo-Platonism provided this voicing, this communication through the giving and receiving of signs, with a metaphysics. In the contemporary linguistic turn, the attention to signification, Christianity is again given an opportunity for continuing, for mapping out for today ... a theology of signification so fundamental to Scripture and in the traditional teaching of the Church. Such a theology makes possible a new analogical world-view.’

Ward’s further crucial step, again in common with his Radical Orthodox colleagues and in the wake of Augustine, ‘words in and of themselves ... give us nothing but themselves. ... Governed by the Word of God the signs become sacramental – dense with mystery. Since for Augustine, even a “thing” is a sign, both in the sense that it is a word ... and in the sense that the world is God’s book – then all things only exist as they participate in the divine being, sustained in their contingency. What is only is as presented as sign’ (2000a:7-9). Whereas Milbank (Ward’s co-editor of *Radical Orthodoxy*) draws more explicitly on de Lubac, Ward tends to refer primarily to de Certeau – in his discussion of the *corpus mysticum*, in particular (2000a:92). See Johannes Hoff (2013) for a discussion of how de Certeau (mis)reads de Lubac, and on the latter’s (inconsistent) ‘dualism between the churchly milieu and the political space’ (Hoff 2013:100).

Ward 2000a:9, see also Ward 2000a:89-90, drawing on Gregory of Nyssa: ‘Corporeality has to be read spiritually, that is, allegorically. ... Creation, as the manifestation of God through His Word, is a text which it is the vocation of the human being, made in the image of God, to read and understand.’ ... The world has to be read with discernment. ... An object’s identity, its intelligibility, only consists in its being an object of God’s activity.’

Ward 2000a:9 (my emphasis). Whether deliberately or not, Ward seems here to echo de Certeau on the Scriptures, who writes: ‘Before the “modern” period ... this writing [the Holy Scripture] speaks. The sacred text is a voice, it teaches ... it is the advent of a “meaning” (un “vouloir-dire”) on the part of God who expects the reader (in reality the listener) to have a “desire to hear and understand” (un “vouloir-entendre”) on which access to truth depends.’ (de Certeau 1984: 137)
of de Lubac and de Certeau, is to focus his attention, from ‘creation’ as a whole, onto **embodiment** in particular, reversing the ‘disembodiment’ and ‘social atomism’ which he sees as both central to postmodern culture and – following the argument of Claude Lefort – an inevitable consequence of post-monarchical democracy.\(^{61}\) Ward’s analogical worldview, then, understands different kinds of ‘bodies’ – ‘physical, social, political, [and] ecclesial’ – as participating in the (eucharistic) body of Christ, and made ‘heavy with meaning’ through that participation: ‘[w]ithin it [the body of Christ] all other bodies are situated and given their significance’.\(^{62}\) Furthermore, Ward goes on to claim, that body provides the ‘new political community’ that democracy has been searching for, the ‘ontologically founded community’ that was eclipsed by modernity’s turn to the individual – that is, ‘a community rooted in a sense of belonging to one another, to a social order, to a cosmic order ordained and sustained by God.’\(^{63}\) When we read the ‘signs of the times’, then, we are to read them ‘through the grammar of the Christian faith’, and that grammar, for Ward, is fundamentally eucharistic.\(^{64}\)

Ward’s ‘beginning’ of a response to the homeless person on the Oxford Road, at the end of *Cities of God*, lies here, then: in ‘the reappropriation of analogical relations, the delineation of a theological cosmology’.\(^{65}\) It has to start, he reasserts nine years later, with getting our ‘metaphysics’ right, with ‘a new way of seeing’ the world: ‘changes to processes, economic or political, have to be preceded by, and grounded on, changes in transcending values and vision. This means the creation of a new anthropology, a new way of seeing ourselves, our purposes and desires, our bodies, hopes, expectations, and teleologies.’\(^{66}\) Fundamental to this ‘new way of seeing’, for Ward, is a transformed understanding of embodied desire.

### 3.3.iii Augustine, desire and the City of God

If embodiment is a central concern of Ward’s, then it remains located within his broader concern for the city,\(^{67}\) and if there is a fundamental ‘substructure’ to Ward’s understanding of both, then it is to be found in his extensive exploration of the operations of desire. Here Ward’s sources include Marx (who ‘perceives that one of the roots of capitalism is desire’ – not ‘freedom of choice’, but ‘freedom understood as unfettered desire’\(^{68}\) and neo-Marxist philosophers such as Deleuze\(^{69}\) and Hardt and

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\(^{61}\) With Lefort, Ward argues that democracy (understood as replacing the physical human body of the sovereign) ‘needs to conceive itself as a political body’ but ‘is always in search of [that] body – a body that continually is absent’ (Ward 2009:55-56; 227-230). As well as Lefort (1986), Ward also makes reference to Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) who, in turn, builds on de Lubac’s and de Certeau’s analysis of ‘the becoming-fictive of the *corpus mysticum*’ (i.e. the increasing effacement, by medieval rationalism, of ‘the simultaneous mutual relation and interpenetration of the church and the [eucharistic] sacrament’, as the Church becomes designated as ‘*corpus mysticum*’ in its own right, divorced from its roots in the eucharist, which in turn becomes reified as the ‘real presence’) as ‘the signal disaster of collective spiritual life in the Middle Ages’ (Rust 2012:104, 106-7). Rust’s article helpfully traces the links between the work of de Lubac, Kantorowicz and Schmitt.

\(^{62}\) Ward 2000a:113

\(^{63}\) Ward 2009:245, 226

\(^{64}\) Ward 2000a:5

\(^{65}\) Ward 2000a:260

\(^{66}\) Ward 2009:74 (my emphasis)

\(^{67}\) In fact, Ward follows, with Richard Sennett, ‘the ancient parallel between the human body and the city’, and thus sustains a strong analogical relationship between the two (Ward 2000a:225, Sennett 1994).

\(^{68}\) Ward 2009:96

\(^{69}\) Ward 2005b:61ff.
Negri, alongside de Certeau and Levinas (whose anthropologies of human being as ‘homo economicus’ are ‘characterised by desire and movement’, a desire which ‘is installed before consciousness, before culture, prior to memory’), but preeminently Augustine, and his *City of God* most particularly. In his deployment of Augustine’s concept of ‘two cities’, the ‘earthly’ and the ‘heavenly’, Ward makes two interrelated but distinct moves, both quite typical of the theological ‘sensibility’ of Radical Orthodoxy: one which directly draws on Plato, and one which is more explicitly Augustinian. The first is to locate the earthly city within the ‘logic of analogy’, acknowledging that the things of the earthly city are made ‘from the likeness’ of things in the heavenly city, ‘even though the likeness is a very remote one’. It is not just that ‘everyday society ... fails in its aspiration to fulfil its ideal form’ (a ‘bottom up’ reading of Plato), but rather (reading Plato ‘from the top down’) that the heavenly city ‘makes possible the cities of the everyday; and makes possible their redemption’, through the latter participating in the former.

As a result of the fall, terms such as ‘love, justice, society and peace’ – even ‘city’ itself – when used of the *civitas terrena* are at best ‘parodies’ of their original, true meaning, as found in the *civitas dei*.

The second move, which we have already seen in the background of Ward’s discussion of Ellul, places the two cities in a clearly oppositional relationship, while refusing the fundamental discontinuity between them that Ellul suggests. Augustine is clear that the two cities are certainly different, distinguished by different ‘loves’, ‘antithetical economies of desire’ as Ward puts it. As we saw briefly in Chapter 2, for Augustine the heavenly city was created ‘by the love of God (*amor dei*)’, which is the ground of sociability (*socialis*), embodied in mutual service (*serviunt inuicem in caritate*). The earthly city, on the other hand, was ‘created by self-love (*amor sui*)’, which is fundamentally *antisocial* or ‘self-centred (*privates*)’, and is embodied in ‘the lust for domination (*dominandi libido*)’. Despite this fundamental opposition, however, Augustine also insists that these two cities cannot be distinguished by geographical location, being thoroughly ‘mingled together (*permixtarum*)’ in the world prior to the eschaton. This ‘theology of commingling’, for Ward, means that Augustine calls for ‘the suspension of judgement in this world on eschatological grounds’, ‘a certain provisionality’ about theological statements, ‘a necessary agnosticism’.

The city of God is not then imposed upon us in some arbitrary now, some future rupturing event. It is continually being given us to live in and build. It is only possible to separate it from the kingdom of this world, the secular city, by divine judgement. We may speak then of two kingdoms or two cities ... but none of us can know the extent to which one is independent of the other. *None of us have that true knowledge of where we are at any given moment*, or where anyone else is. None of us can know the extent to which any activity we are engaged in is *a work in God*, and therefore good and true and beautiful, or *a work of self-reference*, and therefore nothing but the swollen bruising of an injury to the body.

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70 E.g. Ward 2009:103-4, 114, 231, 258
71 Ward 2000a:20
73 Ward 2000a:277n.1, 226
76 Ward 2000a:227-8
77 Ward 2000a:226 (my emphasis)
Here we see one of the central tensions in Ward’s work (a tension, arguably, that he inherits from Augustine himself\(^{78}\)). On the one hand, we are to suspend our judgements eschatologically, and be patient with the ‘commingling’ (within both church and world). On the other hand, we should take with great seriousness the distortions of true sociality that lie underneath Western liberalism’s ‘perverse individualism’ and corrosive ‘social atomism’, to which, Ward insists, ‘[t]he Christian community can and will make a difference’.\(^{79}\) We need to explore further, therefore, Ward’s opposition between the operations of desire within the postmodern city, and the dynamics of what he calls ‘Christian desire’.

### 3.3.iv Postmodern and ‘Christian’ desire

Already in Ward’s economic, cultural and political analysis of the postmodern city, the contours of his depiction of ‘postmodern desire’ have begun to emerge: in the city ‘certain forms of desire’ are both ‘promoted and patrolled’; ‘variants on the theme-park’ cities have been ‘reorganised as sites for consumption’ and ‘entertainment’, the ‘ruthless pursuit of the present’; desire ‘dismembers’ the social, ‘atomising’ us into ‘monadic consumers’; and the costs of consumption – human, social, environmental – are not just concealed, rather, our ‘desire to be ignorant’ of them is actively cultivated, as ‘secular desire ... preys on others for its own satisfaction’.\(^{80}\) Ultimately, however, desire in the postmodern city can ‘never be satisfied’: it ‘can never come to an end – or the market would cease. Desire here operates because we always sense, or are made to sense privation; and we are always attempting to fill that lack or find compensations for unfulfilment.’ While Ward is intent on disentangling desire from its narrow (post)modern focus on sexuality,\(^{81}\) there is something ‘sado-masochistic’ about postmodern desire, he insists, ‘akin to being suspended on the brink of orgasm without being allowed the final release of coming’: postmodern desire, love ‘commodified’ as ‘having’ or ‘not-having’, is caught between ‘a lust that only consuming the other would satisfy’ on the one hand, and the ‘endless sacrifice’ of ‘self-abnegation’ on the other.\(^{82}\) Finally, we should note, Ward’s postmodern desire, intertwined as it is with global capitalism, seeks to be all-pervasive, a ‘comprehensive system that allow[s] for nothing outside [itself]’.

As we turn to attend to Ward’s description of ‘Christian desire’, it is necessary to note again his assertion of ‘the logic of analogy’, the ‘parodic’ relationship between ‘postmodern’ and ‘Christian’ desires: global capitalism’s comprehensiveness is parasitic, Ward argues, on ‘the global logic of Christianity, which forever saw other nations beyond its borders that lacked the gospel’. While Ward seems to be making a historical, rather than theological, statement there, theologically he is clear that ‘Christianity’s divine, Trinitarian economy’ is, like global capitalism, a ‘comprehensive system that allow[s] for nothing outside [itself]’: ‘[g]ranted, one can opt out of being a Christian, but from within the Christian worldview, even those who opt out are still within the operations of God in the

\(^{78}\) See e.g. Ward 2000a:277 n.6 on the tension between Augustine’s support for ‘the forced conversion of people to the Christian faith and the persecution of “heretics”’ and his insistence that ‘the Church was not to be identified with the secular powers of this world’.

\(^{79}\) Ward 2000a:228, 54

\(^{80}\) Ward 2000a:75, 56, 59-60; 2009:83

\(^{81}\) Ward 2000a:76

\(^{82}\) Ward 2005b:79, 263-6 (see also 2005b:109-10 and 2000a:201-2 on the ‘demonic and nihilistic logic’ of ‘endless giving without reception’).

\(^{83}\) Ward 2009:96
maintenance and redemption of the world." In opposition to postmodern desire which operates on the logic of constantly unfulfilled ‘lack’, which reifies the object of desire as object, as graspable, Christian desire operates within an economy of abundance, of ‘giftedness’, such that the object of desire ‘can never be made an end in itself’, but rather, ‘located in a network of relation, invested both with past association and future potential’, ‘takes on a certain density of significance, a rich materiality that cannot be exhausted, cannot be possessed’. Here Ward employs the Augustinian distinction between uti (‘use’) and frui (‘enjoyment’): ‘the object desired is to be enjoyed as gifted; rather than simply used, exploited, consumed.’

‘Christian desire’ – ‘founded’ as it is upon God as triune and, as triune, a community of love fore-given and given lavishily – ‘moves beyond the fulfilment of its own needs’, ‘is always excessive, generous beyond what is asked’, ‘is a desire not to consume the other, but to let the other be in the perfection they are called to grow into’.

3.3.v The flow of love: kenosis and pleroma

Ward is concerned, as we have already seen, to describe Christian love over against the postmodern ‘masochism’ of ‘love as not-having’. Central to this distinction is the shape and direction of the relation Ward describes between two Greek terms, kenōsis and plērōma: ‘a giving of oneself that can only come from the ongoing and endless reception of the other’, an ‘outpouring, both divine and human, [which] is only possible, and for human beings only sustainable, in terms of the infinite plenitude of God’s ousia.’ This vision Ward contrasts with ‘a kenosis or emptying without telos, an infinite kenosis, a kenosis also that issues from and into absence, not pleroma’, that he finds in the work of postmodern philosophers including Michel de Certeau, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, the last of whom he engages with in more depth. For Levinas, against the ‘totality’ of ‘philosophy’ – ‘the going out from and the return to the Same’ – we are summoned to follow in the wake of the ‘wholly other’, who ‘is recognised in the face of the stranger, the widow, the orphan’. ‘There is redemption only in this movement out to the other,’ Ward observes, but

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84 Ward 2009:90-1, 96
85 Ward 2000a:172-3. Eric Gregory’s self-confessedly ‘politically liberal’ reading of Augustine helpfully expands the ‘uti / frui’ distinction in the latter’s work. ‘At times,’ writes Gregory, ‘Augustine emphasizes love for God as the only way to ensure the capacity to love the neighbour… At other times, however, [he] suggests a priority of love for neighbour as the concrete and given opportunity for loving. In fact, in Augustine’s anti-Pelagian and anti-Donatist homiletic contexts, love for the neighbour in this life can be the test of and the preparation for true love for God’. On the one hand, then, ‘Augustine does not view love for neighbour as a transitory stage to love for God’, but on the other hand, ‘the radical emphasis on love for God can also protect prideful human beings from failing to recognize their dependence on others in loving their neighbour’. For Gregory, ‘Augustinian liberalism knows the dangers of making others the object of our moral projects, and of trying to be like God in saving others’ (Gregory 2008:345-6).
86 Ward 2000a:76 (my emphasis)
87 Ward 2005b:77. Behind Ward’s use of kenosis is the ‘Christ hymn’ of Philippians 2:5-11 (see also Ward 1999). Critics of the recent ‘kenotic turn’ in theology (a move of which Ward is a significant representative) have challenged the apparently unproblematic translation from divine (christological) kenosis to human kenosis. As Linn Tonstad observes, for example, ‘[a]lthough Ward exegetes the Philippians hymn in order to discover “the kenotic economy,” he skips directly from there to modernity’s turn to kenosis, starting from Lutheran orthodoxy. This may be why he fails to note how far his own reading of kenosis is from that of the early church, where it – in most cases – expresses the act of assumption of humanity (the appearance of the God of glory in human form), rather than a general economy of sacrifice or representation’ (Tonstad 2016:89 n.24). It is not within the scope of this thesis to further problematise Ward’s translation from divine to human (and ecclesial) kenosis, but rather to note the consequences for human and ecclesial receptivity of such a move.
88 Ward 2005b:78
89 Ward 2005b:78
goes on to ask, what sustains this movement? ‘The economy envisaged, and Levinas is emphatic about this, is “a one-way movement”. ... Levinas conceives that in the unending emptying of oneself, in the way the other empties me, I discover “ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich”.’ Such resources can only come, asserts Ward contra Levinas, ‘from that which is continually being given, such that what I am being emptied of is that which I am being given: the infinite generosity or fullness of God’s grace that St Paul conceives in terms of pleroma. That sociality, which moves beyond ourselves and into a permanent journeying towards the other, is only possible within an economy of the gift in which I am constituted in the transit of plenitudinous grace. Only then can my desire for the other avoid being endless sacrifice, on the one hand, or a lust that only consuming the other would satisfy. Pleroma as infinite, divine generosity makes possible a relationality beyond self-abnegation and beyond appetite.’90 Here is a ‘twofold loving’ that allows for a proper (rather than self-centred, or ‘private’) ‘amor sui’: ‘our loving as it participates within God’s loving is always reaching beyond and forgetting itself, but, in that very activity, loving itself most truly’. In eucharistic terms, this is, for Ward, the outward-reaching ‘logic of the fracture’: ‘both celebrating the intimacy of oneness and taking that celebration out into the world: “we break this bread to share”. In the breaking, the fracturing, the extension beyond a concern with one’s own wholeness, is a sharing that will constitute our own true wholeness.’91

This relationship between kenosis and pleroma is crucial for Ward’s description of ‘Christian desire’ – and it is crucial for our investigation here too. It appears, at least at first glance, that Ward does not ultimately dispense with Levinas’ ‘one-way movement’. He does not seem to open it up to a genuine reciprocity, but instead extends it ‘backwards’, such that Levinas’ ‘permanent journeying towards the other’ is now resourced by the prior ‘plenitudinous grace’ of God. At ‘the heart of [Augustine’s] work’ Ward discerns a crucial question: “What hast thou that thou didst not receive?”92 This ‘attention’ to ‘reception’ which Ward urges on postmodern kenoticists is fundamentally, for Ward, an attention to my reception of that which God gives, not to my reception of the gifts of another human person.93 ‘Human beings are gifts to each other,’ he affirms, ‘in an endless economy of God’s grace whereby we are given in order to give.’94 Thus far there is symmetry. But whenever Ward talks not of giving, but of receiving, it is to God that we are to be receptive, in order to give to others: ‘[t]he question is not “How can we love?” but more “How can we accept such love?” ... Only to the extent to which we can receive God’s unconditional love for us will we be able to pass it on, pass it forward.’95

As feminist critics have noted, Ward is insistent that there is an asymmetry between the divine and human: in the human-divine relationship ‘there is response not reciprocity proper (though we can use Milbank’s felicitous phrase “asymmetrical reciprocity”)’ – because ‘the God who created and sustains me, and in whose Triune life I live, is both the origin and the end of my desire’.96 Within his eucharistic, analogical worldview, Ward is clear that ‘all that is and becomes in this world’ is

90 Ward 2005b:79
91 Ward 2000a:174
92 Ward 2005b:128 (my emphasis)
93 Ward 2005b:81
94 Ward 2005b:81 (my emphasis)
95 Ward 2009b:10
'suspen[ded] ... within the perfection of God’s own transcendent being’, such that ‘moments of giving and receiving’ within the created world – ‘where giving is also receiving, and vice versa’ – reflect, and analogically participate in, a similar giving and receiving within the perichoresis of intratrinitarian life. Our desire (for God and for each other), our ability ‘to give to each other’, is ‘only possible on the basis of the infinity of the other’s [i.e. God’s] desire for me’. But while God desires us, God does not receive from us. As Sigridur Gudmarsdottir observes in relation to Ward’s christologically-focused political ontology, Ward ‘presumes a flow from God to humans, which humans can trigger, but not share with the God-man. Ultimately, they receive, not him.’ The scope of this thesis does not allow for a direct consideration of the question of impassibility or receptivity in the God-world relation, but it does nevertheless have an indirect bearing on a key question for us here: given Ward’s insistence on a ‘one-way movement’ in the kenotic/pleromatic flow of love from God to the world, and his analogical relating of ‘divine’, ‘christic’ and ‘ecclesial’ bodies, to what extent does he reproduce this divine-human asymmetry (and non-receptivity) in his conception of ‘church-other’ (ecclesiological) and ‘Christ-other’ (christological) relations? To put the question a different way, where and how do we human beings practise our receptivity to (where do we allow ourselves to be formed by) the divine flow of love? Must it happen, definitively, ‘in church’ (which is to say, ‘liturgically’) – prior to a flow ‘outward’ into the world – or might such receptivity, such formation, happen also in our interactions with others, even non-Christian others? At its simplest, to pick up a phrase of Rowan Williams, where is it that ‘God happens’? It is with these questions that we turn to examine Ward’s ecclesiology.

### 3.4 Therapy: Church as ‘alternative erotic communities’

Christian desire, for Ward, is inescapably communal. And although the Church is but one ‘erotic community’ among many others in the world – it participates within a particular ‘economy of desire’ – it is unique because it locates itself not, as we have seen, within the ‘pathological’, ‘sado-masochistic’ postmodern ‘economy of lack’, but within the abundant economy of ‘Christian desire’. ‘Communities’ within the postmodern economy can only ever be ‘virtual’, ‘imaginary’ – individualistic, narcissistic pseudo-communities ‘in which eros is read as a purely human drive’. For Ward, ‘only a theological or analogical account of bodies’, and of the body of Christ most especially, ‘safeguards the concreteness’ of communities of genuine belonging, genuine participation: ‘communities in which the desire for the good cultivates the virtues of theological citizenship.’

Here, Ward proclaims, is the ‘body’ that the postmodern city is lacking – a body that can truly participate in, and ‘make space’ for, such an economy of abundance, that nurtures, rather than

97 Ward 2000a:201-2, 2005b:83
98 Ward 200a:80-81
99 Gudmarsdottir 2012:169-70
100 There is a further question here, in the order of those analogical relations. Which, for Ward, is most normative? Does all flow, ultimately, from a theology of the Trinity (functioning as a kind of Platonic ‘ideal’)? Or is it christology (as unfolded through readings of the gospel narratives) which is ultimately decisive for our understanding of God? Again, this is a question which, addressed directly, is beyond the scope of this thesis. But there is a burden of proof, here, to demonstrate, firstly, that Ward’s preference is for the former, and that that has a critical impact on his Christology and ecclesiology; and secondly, that starting with the latter has the potential to ‘open up’ ecclesiology in significant and potentially fruitful ways. Both these points I return to in Chapter 4.
101 Ward 2005b:266
destroys, ‘what is most necessary for our well-being and cosmic flourishing’. And just as love within ‘the Christian economy’ is ‘an action, an economy of response to Christ’, and not a commodifiable ‘object’, so also is the Church itself not an ‘objective entity’, but a body constituted through ‘activity’: ‘an erotic community, a spiritual activity’, which ‘exceeds’ and ‘transgresses’ the ‘institutional ecclesial places’ (which might nevertheless be ‘necessary’ to ‘organise’ our desire). Following Bruno Latour’s ‘reassembling’ of ‘the social’, Ward understands the church, the ‘body of Christians’, as ‘a network of actors’, a (‘multidimensional, multigendered’) ‘body of action’ which ‘participates in a divine poîēsis’ (the creation, the bringing into being of something new): ‘[t]here is no body without this activity, for it is the body of Christ only in and through this continuous operation’; ‘[t]he church ... is “made to appear” through a series of ... interactions of various agents’.104

So what are the actions in which the church, as ‘erotic community’, is engaged? What is it that the church does? Ward’s answer to this question, stretching across his theological opus, might be summarised as ‘political discipleship’ through ‘service’, or ‘leitourgia’. The Greek term leitourgia, Ward notes, ‘from which “liturgy” is derived, was a technical political term for a service rendered to the city or state’, and was taken up by St Paul to describe ‘[s]ervice on behalf of the ecclesial community’. Such service was concerned both with the ‘building up and maintenance of the community’ itself and with publicly ‘announc[ing] what one is committed to and where one’s allegiances lie’. Theologically, then, leitourgia is ‘political’ because it is the service of God, the sovereign God ‘who acts in history’ and ‘exercises authority, power, and judgment in order to establish a kingdom’; such service also ‘participates in the resurrection’, ‘by establishing and performing the kingdom come and yet to come’, and in the ‘pleromatic’ ‘operations of the Spirit in the world (the filling up, the plenitude, the bringing to completion)’.105 We will consider here four distinct but interrelated aspects of Ward’s conception of ecclesial action, or political discipleship: two which are central to Ward’s project (‘performing’ the eucharist, and engaging in ‘cultural politics’), and two which are the most clearly ‘practical’ out-workings of Ward’s proposals (prayer, and service of those ‘in need’).

3.4.i Church and eucharist: overcoming division

Fundamental for Ward, as we have seen, is that the Church ‘makes eucharist’ — or, more importantly, that ‘the Eucharist makes the Church’.106 Performing the eucharist is to perform — ‘engender’, ‘embody’, ‘incarnate’ – ‘the body of Christ’, ‘the true body’ which is the ‘space’ within which ‘all ... other bodies become true only in their participation’.107 It is within the eucharist that the ‘transcorporeality’ — the ‘analogical relations’ of interdependence and mutual ‘vulnerability’ between bodies — at the core of Ward’s ‘analogical worldview’ is made visible, tangible,108 and in this

103 Ward 2005b:266
104 Ward 2000a:180, 2009:201-2 (see also 2013:329)
105 Ward 2009:166-7, 182-3 (my emphasis)
106 The phrase was firmly embedded in Roman Catholic ecclesiology in and after Vatican II through the work particularly of de Lubac, but was first coined by Nicholas Afanasiev (see e.g. McPartlan 2012).
107 Ward 2000a:93-4
108 See e.g. Ward 2000a:93-4, 236-7; 2005b:109 (‘Eros renders the boundaries of our bodies porous and malleable. It renders both bodies and souls vulnerable because receptive...’). See also 2005b:107-8: ‘To borrow from Rowan Williams, the ekklesia is ... not “a special” system of human relations, but a place where the
making visible, tangible, is nothing less than the work of redemption: ‘the formation of that Christ-likeness which is ours truly insofar as we occupy this place en Christoi’, the reorientation of our desire ‘to that which exceeds what we think we know about ourselves and the world we live in’.  

‘[T]he context of this formation’, Ward is clear, ‘is the church’ – ‘in all its concrete locatedness and eschatological significance’ – and the ‘eros’ of the church, which is also to say its purpose, is not just concerned with the reconfiguration of our desires and relationships within the ecclesial community – in which ‘[b]ecoming one flesh is the mark of participation itself’ – but it is a desire which reaches out through ‘all creation’, a ‘love that desires, that draws, that seeks [the] participation’ of all things ‘in God’ – a participation which is, paradigmatically, eucharistic. 

There is, as we have already seen, an ‘excessiveness’ about the eucharistic body, that ‘transgresses’ particular ‘places’: ‘[t]he eucharistic We’ (as Ward sometimes describes that ‘body of action’) ‘is a pluralised and pluralising body that overspills defined places, opening up another space’; ‘[t]he body of Christ desiring its consummation opens itself to what is outside the institutional Church; offers itself to perform in fields of activity far from chancels and cloisters’. The ‘ecclesial bodies’ formed by the Christian ‘erotic communities’ ‘[f]unction first locally, and then [expand] ever outward’, embracing ‘the civic and social bodies within which they dwell’, and ultimately ‘recall[ing] us to the cosmological’. There is a clearly ‘expansive’ theological dynamic here: one which ‘begins with a breaking’, in the eucharistic bread, in which Jesus’ physical presence is now understood to be able to ‘expand itself to incorporate other bodies, like bread, and make them extensions of his own.’ Ward then goes on to locate a further expansion of the Church within the ‘displacement’ of Jesus’ body in the Ascension, in which ‘the Logos create[s] a space within himself, a womb, within which (en Christoi) the Church will expand and creation will be re-created.’

But it is not just the ‘expansive’ dynamic that Ward has in view here: through his eucharistic worldview, he seeks to make space for difference while overcoming division. The ‘becoming one flesh’ within the body of Christ, combined with that body’s ‘dissemination’ ‘through a myriad of

rationale of all relations is made plain and their deepening and securing made possible” (see Williams 2000a:226).

109 Ward 2000a:173
110 Ward 2000a:154
111 Ward 2009:184, 2000a:77, 2005b:145, 82: ‘What salvation is then, and what the operations of grace move towards, is an ever-deepening participation in God – the source of life in abundance, resurrection life.’ See also 2005b:75: ‘Salvation is to become enfolded within this enfolding logic – to attain the condition of being incarnate as the Word is incarnate, or what Gregory and others termed theios. More clearly, human beings have to participate in becoming flesh as he became flesh. ... We are, then, seeking a body; through intimacy we seek an intimacy with that source of the “emanation of things.”’
112 Ward 2000a:77
113 Ward 2000a:102-3. Ward continues: ‘the displacement of Jesus’ body’ which ‘begins with a breaking... is not just blurring the boundaries between one person and another – though it effects that through the handing over and the eating of the “body”. The bread here mediates the crossing of frontiers. ... Bodies are not only transfigurable, they are transposable. In being transposable, while always being singularities and specificities, the body of Christ can cross boundaries, ethnic boundaries, gender boundaries, socio-economic boundaries, for example.’
114 Ward 2000a:112-114. Here Ward also cites with approval Gregory of Nyssa’s observation about resurrection life: ‘Participation in the divine good is such that, where it occurs, it makes the participant ever greater and more spacious than before, brings to it an increase in size and strength, in such wise that the participant, nourished in this way, never stops growing and keeps getting larger and larger’ (Ward 2000a:113).
other bodies’, reveals to us not only a ‘fluidity’ which characterises bodies more generally, but also the extent to which our bodies participate in each other, whether we want to or not: ‘that which I exclude from my body, or that which is excluded in my name from the corporations to which I belong, will affect me, for good or ill’. We might chart at least four dimensions of Ward’s eucharistic ‘mending’ of division, then. First, in insisting that ‘the local is also the global and the universal’, he seeks to mend the geographical fragmentation he fears in merely ‘local theologies’ and, specifically, the ‘segregation for special attention of the UPA area from the rest of the urban fabric’ that he sees in Faith in the City. Second, he seeks to overcome cultural divisions, acknowledging that ‘[t]he ghettoisations and the segregations of racism, sexism, class, and ageism done in my name, condoned by my silence, injure me.’ Third, Ward resists the ecclesial division set up by ‘neo-tribalist’ approaches to ecclesiology, highlighting the entanglement of Christians in the many social bodies of the world, our inescapable ‘belonging to other, larger corporations’ that means that ‘we necessarily impact upon the world we live in, for good or ill’. And fourth, Ward’s church also insistently challenges the modern division of ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ (and the ‘privatisation’ of the former), most particularly in the labour of ‘the layperson’ (more than the supposedly sanctuary-dwelling clergy), who ‘enact[s] the incarnation of Christ’ – ‘performs Christ’ – by ‘dwell[ing] deeply within the material orders to which [s/he] has been given, surrendered to Christ’, seeking – within those ‘material orders’, those ‘civic associations’, those supposedly ‘secular’ (that is, non-ecclesial) bodies – ‘to creat[e], or participat[e] in the creation of, conditions maximally closest to communion’. This brings us to the second pole of Ward’s economy of redemption, his casting of ‘engaged theology’ as ‘cultural politics’.

3.4.ii Church and cultural politics: reschooling the (cultural) imaginary

If Ward’s description of eucharistic performance is about creating a certain kind of space, then his ‘cultural politics’ (or ‘cultural apologetics’, as he often names it) is about conducting a certain kind of conversation. His most thorough methodological treatment of this issue, in Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice, begins with the question, ‘from where does theology speak?’ and ends with the search for ‘a new vernacular – a language that is neither “churchy” nor “secular”’ but which will ‘eventually … constitute a new ekklesia’ – ‘a public discourse, inscribing a cultural ethics’ the goal of which ‘is the social flourishing of all and the voicing of [every] creature’s own doxology’. Here Ward most clearly fleshes out the engaged dimension of his theology: ‘theology’s got to speak’, as he repeatedly insisted in my 2015 interview with him, but in its

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116 Ward 2000a:92
117 Ward 2000a:266 n.23
118 Ward 2000a:92
119 Ward 2000a:69 (as above), 92
121 In fact, at times Ward insists that ‘all Christian practice’ is ‘theological discourse’ (Ward 2005a:171, my emphasis).
122 Ward 2005a:12. See also Ward 2011:115: ‘we are presupposing that it is the task of all Christians to speak…’).
124 In terms of the methodology of this thesis, my interview with Graham Ward (2015, see Appendix A) is of peripheral significance in my critical examination of his theology. Nevertheless, it is important to note here that I explained to Professor Ward the focus of my research in advance, obtained verbal consent before the interview itself (he waved away my written consent form as not necessary), and sent him a copy of the
speaking it must ‘engage with where the world is speaking’, to ask ‘what have we got to say, as theologians, to this world?’ This was the intention of the Radical Orthodoxy book which Ward co-edited, he explained – not to be ‘a programmatic statement’, or a ‘conceptual game’ played by academics, but ‘something that can speak to the environment, the people, the circumstances, the culture, the society in which you’re actually embedded.’

Assuming a position for the church at the cultural margins of secularized (or post-secular) Western society, however – a change of status which he claims Faith in the City failed to recognise – Ward argues that theology must speak ‘to the cultural of that which the cultural displaces’, with the aim of ‘searching’ and transforming ‘the cultural imaginary’. If the first step of ‘cultural politics’, is to ‘read the signs of the times’, then the second and third steps involve ‘critical and constructive activity’ in turn: unmasking the theological and metaphysical sources of current mythologies and revealing the distortions and perversions of their current secularized forms; and then ‘reread[ing] and rewrit[ing] the Christian tradition back into contemporary culture,’ ‘reschooling ... the imaginary, through acts of poïësis’ (creating and recreating), ‘new creative associations made, new relational actions’, new (or sometimes radically changed) ‘social institutions’. This process happens, Ward argues, not in ivory-towered insulation from the world, but ‘in every social and cultural engagement’, in ‘all the micropractices of Christian living’, as Christians engage in ‘encountering, negotiating and interpreting the world around them’.

Each of these terms is significant in Ward’s description of ‘cultural politics’. Following Christ is, he argues, inherently ‘hermeneutical’: we Christians are not just engaged in (re-)interpreting the world, but also in ‘wait[ing] to receive’ our understanding of ‘what it is to be a Christian’, to discover ‘what it is [we] say when [we] say “Christ”’; we are ‘continually being opened up’ precisely as we engage in ‘acts of following’. Ward does not claim to ‘have the answers’ (as we saw in his reflection on his Oxford Road encounter), but is determined, in the light of ‘what the world is’, in the light of people’s experience, to try to ‘keep the questions on the agenda’. We might cast this, in Augustinian language, as a commitment to publicly stirring up a certain ‘restlessness’, not just with ‘what the world is’, but with our present interpretations of, and responses to, it. Here Ward introduces the necessity of encounter. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Ward argues that our actions and interpretations of the world are governed by our ‘habitus’: ‘that “system of dispositions” we both inherit and into which we are socialised’, that ‘culturally constituted ... “space of social possibles” that establish what it is possible to know, do, or think’. Nevertheless, ‘habitus is not static’: it is ‘continually in negotiation with new experience and encounters’, challenged and changed by encounters with difference. ‘Each encounter with what is other to our social imaginaries’ calls for

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transcript afterwards. Quotes from the interview within this thesis are deployed with the intention only of clarifying themes within Ward’s published material.

125 Ward 2015
126 Ward 2005a:58-9
127 Ward 2009:166
128 Ward 2009:165
129 Ward 2005a:152, 150
130 Ward 2009:166, 2000b:103
131 Ward 2000a:259, 95
132 Ward 2015
133 Ward 2005a:18-19, 21-23 (my emphasis)
those imaginaries to be ‘engaged’, ‘reshaped’, ‘refigured’, such that we can glimpse something that is ‘excessive to the status quo’, something that can ‘empower us to act’. 134

Key to Ward’s response to ‘depoliticization’, therefore, is ‘invit[ing] and encourag[ing] contestation’, listening and speaking across difference: between faith communities, with other disciplines alongside theology, and with other human beings whose social and cultural positions are different to our own. Ward enjoins the theologian ‘to cultivate a healthy agnosticism with respect to what he or she knows’, to listen to others (and read their texts) ‘with courtesy and respect’, ‘learn[ing] about how they’re doing things’, trying ‘to hear what they’re saying’. This is not, he warns, about ‘just culling [from others] what you want and making them kind of grist to your mill’, but ‘[s]pace must be allowed, on the basis of what theology understands about itself and the God with whom it has to do, for the other to speak’. 135 The ‘cultural engagements’ of Christian apologetics are, therefore ‘negotiated engagements’ – engagements which allow for ‘the possibility that in this cultural other God is at work’, bringing ‘disruptive grace’ to ‘the theological project’. 136 Who are these ‘cultural others’, for Ward? While in his texts they often seem to be postmodern philosophers, they might also, he suggests, be ‘Afghans being bombed’, ‘people starving in Ethiopia’, ‘farmers and metalworkers in Senegal and Zambia losing their livelihood’, or ‘a homeless person curled into a tight ball, sleeping on the street’. The ‘haunting’ figure returns (although this time Ward meets them on the way home from ‘a good meal after preaching at an Oxbridge college’). 137 And although this particular cluster of ‘cultural others’ seem all to be in desperate situations that disturb Ward’s own ease, significantly Ward notes (if only in passing), in his discussion of the particular habitus of Karl Barth, that the ‘disruptive grace’ of others may also come in the form of unexpected companions in our times of need. 138

Central to this thesis, then, is the question of the extent to which Ward is truly able to hold open this ‘space ... for the other to speak’ – and it is a question to which we must return in our evaluation of Ward’s project. For the moment, however, we need to highlight the theological significance which Ward attributes to the labour of ‘cultural politics’. On the one hand, as we have seen, in the theologian’s ‘cultural others’ it is at least possible that ‘God is at work’ bringing ‘disruptive grace’ to the ‘theological project’; on the other hand, we are to understand the poiesis of ‘cultural politics’ as participating in a divine poiesis, in ‘the redemption of Creation’, ‘the in-gathering of all things into the Godhead’. 139 Here cultural politics and eucharistic performance are clearly two sides of the same coin: ‘[t]heological reflection’, Ward claims, as the rereading of bodies ‘into’ the ever expanding body of Christ, as ‘render[ing] visible the operation of the Word, the body of Christ’, is itself a participation in that extended embodiment as it moves through time and space and redeems the

134 Ward 2005a:135-6
135 Ward 2005a:54; 2015
136 Ward 2005a:54 (my emphasis). See also, in Ward 2015: ‘you want to get the contestation, because you realise that actually you’ve got a very privileged voice in being a writer and being a theologian, and that voice has to be disrupted, and other voices have to come in and say it’s not like that, and you have to listen to those voices.’
137 Ward 2005a:135-6
138 In the midst of Barth’s unhappy marriage to Nelly Hoffmann, Ward notes, Barth ‘meet[es] Charlotte von Kirschbaum, a companion whom he viewed as a miracle of God’s grace to end his loneliness. She came to live with Nelly and himself, and she has increasingly been recognised as important for not just his emotional but his intellectual formation’ (Ward 2005a:22).
139 Ward 2000b:103
material.’ At his strongest, Ward claims that by directing ‘the productive transformation of culture ... towards a transcendent hope’, theological discourse works ‘not only to participate in but to perform the presence of Christ’, as ‘the cultural imaginary is changed, and alternative forms of sociality, community and relation are fashioned, imagined, and to some extent embodied’. Whether or not this strong claim for theological poesis overwhelms the ‘disruptive grace’ which comes from the Christian theologian’s ‘others’, is the question we will need to hold onto, as we turn to consider Ward’s description of two more ‘concrete’ practices: prayer, and practical service for those ‘in need’.

3.4.iii Church and prayer: inhabiting the eschatological tension

In a few brief but important passages in his work, Ward makes a claim for the centrality of prayer not just as a fundamental Christian practice but also as ‘the most political act any Christian can engage in’. Prayer is the place, he argues, ‘where the material and the spiritual inform each other, the place where the universal cannot be separated from the particular, where the eternal economies of divine givenness operate within history’: as such, it is the place ‘between’ church and world, the place where an Augustinian ‘commingling’ is not just inevitable, but essential. In prayer, then, we open ourselves ‘to the infinity of what is God’ – but we bring ‘not simply ourselves but the whole world we are caught up in, that vast network of relationships of which we are a part, the complex corporations onto which our bodies are mapped’. What changes, then? Firstly, prayer changes us: in prayer’s ‘deep inhabitation of the world’, we pay attention to ‘[t]he world’s events’, and they ‘pass through us and change us’; at the same time, in prayer we are listening to our own yearning – ‘the reaching out of our desire for communion with Christ’ – and listening also, at least in part, to ‘the yearning in the heart of Christ to heal and transform’.

Ward comes close, here, to describing what Luke Bretherton calls the discipline of ‘double listening’ that he identifies as ‘the constitutive political act’ for the church: ‘listening on two horizons simultaneously’, ‘listening to one’s neighbours’ and ‘listening to Scripture’. Like Bretherton also, Ward situates the Christian act of prayer within ‘the eschatological horizon of fulfillment’ (Bretherton), stretching our yearning, our desire, between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’: a distinct ‘temporality of Christian discipleship’ is exposed here, one which ‘always recognizes a remainder’ (Ward coins the term ‘eschatological remainder’, developing the work of Metz and Agamben) – ‘where Christ is not fully revealed, then the present remains incomplete’. Prayer is, then, ‘the primordial participation in [this] eschatological remainder’: every prayer that we pray ‘reaches out toward some inchoate understanding of, even present participation in, another order – a true, just, and good order being prepared, waiting to be revealed.’ If, in prayer, the events of the world ‘pass through us and change us’, then ‘as we dwell in Christ and Christ in us’, says Ward, these events ‘pass through Christ also’. Does this change Christ, as it changes us? Ward does not say. Does prayer somehow change the world as well as changing our responses to it? Yes, Ward affirms: ‘[i]t is not just the individual who is being conformed to Christ; it is the whole of creation,’ he asserts, as ‘[a]ll things

140 Ward 2005b:177
143 Ward 2009:280-281
144 Bretherton 2010:99, 102 (see section 2.5.iv, above).
145 Bretherton 2010:1-5, 44 & passim
are brought before the feet of the cosmic King’. The Christian (the ‘layperson’ particularly, Ward suggests) ‘is continually called upon to pray for discernment; and allow the world within which they engage to permeate those prayers, that it might be redeemed’. And yet again, Ward leaves us with an ambivalence here. On the one hand, prayer is a quintessentially receptive act — ‘listening’, ‘opening’, ‘yearning’ — in fact (and we must return to this later) Ward claims a certain exclusivity for prayer that is hard, if not impossible, to justify: that ‘it is only in prayer that the discipline of listening is developed’. On the other hand, Ward also claims that Christian political discipleship is ‘explicitly engaged in ushering in a kingdom’, ‘enact[ing] it’, even ‘establishing and performing’ it, however incompletely. Here again, the danger remains, that ecclesial performance might squeeze out all other possibilities for agency.

3.4.iv Church and service of those ‘in need’: incorporating ‘the stranger’

The church ‘makes eucharist’, it engages in ‘cultural politics’, it prays, and it serves those ‘in need’. We have already noted the way in which Ward terms all of these practices as ‘service’ (leitourgia), as the ‘body of action’ that constitutes the church, but it is in specific acts of serving particular human ‘others’ that Ward perceives an alternative ‘sovereignty’ to the sovereignty of the world: in Jesus’ act of washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:12-17) he announces ‘a sovereignty (and pedagogy) of service’. When Ward then goes on to read the judgment of the ‘sheep and goats’ in Matthew 25:31-45 as giving concrete expression to ‘the apophatic body of Christ in action’, he fleshes out in more detail this ‘sovereignty of service’: ‘[t]he acts undertaken in these exchanges’ (feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, etc), he claims, are both ‘transformative practices of hope’ and ‘social, political, and ethical interventions in the fabric of the world that incarnate Christ and are oriented toward him’ — and as such, they ‘constitute the body of Christ, the church’. While Ward admits immediately that ‘there is no mention here of an institution such as the church coordinating these actions undertaken as Christians’ he nevertheless insists that ‘what Charles Taylor has called “a network of ever different relations of agape” characterizes this activity done in the name and the Spirit of Christ’. In Ward’s framework, then, these acts of kenotic love, giving to those who are ‘in need’ (in one way or another), both ‘constitute the church’ (as ‘body of action’, which is to say as ‘giver’), and ‘incorporate’ both ‘[t]hose who act and those who are the recipients of such action’ (who ‘are neither designated insiders nor outsiders’ but ‘are simply there as hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, and far from home’) ‘into Christ’.

Here again, however, there are ambiguities in Ward’s writing, but in seeking to clarify them, we will find ourselves drawn towards the central questions of this thesis: how do we configure the relations between ‘Christ’, ‘church’, and ‘other’, and how do we, the church, navigate the equivocation between ‘performing Christ’ and ‘being opened to Christ’? We proceed slowly here, then, seeking

146 Ward 2009:279-283
147 Ward 2013:330
148 Ward 2009:280
149 Ward 2009:284-5
150 Ward 2009:182 (see above)
151 Ward 2009:289
152 Ward 2009:258-9, referencing his earlier work in Ward 2005a:168-174
153 Ward 2009:259
154 Ward 2009:260 (my emphasis)
both to make some sense of Ward’s ambiguities, but also to resist too-easily resolving his equivocations.

First, then, there are questions about how Ward perceives the ‘recipients’ in this passage. If they are indeed, as he says, ‘simply there’, is he (momentarily, at least) acknowledging the ‘gains’ Bob Catterall suggests have been wrought ‘from all the hard-won battles conducted by empiricism and a sensuous form of materialism’,\(^\text{155}\) that might treat these bodies – like the body shrouded in that sleeping-bag on the Oxford Road – simply as they present themselves in their materiality – and to demand a material response – prior to reading on to them a ‘heavy’ economy of cultural signs? Or alternatively, in claiming that the actions here are ‘oriented towards’ Christ and ‘practices of hope’, is Ward in fact echoing the clear direction of the passage (which otherwise he seems to resist with his language of ‘incarnat[ing] Christ’), that what we do ‘for the least of these’, we do \textit{for Christ himself}? Or beyond either of these options, is that claim of an ‘orientation’ towards Christ – a claim possible to make only \textit{after,} and with knowledge of, this parable – in fact to miss what Rachel Muers calls the ‘disruptive power’ of Matthew’s irony here: that ‘the transcendence of God is encountered precisely where \textit{God was not looked for,} or even where the transcendence of the other was not looked for’?\(^\text{156}\) Strong echoes of Ward’s own description of ‘disruptive grace’ suggest we should take this ‘un-looked-for’ dimension of the encounter seriously: that the ‘recipients’ are \textit{neither} ‘simply there’, \textit{nor} perceived in advance ‘as Christ’, but that their meaning is discovered only in, through, and beyond the encounter. It is tempting, as Ward does elsewhere, to incorporate ‘the stranger’, \textit{a priori,} into an ‘economy of friendship’ in which guest and host are interchangeable and the answer to ‘the question in every encounter, “Who is the stranger?”’ is ‘Neither of us – while we have each other.’\(^\text{157}\) But does that \textit{a priori} incorporation in fact function to neutralise the ‘disruptive grace’ of the stranger \textit{as stranger} – as the ‘exteriority’ (in Levinas’ terms) ‘that forever disrupts’ our tendencies (philosophical, theological and practical) to ‘return to the homeland of the Same’?\(^\text{157}\)

Secondly, we must ask what, exactly, is being ‘\textit{exchanged}’ in ‘these exchanges’, as Ward calls them? What does Ward mean when he goes on to say that ‘[t]hose who do not act become those who are excluded’ (an assertion that goes with the grain of the parable – see Mt. 25:45) ‘because they could not receive the gift of Christ that was given, just as the refusal of food, drink, clothing, a prison visit, or hospitality prohibits the performance of the body of Christ’?\(^\text{158}\) A parallel discussion elsewhere in Ward’s work is potentially enlightening here. When Abraham welcomes the three strangers to his camp at Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15), Ward argues, he ‘does not give to the strangers because he will get something in return’ (i.e. according to the conventional economy of exchange), but ‘receives [them] \textit{as God} and in faithfulness to … God’.\(^\text{159}\) He receives them \textit{as gifts}, and in so doing reveals something about ‘guesthood’ beyond being ‘simply there’: ‘to become a guest is to understand that you are not totally dispossessed. Though exhausted and hungry, thirsty and homeless, you still have something to give: you give yourself into the hands of the other – who receives you as a gift. … To be a guest is to place oneself into the hands of another, in humility. The proud and self-sufficient cannot be guests, they are too resentful of the submission to the other that is necessary. They cannot receive; and if they cannot receive they cannot be saved – for they wrestle ultimately with

\(^{155}\) Catterall 2002:152

\(^{156}\) Muers 2009:45 (emphasis in original)

\(^{157}\) Ward 2005b:82, 78 (and also 2003b:7, 4)

\(^{158}\) Ward 2009:260 (my emphasis)

\(^{159}\) Ward 2005b:81-82 (my emphasis)
the grace of God. They fight against the experience of radical dependency; and yet it is in that very experience that God would meet them – as he meets Abraham. Ward’s exegesis of Genesis 18 offers a helpful supplement to his commentary on Matthew 25. Might we understand ‘the gift of Christ’ to be ‘received’ by those who act (or don’t) as the hungry person, the stranger, themselves – and ‘the gift of Christ’ to mean the gift that is Christ himself? That would demand of the would-be-giver a receptivity to the gift of the other (whether or not they perceived them ‘as Christ’). Again, that sense is close to the grain of the parable, even if not completely explicit in Ward’s reflections.

A third question to Ward here, and perhaps more troubling, is what he means by his parallel warning that those who ‘refuse’ (to receive the agapic action) are ‘prohibit[ing] the performance of the body of Christ’? Again, his reflections on the Abraham passage suggest that such a refusal ‘to be a guest’, if coming out of pride and self-sufficiency, might indeed prohibit the flow of God’s hospitable grace. But what if, like the strangers at Mamre, God is already, as it were, on their ‘side’ of the encounter? And what if their refusal here is a response to a prior refusal, by the well-meaning Christian donor, to receive as gift those who present as ‘strangers’, those who are ground down in their hunger and thirst but who, in Ward’s own words, ‘still have something to give’ – who are, as human beings, more than ‘simply there’ as hungry, thirsty’; who exceed the would-be-donor’s definition of them as ‘in need’? What if, as the parable suggests, there is yet another kind of ‘sovereignty’ at work: the sovereignty of the parable’s ‘king’ (that is, Christ) who is able to say ‘I was hungry... I was thirsty... I was a stranger...’ and who desires not simply the meeting of his ‘need’, but to be received – both in and despite of his hunger, thirst and strangeness – as gift? What sense can be made of a ‘sovereignty of hunger and thirst’ within Ward’s economy of Christian desire if ‘[i]n fact,’ as he claims, ‘there is only one motion because there is only one telos – and that motion is, depending upon perspective, kenotic or pleromatic’, ‘either emptying towards the other of filling with respect to receiving the other’? What place does he allow for a movement of desire which issues from thirst – beyond, within, or against the apparently one-way flow of divine love through the church into the world? Or does this veer too close, for Ward, to the ‘postmodern’, or even ‘sado-masochistic’, ‘economies of lack’ (of Levinas, Žižek et al) which he so resists? With these questions as yet unanswered, we need to venture a preliminary evaluation of Ward’s ecclesiological project, before plumbing deeper his christology to find a way forward.

### 3.5 Evaluation: Ward’s ecclesiological equivocation

Ward’s project, we have seen, is concerned with reversing the ‘social atomism’ and ‘disembodiment’ which lie at the roots of the postmodern city’s economic and geographical fragmentation, and the depoliticization of its citizens. He pursues these goals by developing a eucharistically-centred ‘analogical worldview’, grounded in an Augustinian opposition between ‘postmodern’ and ‘Christian’ ‘economies of desire’. These provide the foundations on which Ward builds a theology of the church.

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160 Ward 2003b:3

161 Eric Gregory, in his reading of Augustine’s exegesis of the same parable, does highlight precisely this point. ‘The identification of Christ with the “least of these” can fuel the concern that Augustine’s account of love (even in acts of mercy) remains essentially a concern for one’s salvation’. Augustine’s ‘theological and ethical focus’, however, ‘is Christological rather than merely soteriological... For Augustine, “Christ’s continuing presence with humankind in all-embracing love and in need of love is the surprising message of Matt. 25”... The neighbour is a sacramental presence (a repetition of the first sacrament of the Christ), a real subject of love that still points beyond herself’ (Gregory 2008:349).

162 Ward 2005b:83
as the ‘alternative erotic community’, which ‘appears’ in its performances of eucharist, in its engagements in ‘cultural politics’, in its habits of prayer, and in its service of those ‘in need’. Through these practices we can trace the ‘flow’ of divine love which seems, predominantly, to be directed from God, through the church, into the world (Fig. 3.1, below): the church is receptive primarily to divine initiative, but this appears largely to mute ecclesial receptivity to the initiatives and agencies of the church’s ‘others’. This is the question that we need to consider more directly here.

As we have seen repeatedly, at the heart of Ward’s analogical worldview is a ‘two-level’ cosmology. Although it is tempting to label these two levels the ‘theological’ and the ‘empirical’, Ward would reject such a division, refusing any sense of the ‘empirical’ shorn of ‘theological’ meaning. Perhaps, then, we might better label these levels ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’, with the secondary understood as derivative of, and participating analogically in, the primary. Nowhere are these two levels more significant than in Ward’s consideration of two of his most central terms – ‘church’ and ‘Christ’ – as we have seen already in his discussion of the eucharistic location of Christian formation. ‘The Christian act,’ says Ward, ‘has to be understood in terms not just of the church but also of the church’s participation in Christ, the church as the body of Christ... Discipleship is... not simply following the example of Christ; it is formation within Christ... And the context of this formation is

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163 Ward does not consistently use any pair of terms for what we are talking about here – unlike some of his fellow Radical Orthodoxy writers. In Politics of Discipleship he occasionally talks about ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ – ‘the Christic operation, though working within the world (immanently), also works beyond it, externally to it (transcendently)’ (Ward 2009:185; see also 2009:244, 2005a:14) – and the ‘material’ and the ‘metaphysical’ (e.g. 2009:223). Elsewhere he has contrasted ‘Word’ and ‘world’, the ‘eternal’ and the ‘temporal’ (2005a:10), the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ideal form’ (2000a:277 n.1, referring to Plato), the ‘universal and eternal’ and the ‘local and contingent’ – ‘the local and contingent is vouchsafed only in the name of the universal and eternal that “made of it this particularity”’ (2005a:173, quoting Althusser) – the ‘divine’ and the ‘human’ (2000a:187), and – perhaps simplest – ‘creator’ and ‘creation’: ‘only theology reflects upon the relationship between the uncreated creator and creation on the basis of what the Godhead has revealed about both itself and its desires and designs with respect to creation. The theological makes differences different, makes particularities singular and concrete’ (2000a:254; cf 2005b:8). In all these construals of ‘ontological [or ‘theological’] difference’, Ward is nevertheless clear, ‘read[ing] Plato from the top down’ (2000a:277 n.1), that the ‘secondary’ term derives from, and participates analogically in, the ‘primary’.
the church in all its concrete locatedness and eschatological significance.

Here Ward emphasises both the distinction between the ‘church’ (secondary) and ‘Christ’ (primary), and between the church’s ‘concrete locatedness’ (secondary) and its ‘eschatological significance’ (primary). But in his characteristic move from ‘the church’s participation in Christ’ to an identification of ‘the church as the body of Christ’, he also simultaneously appears to risk blurring those primary-secondary distinctions – just as elsewhere he identifies ‘theological discourse’, and even simply ‘being a Christian’, with ‘perform[ing] the presence of Christ’, or ‘enacting the incarnation of Christ’.

A critical question for Ward’s project, then, is whether the qualifiers ‘body’, ‘presence’, ‘incarnation’ and ‘performance’ preserve sufficient critical distance between ‘church’ and ‘Christ’, so that the latter is not limited to an identification with the former, a relationship ultimately of univocity rather than analogy (i.e. participation) or even something more equivocal (such that we might perceive Christ in the church, or in the stranger, or in both, or neither). This is what we need to evaluate here, and it is intimately entwined with Ward’s second distinction highlighted above, between the church’s ‘concrete locatedness’ and its ‘eschatological significance’. Whether Ward can sustain this temporal distinction, resist the temptation to collapse it, will determine how open he is, ultimately, to the church’s ‘others’. I argue below that Ward’s ‘ecclesiological stance’, the degree of distance between the worldly church of the present and its eschatological fulfilment, in fact varies considerably across his writing, to the point that we can identify at least four distinct ecclesiological positions within his body of work, closely associated with distinct clusters of language he uses for the church. While each of these positions has its dangers (to which Ward is in differing degrees alert), at best these different aspects of Ward’s ecclesiological equivocation offer four positive characteristics of a church open to the formative and transformative potential of the initiatives of its ‘others’. I will consider each position in turn, highlighting both its promising and concerning features.

3.5.i Church as ‘corpus permixtum’: humble, but anxious?

‘[A] distinction has to be drawn,’ says Ward in his discussion of Augustine, ‘between Christ’s true body (vero corpus), realised eschatologically, and Christ’s commingled body in this world (corpus permixtum), a distinction which acknowledges ‘that those who make up the ecclesial community are subject to the same desires and temptations of those espoused to the civitas terrae’. One consequence of this distinction is, at the very least, a certain ‘modesty’ or ‘humility’ about the condition of the worldly church. Ward repeatedly returns (as we have seen already) to ‘the insight Augustine has in De Civitate Dei that it is both necessary to make judgements and equally necessary to admit an ignorance and submit all our judgements to the arbitration of the final judgement of all things in and by Christ’. Our judgements, for Ward, must have a provisionality about them – an

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164 Ward 2009:184 (my emphasis)
165 Ward 2005a:172 (see above, n.121), Ward 2013:330-1
166 I use the term ‘stance’ here following JK Gibson-Graham, acknowledging both the intellectual, but also ‘emotional and affective’ dimensions of our ‘positioning of the self in relation to thought and thus to apprehending the world’ (Gibson-Graham 2006:1).
168 The word is suggested by Ron Kuipers in his review of Ward’s Politics of Discipleship (Kuipers 2009:8), himself drawing on Lambert Zuidervaart’s critique of the work of Ward and his fellow RO theologians (Zuidevaart 2005:141).
169 Ward 2009b:9-10
'eschatological proviso’, as Johann Baptist Metz names it\textsuperscript{170} – such that we cannot know for certain ‘the extent to which any activity … is a work in God’ or nothing but a ‘work of self-reference’. [T]he operations of grace are not limited to the ecclesia,’ he insists; just as there is no guarantee that the church itself is free from ‘mistakes’, ‘compromises’ and ‘blemish’.\textsuperscript{171} ‘The church’s address to the world,’ Ward admits, ‘issues from a struggle, an internal struggle to discern the truth of its own vision and its mission. There is no voice from above, not even in the Christian Scripture, no voice that descends unmediated from some Empyrean realm.’\textsuperscript{172}

For all Ward’s insistence on Christian theology’s imperative to 

\textit{\textbf{\large speak}}, then, there is, for Ward, a ‘rich interpretive openness’ inherent to the Christian narrative, which means that Christians ‘belong to a community that is open-ended and, therefore, continually has to risk’, a community ‘that believes in teleology without being able to predict the future’, that recognises that ‘[w]e do not know how the story ends’ or ‘how far we have come in the plot’, and that all ‘our knowing, thinking, and representing’ is ‘incomplete, open to what is more and limited by that which cannot yet arrive – the questions of tomorrow’. Christian communities might be shaped by narratives, traditions – as the likes of MacIntyre, Lindbeck and Hauerwas assert – but they are not \textit{\textbf{\large bound}} by them, Ward insists: ‘narrative-bound Christian identities … which attempt to draw up the bridges and demarcate the boundaries of confessional communities, have to embrace fully the \textit{\textbf{\large poiesis}} that narrative installs.’ Whereas earlier we highlighted the potential for theological \textit{\textbf{\large poiesis}} to overwhelm the ‘disruptive grace’ of the theologian’s ‘others’, here we must recognise that Ward’s sense of ‘narrative’ (and narrative’s own \textit{\textbf{\large poiesis}}) exceeds what the church has already grasped: ‘[t]raditions are not static’, he insists, and so ‘[t]he boundaries cannot be patrolled, the sites of Christian community cannot be mapped and labelled (as Augustine recognised).’\textsuperscript{173} Theological discourse, for Ward, therefore has its own internal logic for ‘always having to re-examine itself afresh, question its own rhetoric, allow its own blindnesses to exposed’, thus ‘not seeking to colonise the other’ – not to ‘judge the other … to have value’ only insofar as s/he can be ‘integrated into one’s own projects’, only insofar as s/he ‘fulfils and perfects the same’ – but to risk allowing the other to ‘challenge radically the theological project’, to ‘engage [the other] on the basis of a tradition which is open to its future transformations.’\textsuperscript{174}

If \textit{\textbf{\large time}} is ‘open-ended’ for this ‘modest’, ‘commingled’ church of Ward’s, then so also, in an important sense, is \textit{\textbf{\large space}}. The worldly church stretches beyond ‘institutional framework[s]’,\textsuperscript{175} ‘far beyond the precincts of the parish and the priesthood’,\textsuperscript{176} but it still remains \textit{\textbf{\large worldly}}: ‘in all the complexity of being situated’, made visible by those who claim for themselves the name ‘Christians’ – ‘whether they openly declare their Christian allegiance or not’ – in their movement and witness within and among ‘the social bodies’ of the world.\textsuperscript{177} It is in this dispersal of the church beyond a

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{170} See Ward 2009:167-172
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ward 2009:203 (see also 2009:198).
\item \textsuperscript{172} Ward 2009:24
\item \textsuperscript{173} Ward 2000a:247, 258
\item \textsuperscript{174} Ward 2000a:74; 2005a:54. The distinction Ward draws out here, in a discussion of Barth’s relation to Hegel, is between the ‘supplementary’ (i.e. disruptive) and ‘complementary’ (i.e. integrated) use of ‘paradox’.
\item \textsuperscript{175} Ward 2009:189
\item \textsuperscript{176} Ward 2009:203 cf also Ward 2000a:180.
\item \textsuperscript{177} Ward 2013:330-1 cf also Ward 2005a:55: ‘These members of the community of the Church are also members of other forms of fellowship, other bodies – industrial, commercial, agricultural, political, sporting, domestic…’. 
\end{footnotes}
dogmatically patrolled ‘territory’ that the world is transformed (through the performance of eucharistic dissemination, and the engagements of cultural politics, prayer and service), as Christians, individually and collectively, through their participation in ‘other civic associations’, are able to ‘constitute and contest social and political meaning, institutional and behavioural norms’; the practices of the church ‘spilling over and affecting all other social practices’. And while ‘spilling over’ might suggest an emphasis on an overflow from within, a ‘centrifugal’ directionality to ecclesial (inter)action, there are at least repeated suggestions, in Ward’s writing, of the possibility of mutual transformation, as the church finds itself in, and as, ‘a location of liminality, a co-relation that lives always on the edge of both itself and what is other’, as ‘always living beyond itself because it is always interpenetrated by that which refigures its boundaries’.

‘We share so much,’ Ward insists against any ‘assertion[s] of exclusivity’, and so ‘[t]he real questions’ about our inter-relations (he is particularly interested here in ‘the relation of different faith communities and traditions’) ‘only emerge in the practices of our everyday living alongside each other’, when we are able to ‘dwell together’, ‘sit around a table’ together, look each other in the eye and speak and listen to each other’s experiences.

Ward’s ‘corpus permixtum’, then, is a humble church, aware of the provisionality of its judgments, the open-endedness of its narrative, the liminality of its engagements in the world, open to the possibility of challenge, transformation and grace coming to it from the ‘others’ beyond its boundaries. At the same time, however, alongside Ward’s tendency to lean towards a ‘centrifugal’ understanding of the church’s action-in-dispersal, he also confesses to an anxiety about such activity (perhaps here speaking, whether self-consciously or not, from within ‘the institution’). It carries with it ‘certain risks’, he suggests, and the further such action is ‘from chancels and cloisters’ – the further, that is, from the ‘control’ of ‘the church as an institution’ – the greater the ‘vulnerability’, it seems, to the possibility of ‘making mistakes, making compromises, being blemished’. For Ward, it seems, the ‘edges’ of the ‘corpus permixtum’ are more ‘vulnerable’, more ‘compromised’, more ‘commingled’ than some imagined, theologically ‘pure’, institutional ‘centre’. There is a quasi-sociological ecclesial geography in such a claim, but one which surely fails to withstand empirical scrutiny: to take one recent, ugly example, consider the revelations of historic, institutionally acknowledged, sexual abuse of children by members of the priesthood. Ward’s ‘pure’ centre is a fiction – and a dangerous one, at that.

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178 Ward 2009:188-9. There is an ambiguity to Ward’s description of the ‘liminality’ of the church here: while it is in the context of Christians’ entanglement within ‘other civic associations’, it is also in the context (the primary context, we might say) of the mutual indwelling of the church and the divine ‘other’, something that he articulates with more clarity in a parallel passage in 2005b:106-7: ‘I embody Christ’s body and this body embodies mine... [t]he ekklesia ... is the history of [this body’s] co-relation, its indwelling and being indwelt; an erotic history... In fact, it is the eros that can never fully possess the object of its desire that renders the co-relation dynamic... the circulations of desire in which Christ as other is not consumed but is nevertheless continually in touch and therefore continually causing the movements within the soul’ (my emphasis). There is no explicit suggestion by Ward, in either of these passages, that ‘Christ as other’ might be transforming the church in and through those ‘other civic associations’ – a suggestion I want to pursue further, through Ward’s christology, and with the support of Coles in the following chapter.

179 Ward 2000a:258

180 Ward 2000a:180, 2009:203
3.5.ii Church as ‘apophatic body of Christ’: ‘emerging’, or invisible?

A second ecclesiological stance emerges in Ward’s turn to the language of the ‘apophatic’ body of Christ. As bodies, generally, are discovered to be ‘heavy with meaning’, they are also rendered mysterious, excessive to an empiricism which, in Ward’s view, seeks both to grasp in description, and to ‘atomise’ what it describes. ‘The cataphatic body, that which is visible (after the Greek *kataphasis*, affirmation), that which is and can be spoken about, is also, in Christ, apophatic (after the Greek *apophasis*, denial, negation), that which is beyond the powers of human beings to conceive or think’. While this presents as a ‘both/and’ affirmation, Ward’s most frequent leaning is towards an *apophatic* ecclesiology: ‘the body of Christ ... resists the neat and static labels and identities that render it readily understandable’. Here Latour’s understanding of ‘the social’ comes to the fore: even the church as ‘institution’ is not ‘simply there’, but ‘is “made to appear”’, is ‘achieved’ through ‘a series of social acts by’, and ‘interactions’ among, ‘various agents’. Furthermore, this ‘appearance’ has little permanence once it has been ‘achieved’: it has continuity only in the continuity of the activity which constitutes it. This more ‘liquid’ understanding of church, combined with the dispersed geography discussed above, allows for – or even positively encourages – an attention to the church’s interaction with its ‘others’: rather than residing securely in clearly-demarcated *places* (to follow de Certeau’s use of the term) enclosed by ‘solid’ boundaries, it is instead precisely in the *spaces* opened up in interactions between Christians and the non-Christian world (as well as between Christians) that what we call ‘church’ is seen to emerge. This opens the possibility – at the very least – that rather than understanding church to have a central ‘core’ relatively untouched by the church’s engagements at its ‘borders’, we might understand *all* interactions as ‘border negotiations’, and all spaces of encounter as spaces of Christian formation (a suggestion I develop in my engagement with Romand Coles in Chapter 5).

This indeed might well be part of Ward’s intention when he reads Matthew 25 as ‘the apophatic body of Christ in action’, where ‘[t]he acts undertaken in these exchanges ... constitute the body of Christ, the church’: the church comes to visibility in these interactions between giver and recipient. We have already seen, however, how Ward’s reading of this parable skews his ecclesial centre of gravity towards identifying the ‘Christians’ as ‘those who act’ (or ‘intervene’). Here, I want to highlight the other side of that identification: that ‘those who act’ are identified as ‘the body of Christ’, acting ‘in the name and the Spirit of Christ’ – identified at least implicitly, that is, as Christians. A subtle but important shift has happened from the Augustinian ‘indeterminacy’ of the *corpus permixtum* to this ‘apophatic body of Christ’: whereas with the former it is perfectly possible

\[\text{181} \text{ Ward 2009:255} \]
\[\text{182} \text{ Ward 2009:258} \]
\[\text{183} \text{ Ward 2009:201-2} \]

\[\text{184} \text{ While Ward suggests that ‘[t]o some extent’, his ecclesiology here ‘maps on to’ Pete Ward’s conception of ‘liquid church’’, he differs by ‘seeing the networked body of Christ as nothing new. It is the nature of the church as it has always been’ (Ward 2009:203-4 n.32; cf P. Ward 2002).} \]

\[\text{185} \text{ Even in Ward’s advocacy of a more ‘liquid church’, he retains what we might call a ‘centripetal’, institutional tendency that resists such a shift of attention to the church’s ‘borders’. Continuing in his response to Pete Ward’s work, there is, Ward insists, ‘no need to develop new forms of church along the lines of consumerist flows’, not just because church is already in the ‘space of flows’, but because ‘[s]uch networks and flows must be rooted in the traditions of being church. There always remains the need for discipline, catechism, discernment, and belonging that is transgenerational and historical. The institutional church plays an important role in not only encouraging the development of the body of Christ well beyond its borders but regulating such development.’ (Ward 2009:203-4 n.32, my emphasis).} \]
to differentiate between ‘Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’, ‘church’ and ‘other social bodies’ (however interrelated and interpenetrated these might be), but not to discern definitively what actions are ‘in God’ or merely self-referential, in the latter, by contrast, it is the boundaries of ‘the church’ itself which become indeterminate: it is ‘impossible for the church to know’, Ward claims in his exegesis here, ‘who are and who are not part of its [the church’s] composition and therefore who are and who are not included in [Jesus’] “family”’; just as earlier he has asserted that there is no ‘panopticon position from which a judgment can be made concerning who is inside or outside this church, who is or is not acting in and as Christ in any particular situation’; no position, that is, other than that of God alone. Here ‘acting in and as Christ’ (or not) becomes identical with being ‘inside or outside’ the church. Ward here describes this indeterminacy of the church’s boundaries as ‘porous’, but that is surely not exactly what he means. He does not appear interested in ‘holes’ which permit (or are made by) the movements of people back and forth across such boundaries (the usual sense of the word); rather, he is simply stating that we cannot know where the boundaries are. The ‘boundary spaces’ are not just dispersed: they are invisible. One consequence of this, at least in Ward’s exegesis of Matthew 25, is that since we cannot know whether the ‘others’ here are ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’, the possibility that they might be ‘interesting’ others – meriting some kind of negotiation with – seems to dissolve into them being ‘simply there’, defined only by their need, requiring us to act but not interact. As Michael Nausner notes of Ward at the end of Cities, there is a contradiction in his work when he can ‘quote [Homi] Bhabha appreciatively for his emphasis on the in-between spaces as the terrain for the elaboration of selfhood’, but then ‘in the same paragraph becomes impatient with the in-between spaces he has just endorsed as crucial. ... From the perspective of Christian community, then, the interstitial production of subjectivity seems to fall by the wayside due to its [the church’s] “transcending” of these in-between spaces.’

We will return to Nausner’s critique of Ward’s ‘boundary-transcending’ shortly, but for the moment I want to note that Ward’s apophatic ecclesiology of the body of Christ more than resembles the ‘ecclesiological inclusivism’ which Nicholas Healy associates with Karl Rahner, an inclusivism which, in Healy’s words, ‘asserts that all that has been touched by the truth and goodness of Christ is in some way embraced within the church’s reality. There is therefore a connection at the ontological level between the church and all that lies outside its visible boundaries, both religious and non-religious’. In fact, Ward’s and Rahner’s common debt to de Lubac is clear here: ‘[n]othing authentically human,’ writes de Lubac, ‘whatever its origin, can be alien to her [i.e. the church Catholic] ... To see in Catholicism one religion among others, one system among others, even if it be added that it is the only true religion, the only system that works, is to mistake its very nature, or at least to stop at the threshold. Catholicism is religion itself. It is the form that humanity must put on

186 Ward 2009:259
187 Ward 2009:202. See also Ward 2005a:58: ‘the question always remains open, as Augustine knew, concerning who are the citizens of the city of God, how they are identified and thus who constitutes the Church’. Again, Ward slips from identifying the church as the worldly ‘corpus permixtum’, to identifying the church with ‘the citizens of the city of God’.
188 Nausner 2005:277. Ward quotes Bhabha 1994:1-2: “What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain with for [sic] elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative site [sic] of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (in Ward 2000a:258)
189 Healy 2000:130
in order finally to be itself.

What ‘Catholicism’ is for de Lubac here, ‘the body of Christ’ is for Ward. It is an ‘account of the church and its relation with the world’, as Healy highlights, ‘from a realized-eschatological perspective. It describes who we – graced humanity as a whole – already secretly are in the light of our final redemption’. The ‘concrete church’, as Healy calls it, is simply ‘the expression of what is hidden and already present in the world’; the visible ‘expression’, that is, of Charles Taylor’s “network of ever different relations of agape” that Ward names ‘the apophatic body of Christ’. If, however, these ‘social, political, and ethical interventions in the fabric of the world’, interventions which ‘incarnate Christ and are oriented toward him’, are yet often done (as the parable insists) without knowing they are done ‘for Christ’, then we find ourselves in a dilemma similar to that which plagues Rahner’s inclusivism: on the one hand, we resist associating an exclusivism with the visible, institutional church (acknowledging that these acts of love could happen, and do happen, all over the place); on the other hand, we risk appropriating all such acts of love as (‘anonymously’) ‘Christian’. The appropriations which emerge in Ward’s leaning towards an ‘apophatic’ ecclesiology – his ‘explod[ing]’ of ‘any tidy distinction between inside and outside’ as Kyle Gingerich Hiebert puts it – are, however, little more than precursors of the more thorough colonisation that comes with his more thoroughly ‘erotic’ ecclesiological language.

### 3.5.iii Church as ‘erotic community’: ‘transgressive’, or colonial?

The dissolving of boundaries is, as we have just seen, a characteristic of the ‘indeterminacy’ of the ‘apophatic body of Christ’. It is also, however, more strongly emphasised when Ward turns to the language of church as ‘erotic community’. Now ‘transgression’ of the boundaries of the church ‘as an institution’ is something not just to be acknowledged, but to be celebrated, as that transgression is by something more, something ‘excessive’ to the institution: ‘a community of desire, an erotic community, a spiritual activity’. Eliding, even collapsing, the Augustinian distinction between ‘corpus permixtum’ and ‘vero corpus’, this ‘transgressive’ community Ward consistently identifies with ‘the body of Christ’ itself – which elsewhere he has identified as ‘the true body’ within which all other bodies ‘become true only in their participation’ – ‘the eucharistic We’, which is ‘excessive’ to those ‘institutional places’. There is much to be said for this ‘excessive’, ‘transgressive’ body: not only does it (apparently) escape the sexism and heterosexism of the ‘institutional church’, but more widely it has potential to ‘offer spaces of resistance’ to ‘all current ideologies, powers, and dominions’, precisely because ‘[t]he work of the church ... exceeds the limitations’ of all of these: ‘the depoliticizations, the dematerializations, the dehumanizations, the commodifications, the atomisms, ghettos, gated communities, and cosmopolises produced by our current democracies,

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191 Healy 2000:136
192 Healy 2000:135
193 See e.g. Fletcher 2005:245.
194 Hiebert 2014:295 (my emphasis). Similarly, Lucy Gardner notes ‘an intriguing double-think’ in Ward, and Radical Orthodoxy more generally: ‘everything is “in” – within theology, within RO, within Christology’ and, we might add, within an apophatic ecclesiology – ‘except strong and thick demarcations of inside and outside’ (Gardner 2000:130).
195 Ward 2000a:93-4
196 Ward 2000a:180-1 (see above)
neoliberal economics, and spurious spiritualities’. ‘The church is not unaffected by them,’ he acknowledges, ‘but it works a work that cannot be reduced to them’. 197

As Ward has already warned us himself, however, in eroding the vital temporal distinction between the worldly church and its eschatological fulfilment, he opens himself to at least two dangers: on the one hand, he slips towards an idealised church, of which we catch only glimpses in the present-day world; on the other hand, if retained as a description of the worldly church Ward’s ever-expanding erotic community risks charges of colonialism, despite his protestations to the contrary. In this latter danger is Michael Nausner’s main argument with Ward: that despite Ward’s generally acute ‘sensitiv[ity] to the pulls and pushes of our multicultural situation’, he nevertheless ‘risks colonial affiliations’ and a certain ‘triumphant boundary crossing’ when he describes ‘the Christian community’ as ‘a community that “occupies [sic] a space transcending place, walls and boundaries.”’ 198 The problem, as Nausner articulates clearly, is that with his conception of the boundary-transcending ‘erotic community’ Ward erodes the vital distinction between the church and Christ. Ward may be alert to the dangers of imperialism and globalization, but he cannot resist describing the church precisely in globalising terms. It is not just, as we have already seen, that Ward describes ‘Christianity’s divine, Trinitarian economy’ as, like global capitalism, a ‘comprehensive system that allow[s] for nothing outside [itself]’. 199 While Ward would surely agree with Elaine Graham’s assessment of him, that he still retains ‘a perception of “the Word and the world” as essentially of a different order, ontologically, to one another’, 200 nevertheless for Ward ‘the work and words of the living community’ of Christians themselves ‘extend out’ – in language so closely resembling the very Word to which they ‘bear witness’ that they risk identification – ‘into the “deepest, darkest immanence”’ (Barth’s words) as they ‘go forth’, commissioned and commanded (Mt. 28:19-20), ‘teleologically driven’, ‘tracing and performing ... “the march of God in the world”’ (Hegel). Ward does acknowledge that ‘[w]e may not like Hegel’s metaphor’, and that the words of Jesus’ missionary imperative are ‘not only stirring and challenging ... but dangerous ... as a continuing history of colonialism, zealotry, hatred, prejudice and violence ... testifies’, and yet it seems the danger is unavoidable: it is ‘upon this basis’, he insists, upon ‘[t]his movement in, through and beyond the Church’, that a Christian cultural politics, must proceed. 201

For Ward, the potential contradiction between his insistence that there is ‘no room for Christian imperialism’ while describing ‘the continually expansive Christological corpus’ is avoided by maintaining the non-violence of divine love, however unilateral and boundary-transcending it remains: ‘crusades in the name of the triune love misconceive the kenosis of that love. That love is poured out externally on behalf of not against. It works alongside, transfiguring the ordinary, transforming the mundane. It persuades; it does not coerce.’ 202 The same, however, cannot be claimed of the church’s history of expansion – hence the need to hold onto a ‘modest’, ‘limited’ conception of church, as Nausner argues: ‘[t]o avoid a colonial-style affiliation between Christianity and the powers that be,’ he suggests, ‘it would be better to refrain from depicting the Christian

199 See n.82 above (Ward 2009:96).
200 Graham 2013:128-9
201 Ward 2005a:55-6, 10
202 Ward 2000a:257, 259
community as “transcending place” and limit the transcending qualities to Christ’s presence.

Although Christ is the one who transcends multiple boundaries, I believe that we as Christians, as Christian community, need to settle for the more modest notion of negotiating at boundaries. While Ward acknowledges that the ‘voice’ of Christian tradition ‘is never pure, never innocent’, but needs to ‘listen to … many voices’ and ‘risk encounter’, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern how and where such ‘encounters’ might happen if the boundaries of the church, the ‘erotic community’, are not just invisible, but constantly ‘on the march’. If ultimately, for Ward, there is ‘no insider or outsider in Christ and therefore in the operations of the body of Christ’, then where are the spaces for ‘negotiation’ that Ward apparently needs for his cultural politics? If, as Ward insists, ‘neither of us’ is ‘the stranger’ within ‘the Christian economy’, then what possibility remains for the challenge of ‘disruptive grace’? And what are we to make of those who consciously situate themselves ‘outside’ the church? Are they simply wrong? Or worse, condemned to an Augustinian ‘nothingness’?

3.5.iv Church as ‘heavenly city’: ‘prefiguring’, or triumphant?

If Ward often elides the temporal distinction between ‘corpus permixtum’ and ‘vero corpus’ through an apophatic ecclesiology, an inclusivist church with invisible, indeterminate boundaries, or through the transgression – or imperialism – of the ever-expanding, ‘erotic community’, then there are times when he ventures even further – appearing to collapse the distinction entirely and equating the visible church, as Hans Boersma points out, with ‘the celestial City of God’. In the passage where Ward teases out the distinction most clearly, he carefully hedges his language with conditions: insofar as the Church ‘is ordered towards the worship and love of God, and participates in the triune operation of that God (both in the natural world and in and through the willed actions of human beings), then it is the heavenly city’, he states – maintaining the ‘apophatic’ point that we can never know exactly how much the worldly church of our everyday experience is so ‘ordered’. But the danger in Ward’s writing is that he is rarely as careful to qualify ‘the Church’ in this way; elsewhere he seems to assume, without qualification, that ‘the church’ is indeed that rightly ‘ordered’ body. When he identifies ‘the layperson’s gift’ as being ‘at the forefront of the relationship between the public life of the church and the civic life of society: the city of God and the secular city’, the parallel pairings allow us to risk imagining that ‘the church’ simply is ‘the city of God’ (just as ‘the civic life of society’ and ‘the secular city’ appear as identifiable terms).

Elsewhere, as Ward teases out the ‘new anthropology’ that is ‘re-establish[ed]’ in the ascension of Jesus, he insists that ‘[i]t is pointless’

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203 Nausner 2004:131 (my emphasis). Nausner argues (2005:279) that Ward’s concentration on the Christian community’s ‘transcending boundaries’ means that he tends to ‘stop short’ of describing what happens in ‘negotiations’ at inter-traditional boundaries (while implying that they do at least exist). Nausner reads as christological, rather than ecclesiological, Ward’s claim ‘that the body of Christ can cross boundaries, ethnic boundaries, gender boundaries, socio-economic boundaries, for example’ (Nausner 2004:131, citing Ward 2000a:103). I am less convinced than Nausner that Ward’s ‘church’/‘body of Christ’ distinction is as clear as that – in fact, I am arguing that Ward consistently equates the two.

204 Ward 2000a:70
205 Ward 2009:260
206 Again, see Nausner 2005:277: ‘[Ward’s] boundary transcendence is less pronounced in its absorption of difference than Milbank’s boundary obliteration, but it risks a similarly appropriative vision of the love of alien and enemy’.
207 Boersma 2004:419
208 Ward 2000a:229 (my emphasis)
209 Ward 2013:330
trying to ‘access ... the body of the gendered Jew’ because ‘the Church is now the body of Christ, so to understand the body of Jesus we can only examine what the Church is and what it has to say concerning the nature of that body as scripture attests to it’.\(^{210}\) Not long after, Ward quotes Gregory of Nyssa approvingly: “he who sees the Church looks directly at Christ. ... The establishment of the Church is [the] re-creation of the world.”\(^{211}\) Gregory surely means the eschatological church here – but Ward, unlike Gregory, appears to be directing our attention (in exhorting us to ‘examine what the Church is and what it has to say’) to the visible, worldly church of the present.

Here is the ‘realised’ side of Ward’s ‘eschatological remainder’ (in contrast to Metz’s ‘eschatological reserve’): the ‘supernatural mystery of Christ-with-us’ that is both ‘present [yet] incomplete’, ‘a messianism operative now’, traces of which can be recognised in both ‘acts of charity’ and ‘secular ideologies of the future’, even while it ‘is excessive and superabundant to them’.\(^{212}\) Viewed in its most positive light as offering potential for political change, Ward’s ecclesiological stance here might be seen to closely resemble the logic of ‘prefigurative politics’ which, as Luke Yates has argued, combines five processes: ‘collective experimentation; the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings; the creating of new and future-orientated social norms or “conduct”; their consolidation in movement infrastructure, and the diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages and goals to wider networks and constituencies’\(^{213}\). At best, Ward’s ‘confidence’ in the visible church, far from an ecclesial triumphalism, can be understood as the creation, consolidation and diffusion of just such a future-orientated collection of meanings, norms and activities: orientated, that is, towards ‘the city of God’ and ‘the re-creation of the world’. That Yates’ description begins with ‘experimentation’ is not incidental, however: the kind of poiesis that prefigurative politics engages in is not only confident, but also includes an ongoing element of self-critical reflection\(^{214}\) - something to which, at his humble best, Ward is also attentive: prefiguring the ‘heavenly city’ and recognising the fallibility of the ‘corpus permixtum’ must go hand-in-hand.

The danger with Ward’s tendency here, however, is precisely that he loses sight of the ‘corpus permixtum’: as Hans Boersma has argued, Ward ‘transposes St Augustine’s oppositional logic of civitas dei and civitas terrena from the celestial key to the temporal key’, a transposition ‘fraught with complexities and consequences’.\(^{215}\) If Augustine himself wrestled with the contradiction between a patience with the present ‘commingling of amor dei and amor sui within both church and world, and an oppositional – even at times violent – stance towards those he considered heretical,\(^{216}\) then Ward exacerbates this contradiction the more he tends towards an ‘overrealized eschatology’ that holds to a boundary-less, ‘anti-institutional’ ecclesiology (within his all-encompassing ‘participatory framework’) on the one hand, and a wholly negative construal of ‘the world’ on the other. We have seen, in his criticisms of Ellul’s theology of the city, that Ward explicitly disavows such a binary opposition, but in practice he falls repeatedly into just such a trap. Indeed, I would suggest it is almost inevitable with the way he construes his ‘cultural turn’ as reading ‘the signs of the times’ (and with it a universalising description of ‘postmodern culture’ as ‘dispersed into a sea of

\(^{210}\) Ward 2000a:113 (my emphasis)
\(^{212}\) Ward 2009:169-172
\(^{213}\) Yates 2015:1
\(^{215}\) Boersma 2005:419, 424, 427, 430, 432
\(^{216}\) See n.76, above (cf Ward 2000a:277 n.6).
universal placelessness ... leading always to a single, human subject, the monadic consumer, thus concealing the cultural differences between different spatial locations, and the possibility of different forms of human subjectivity (or, indeed, personhood) in different places. It is to such subtleties that disciplines such as urban geography and ethnography pay close attention, but which Ward’s broader-brush ‘cultural’ approach tends to render in much starker (and predominantly negative) terms.

This ‘oppositional logic’ that Boersma identifies is illustrated most clearly by an image Ward develops in *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, as he seeks to answer that book’s central question, ‘From where does theology speak?’ On the ‘primary’ level (as we have labelled it here), he reminds us that theology speaks ‘[f]rom Christ and of Christ and in Christ’. On the ‘secondary’ level, however, theology ‘must be rooted in the Church, but at its open western door – on the threshold between the world and the east-facing altar; as ready to serve in one direction as the other’. The Christian theologian who ‘stands at that place between the breaking of the bread and its distribution throughout the world’ is to look in both directions, but not with equal affection: she is to look ‘back into the church [where] the order of life is presented’, and out into the world, towards ‘the serried ranks of city life ... so many high points and squalid allies, neon-lights, plasma-screens, crowded tenements, seductions, excitements and destitutions’. What sounds initially like ‘a mutual encounter on equal terms’, as Elaine Graham puts it, turns out to be one in which ‘the traffic is all one-way’. There is little evidence of ‘commingling’: there are ‘high points’ and ‘excitements’ in Ward’s postmodern city, but there is no sense that they have any depth of meaning to them. Instead, as Graham observes, the role of the Church, as ‘the space of order’, ‘is to bestow peace and reconciliation on a degenerate culture’ – a ‘contradictory and disordered’ world – ‘whilst never appearing to require words of insight, healing or forgiveness in return.’ The theologian, moreover, ‘remains ensconced inside the Church’, and there thus ‘seems no possibility ... that theology might speak from profane places as well as from the sanctuary of the conventionally sacred.’

### 3.6 Summary

In the chapter that follows, I will examine two further examples of this ‘one-way traffic’ in Ward’s work – both examples located very specifically in the urban margins – and I will go on to explore both the possibilities and the limits of Ward’s own (christological) resources to ‘interrupt’ it. For the moment, let us recall where our examination of Ward’s ecclesiology has taken us.

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217 We have seen this universalising tendency particularly in rhetorical flourishes such as his pronouncement that ‘[t]he market turns us all into consumers who produce only to afford to be more powerful consumers’ (Ward 2000a:55-56, see above n.24). The universal ‘us’ here is, on one level, a claim for the globalising reach, the ‘incorporating’ dynamic, of ‘the market’; but on another level it conceals a more particular ‘us’ that merits closer examination. Furthermore, Ward’s emphasis on the logic of ‘incorporation’ (in different ways economically, culturally, and theologically), while it does pick up a key dynamic (as we saw in Sassen’s analysis in Chapter 1) of pre-1980s capitalism, tends to either downplay or ignore the equally powerful logic (which Sassen identifies) of ‘expulsion’, increasingly visible in our post-1980s world. Ward’s emphasis on the church’s logic of incorporation might similarly obscure the reality of ‘expulsions’ in the real-life church, which is precisely why (as I argue here) sustained attention to the church’s ‘others’ is vital.

218 Ward 2005a:59 It is worth noting, at least in passing, that in Ward’s idealised church it must be an ‘east-facing altar’ (i.e. both historically a pre-Vatican II liturgy, and clearly locating God ‘beyond’ in the opposite direction to ‘the world’).

219 Graham 2013:129-30

220 Graham 2013:129-30
For Ward, Christian discipleship is, we have seen, ‘not simply following the example of Christ; it is formation within Christ... And the context of this formation is the church in all its concrete locatedness and eschatological significance.” I have sought to demonstrate, however, that while Ward makes the case strongly for a tensive distance between these two terms (the Augustinian ‘corpus permixtum’ and ‘vero corpus’), he does not sustain that distance consistently, instead positioning ‘the church’ differently, at different points in his writing, in relation to its ‘eschatological significance’ as ‘the body of Christ’. In some places, Ward describes a humble, fallible, and visible body, ‘vulnerable’ both to the ‘disruptive grace’ of the non-ecclesial ‘other’ and to the (anxiety-inducing) possibilities of compromise and blemish. In others, he proposes church as an ‘apophatic’ body, forever ‘emerging’ in temporary materialisations (showing up, for example, in acts of love and service), but also ‘inclusivist’ in a sense which tends to render boundaries invisible, border-lands non-existent, and absorb outsiders as acting ‘in Christ’, whether they know it or not. In yet others, we are offered an ‘erotic community’ which not only ‘transgresses’ the boundaries of the institutional church, but also offers a space resistant to the expulsions and depoliticizations of global capitalism – while risking falling prey precisely to the colonial temptations of the latter in its ongoing dynamic of expansion. And lastly, as ‘heavenly city’ visible in an earthly present, Ward’s most ‘eschatologically realised’ version of church is at best an experiment in ‘prefigurative’ politics, embodying a glimpse of an eschatological future in stark critique of the ‘powers that be’, but at worst that same church can be heard triumphantly claiming to be the place of transcendent ‘order’ and light over against the ‘deepest, darkest immanence’ of a disordered world, missing (among other things) the countless sites of hope-full micro-politics beyond the church’s gates.

This spectrum of ecclesiological positions reflects a tension which Ronald Kuipers identifies in Ward’s Politics of Discipleship, ‘between modesty and confidence’, ‘between Ward’s robust theological commitment, on the one hand’ – his belief ‘that the theological perspective he (so impolitely) promotes does indeed possess “the goods” to combat the various malaises of modernity he describes’ – ‘and his humble recognition of the all-too-human follies to which it [theology] may easily succumb, on the other’.

What determines Ward’s ecclesiological stance at any given point in his writing? At its most positive, we might read his equivocation as a ‘tactical’ positioning, with respect to particular contexts and particular ‘others’: a ‘negotiation’ of the power differentials between the church and those particular ‘others’ – however implicit that power analysis might often be in Ward’s work. So, for example, we have seen that Ward’s ecclesiological positioning is relatively ‘humble’ (perhaps penitent, and sometimes completely tongue-tied) with regard to bombed Afghans or rough-sleepers in Britain, ‘courteous’ and ‘respectful’ (if also ‘impolite’) in conversation with other religious and philosophical traditions, inclusive and ‘incorporating’ of those who act in agape-reflecting ‘service’, and yet fiercely oppositional in its ‘battle for the soul’ against

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221 As above, n.161 (Ward 2009:184).
222 Kuipers 2009:9-10
223 Rose notes (of the ‘new Jerusalem’ tendency, in which we include Ward) that by re-presenting ‘power as plural yet total and all-pervasive’, and the ‘opposition to power thus conceived as equally pluralistic, multiform and incessant, as the anarchic community’, we ‘unwittingly’ disqualify ‘any possible investigation into the dynamics of the configuration and reconfiguration of power’, which is, she argues our actual and ‘endless’ predicament as inhabitants of ‘the third city’ (Rose 1996:21).
224 In my interview with him, Ward expressed a similar paralysis when describing his experience returning to his childhood city of Salford, as a theology student: ‘there was no way that I could speak even to my next-door neighbours in Salford. I mean, I had a desperate need for – we just didn’t have a vocabulary that either of us could share’ (Ward 2015).
the atomistic consumption of global capitalism. It is pre-eminently in prayer, Ward argues, that the Christian discerns the difference – and the distance – between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’ of a particular situation, and it is in prayer that our desire is stirred and stretched to actively seek out the latter. I suggested earlier that in Ward’s description of prayer he comes close to the ‘double listening’ that Luke Bretherton identifies as ‘the constitutive political act’ for the church: simultaneously ‘listening to one’s neighbours’ and ‘listening to Scripture’. While even in Bretherton’s writing the centre of gravity at times tips towards portraying the church as the source and the ‘host’ of ‘truly public space’, however, in Ward the direction of flow is far less open to interruption: for Ward, we recall, ‘it is only in prayer that the discipline of listening is developed’. It is Ward’s resistance to being formed and transformed through his encounters with his neighbours, to which we now turn our attention.

\[225\] The church, Bretherton argues, is not simply ‘a constituent of civil society’ but is itself ‘a public constituted by its worship life’, and ‘as precisely this it is the free or truly public space in which civil society can be re-formed’. It is from the church that contradictions to the dominant and oppressive dynamics of power may be forged. For Christians, ‘it is the prior experience of being the world reconciled in and through Christ that provides the church with the possibility of hosting the re-emergence of a genuinely political space in which human dignity is upheld and common objects of love may be deliberated over and acted upon’ (Bretherton 2010:95, my emphasis; cf Cavanaugh 2001:84, Wannenwetsch 2004:146-59).
Chapter 4

Interrupting the church’s flow:
Ward’s ‘schizoid’ christology,
and repressed ‘others’
In the previous chapter, we examined Graham Ward’s ‘diagnosis’ of the ‘ailments’ of the postmodern city (‘social atomism’ exacerbated by economic and geographical fragmentation, and a ‘disembodiment’ at the root of a profound depoliticization), in terms of two, opposing ‘economies of desire’, and we began to evaluate his proposed ‘therapy’: the ‘performance’ of an ‘alternative erotic community’, the Christian church, through practices of eucharist, ‘cultural politics’, prayer and service. We discerned in Ward’s work a variety of – at best tactically, contextually determined – ecclesiological ‘stances’ on a spectrum between ‘modesty’ and ‘confidence’; varying distances between the ‘concrete’ church and its eschatological perfection in Christ, offering a range of possibilities for reversing depoliticization, from mutually transforming conversations across the boundaries of difference, through ever-expanding networks of agapic action, to bold experiments in ‘prefigurative’ politics. We began to observe, however, that in Ward’s more ‘confident’ theological articulations, the ‘flow’ of loving action becomes more and more clearly ‘one-way’ – from God, through the church, into the world – and the church becomes less and less receptive to the gifts and challenges of its ‘others’, tending either to ‘incorporate’ them with more than an echo of colonialism, or to render them passive, ‘needy’, or ‘disordered’.

It is these tendencies that we examine more critically here, starting with two key examples of Ward’s ‘oppositional logic’ in action: both are situated, significantly, in the urban margins, and taken together they expose a clear but unacknowledged masculine sexual, and imperialist, logic underlying Ward’s concerns – and discernible, in fact, even in his more ‘modest’ ecclesiological formulations. To ‘interrupt’ that logic, this chapter proceeds to find a promising ‘opening’ within Ward’s christological reflections, in his readings of both the work of Luce Irigaray and the gospel story of Jesus’ encounter with a haemorrhaging woman. I then go on to show, however, how Ward ‘retreats’ not only from this ‘opening’, but also, more generally in his work, from the challenge of the other, from the materiality of Jesus, from the particularity of christology, from the engagement of praxis and, finally, from his particularity and situatedness as a theologian and human being. If Ward’s political theology is to be an effective resource for reversing the ‘social atomism’ and ‘disembodiment’ at the root of contemporary depoliticization, I argue here, some further significant developments are needed to return Ward to these places to which he seems unwilling to give sustained presence and attention.

4.1 ‘Penetrating’ the urban margins: The Full Monty and ‘violent no-go zones’

If ‘city life’ appears in Ward’s Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice as both ‘seductive’ and ‘squalid’, but in relatively abstract terms, then in his earlier Cities of God it has much more texture and detail to it but is, at times (and particularly when Ward focuses on the urban margins, rather than the city centre), no less theologically desolate. This is brought into sharpest relief in Ward’s reading of ‘the signs of the times’ as depicted in the 1997 film The Full Monty.1 As a graphic illustration of the economic shift ‘from Fordism to flexible accumulation’ (as David Harvey names it), the film is set against the political backdrop of UK society under Margaret Thatcher. The worldview emerging with Thatcherism was, Ward argues (citing with approval the analysis of Nicholas Boyle), a

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1 The first view of the city [of Sheffield], which unfolds as the credits and titles roll, takes the form of a promotional exercise on behalf of the city in the 1960s... Sheffield, the home of steel manufacture, as a city of industrial and commercial plenty. The second view, which follows the credits, is an interior shot of one of the steel sheds in the 1990s, now abandoned, gutted, derelict. The camera looks down impassively on the scene ... and into the corner of the frame walk two of the former workers-turned-petty-thieves bearing an old girder (symbol of that erstwhile plenty) (Ward 2000a:55).
nihilism in which *there is nothing else, beyond the satisfaction of desires*. ... The assumption behind the demand for flexibility in the workers – which denies them the continuity of a fixed identity – is that as consumers too they will have no fixed or limited desires, not give themselves an identity by voluntarily renouncing any of those desires (e.g., to buy furniture on Sundays or to receive forty channels on their TV set) for some more general – and therefore non-marketable – good.² For Ward, however, Boyle’s analysis is missing one significant factor: this desire ‘is gendered. The agency of this desire is phallic.’ The logic of ‘the changing matrix of global and national economic forces’ entangled in the ‘contemporary erotification of culture’ is ‘the intensification of erectile pleasure’, ‘the penetration and conquest of the new and the novel’, with the accompanying ‘fear of castration (of being excluded or thwarted)’.³ In The Full Monty, then, Ward perceives not simply the ‘effects of economic restructuring’ on an urban area abandoned in the post-Fordist shift, but also the stark ‘gendering of urban relations’ when ‘[t]he surplus of unemployed male labour’ and ‘the pool of lowly paid female labour’ are brought together in ‘the constant interweaving of consumer and sexual desire’. ‘[T]he film focuses,’ Ward argues, ‘on male sexual anxieties of castration (or impotence). Female desire is governed entirely by the phallus (the male strippers). In one significant scene a group of women invade the men’s toilets and one of them pees standing up against the urinal. She is completing the castration of the male (she is being watched by one of the men), but in carrying that castration to completion her own sexuality is denied and erased even more.’⁴ If Ward accuses of Ellul of a ‘disturbing gendering’ of the city when he casts the metropolis as a ‘barren mother’,⁵ then through his reading of The Full Monty he has depicted post-industrial Sheffield as the terrain of castrated men and sexually dominated women, rendered invisible – ‘erased’ – by the phallic economic desire of global consumerism.

In Ward’s most recent discussion of the city and the ‘struggle for its soul’, in The Politics of Discipleship, the ‘one-way traffic’ of CTRP and the sexual economics of Cities converge, as Ward’s ‘oppositional logic’, his account of ‘service’, and his one-way conception of the flow of divine love, come together with rhetorical force. While ‘the church can celebrate,’ he allows, ‘the transcendent aspirations expressed in the British city’, he warns it also ‘to be alert to the dehumanizing and godless dangers’ of prevailing cultural trends. ‘The church,’ he goes on, ‘must not allow areas of the city to be walled up. Ghettos and gated communities must be entered; the no-go zones riddled with racial and economic tensions and ruled by violence must be penetrated and linked back to the wider civic society; and the Christians in these places must be hospitable, opening the possibilities for transit, for the flow of communications necessary for freedom. The church must work alongside other agencies at every level ... to [help] those who fall beneath the city’s ambitions, those dwarfed and rendered insignificant by its towering achievements.’⁶ Here, again, we witness a prioritising of action and initiative over reception, of the agency of the ‘helpers’ over the agency of the ones cast as ‘needy’ – and an unquestioning identification of ‘the church’ with the former. We are also confronted here, however, with a church whose centre of gravity is presumably so much outside such ‘walled up’ urban areas (located firmly in middle-class suburbia, perhaps?), such that it has to ‘enter’ and ‘penetrate’ them; and those (presumably few) Christians who are in ‘these places’ are

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³ Ward 2000a:56
⁴ Ward 2000a:265 n.5
⁵ (Section 3.3.ii, above)
⁶ Ward 2009:219-20 (my emphasis)
commanded to be ‘hospitable’ to that penetration. At its best, there is a burning desire here, from Ward’s middle-class church, for relationship with and participation in these urban ‘no-go zones’; at its worst, however, that desire is so heated, and the uneven distributions of wealth and power (within both city and church) so unexamined, that Ward’s ‘sovereignty of service’ begins to sound distinctly, and unnervingly, violent in its intention to ‘penetrate’.7

4.2 Ward’s ‘radical orthodoxy’: a patriarchal, sexual, and imperialist logic?

Ward’s theology is unashamedly ‘erotic’. The two examples considered above come perhaps from the more extreme end of his rhetorical register, but they are by no means anomalies within his corpus of writing, nor are they confined to the more ‘confident’ and ‘oppositional’ of his ecclesiological stances. Rather, they are, as we saw in the previous chapter, a direct consequence of his configuration of the one-way ‘flow’ of divine love as ‘pleroma-and-kenosis’ which is at the core of his theological ontology. This ‘flow’ can be repeatedly seen at work in Ward’s conception of the church as the ‘erotic community’ which, variously, ‘overspills defined places’, ‘expands ever outward’, ‘disseminates’ the body of Christ ‘through a myriad of other bodies’, and ‘penetrates’ even the barren wastelands and violent ‘no-go zones’ of the postmodern city.8 As Linn Marie Tonstad observes, there is a consistent ‘spatializing’ tendency in Ward’s work – of equating ‘difference’ with ‘distance’ – which goes ‘all the way down’ to his theology of trinitarian relations (closely paralleling that of Hans Urs von Balthasar), and is rooted in Gregory of Nyssa’s image of the ‘diastema’, the separation between God and creation. Ward focuses on ‘distance’, Tonstad notes, in an attempt to render difference ‘fluid’, ‘unstable’: ‘[i]f difference is always a matter or relative distance or proximity, [then] difference takes no final or fixed form’. One consequence, she suggests, is that ‘distance’ ends up ‘stand[ing] as a proxy for relation itself’: ‘desire’, for Ward, becomes ‘both the creator and the creation of space’. Furthermore, she argues, if the bodies of ‘self and other cannot be [thought to be] in the same place at the same time’, then ‘kenosis’ itself becomes spatialized ‘as a space-making in which the self must move aside to make room for the other, to be filled by the other’, and the desires and transformations of bodies inexorably slide towards (heterosexual) ‘cycles of penetrating and being penetrated’.9 For all Ward’s ‘radicalism’ he seems bound to what Marcella Althaus-Reid identifies as the dominant (patriarchal) ‘logic of theology’: that is, it ‘follows models of spermatic flow, of ideas of male reproduction which defy modern science but are established firmly in the sexual symbolic of theology’.10 Ward’s emphases on ‘speaking’ theologically as ‘performing Christ’, and ‘giving’ to those ‘in need’ as ‘constituting the church’, are perhaps less overtly sexual, but perpetuate and extend the unilateral direction of his theology.

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7 Compare this outworking of supposedly ‘Christian desire’ with, for example, Ward’s construal of postmodern desire as ‘akin to being suspended on the brink of orgasm without being allowed the final release of coming’ (see section 3.3.iv, above).
8 There are strong resonances between this collection of examples within Ward’s work and the intensely gendered ecclesiology and eucharistic theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (of whom Ward is often appreciative). Compare, for example: ‘What else is his eucharist but, at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his own flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his own body?’ (von Balthasar 1998[1971]:226).
10 Althaus-Reid 2000a:155
In an early essay preceding *Cities of God*, Ward claims that ‘God may have a phallus, but he certainly doesn’t have a penis’. This ‘apparently contradictory idea’ (as Beverley Clack puts it), rooted in the psychoanalytical thought of Jacques Lacan, seems to lead to a stronger statement: for Ward, God does indeed seem to ‘have a phallus’; and his phallocentric theology of God seems to profoundly shape both a consistently phallic theology of the church, and an identification of ‘the world’ as disordered, lacking, passive and therefore – in a Lacanian reading at least – symbolically ‘feminine’. Furthermore, critics have turned Lacan’s psychoanalysis back on Ward (alongside his ‘Radically Orthodox’ colleagues) to argue that his theology is in fact dependent on its ‘others’: that his ‘orthodoxy’ only ‘becomes articulable’ against the provocation, threat or fear of ‘heresy’ (Virginia Burrus identifies Ward’s ‘heretical targets as ‘wrong-headed “feminists”’ and ‘pathological “sado-masochists”’); and that RO’s ‘radicalism’ (to be understood, we are told, as going ‘to the “roots” of... Western theology’) in fact appropriates, redefines and neutralises the more *materialist* ‘radicalism’ (that is, the ‘orthopraxis’ of popular protest, ‘identified with the excluded of society’) of what Althaus-Reid names as its ‘beloved enemy’, liberation theology. At worst, we might be tempted to suggest that Ward’s ‘allergy to identity politics’ leaves his theology defined not just by, and against, its repressed *theological* others – namely, feminist and liberation theologies – but also by, and against, its repressed *human* others – specifically, women and the urban poor. His textual shrug of the shoulders at the imperialist dangers inherent in the missionary language of ‘expansion’ and the Hegelian metaphor of ‘the march of God in the world’ suggests that he has not fully grasped – has not, in fact, been radically receptive to, we might say – the tragic results, throughout history, of such tendencies.

We might well ask of Ward, then, as Althaus-Reid does more widely, and in characteristically provocative style, ‘how can we cool down this erection of the *logos spermatikos* in theology?’ Althaus-Reid herself offers two strategies: ‘[o]ne way is by giving privilege to the subordinated part of binary compositions, what “leather” people would call the prevalence of “bottoms” (submissive partners) over “tops” (dominant partners). The other is by trying to find the different (not belonging to the binary pair in conceptual opposition).’ My overarching argument in this thesis will be that this ‘cooling down’ might best happen through an intentional ‘opening up’ of the church to a receptivity to its ‘others’, leading to a tensional ‘equivocation’ (between church and ‘other’, between speaking and listening, between giving and receiving or, in Althaus-Reid’s terms, between ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’). More specifically, I will argue that this equivocation might be found, and founded, in *christology*, and it is to Ward’s more explicitly christological reflections, with their own promising ‘openings’, that we now turn.

11 Ward 1998:173

12 See Clack 2000:120ff. As Clack puts it, ‘[i]n seeking a new way of thinking about God which is grounded in the ideas of Lacan, Ward simply reveals the problematic nature of the Western concept of God which itself valorizes the male body. In patriarchal culture, not only does God have a phallus, “he” is also understood to have a penis’ (2000:126).

13 Cf Clack 2000:123.

14 Burrus 2006:36-37 (‘Ward seems to fear, as the ancient fathers also feared, that without the threat of heresy theologians have nothing to say.’); Althaus-Reid 2006a:115-6

15 I am grateful to Richard Sudworth for this phrase.

16 ‘We may not like’ the language, Ward acknowledges, before asserting that it is ‘upon this basis’ that the movement of the Church must proceed (see section 3.5.iii, above).

17 Althaus-Reid 2000a:155
4.3 Christological openings

Ward does not consider his 2005 book *Christ and Culture* to be following exactly the same thread as his ‘Cities trilogy’ (*Cities of God, Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* and *Politics of Discipleship*), nevertheless many of the key themes he pursues within the ‘trilogy’ come to a christological focus in *Christ and Culture*, among them most centrally the effort to distance himself from the Enlightenment turn to the ‘autonomous, self-determining, self-defining, ... atomised subject’ and its christological counterpart. Instead of trying to define ‘who is this Jesus, called the Christ?’, then, Ward is much more interested on asking ‘where is the Christ?’

We have already noted the ‘transcorporeality’ (permeability, fluidity) of bodies which Ward discovers in the ‘displacements’ of Christ’s body in birth and circumcision, in transfiguration, in eucharist, and in death, resurrection and ascension. In this sequence of displacements Ward perceives a spatial ‘logic of opening-up’, from the mediaeval Church’s gendering of the crucified Christ as mother, ‘with the wounded side as both a lactating breast and a womb from which the Church is removed’ (the wound, ‘symbolic of the vaginal opening’, towards which Thomas stretches his hand, penetrates, and withdraws), through to the ‘withdrawal of the body of Jesus’ in the ascension, ‘understood in terms of the Logos creating a space within himself [sic], a womb, within which (en Christoi) the Church will expand and creation be recreated’. This destabilising of the gendered body of Christ, which renders its morphology fluid, Ward develops at greater length in *Christ and Culture* (which itself builds on an earlier article) in conversation with French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, herself a student and critical interpreter of Jacques Lacan, who answers Lacan’s construction of the feminine as wordless other, defined only negatively in relation to the dominant phallus, with her own construction of a feminine imaginary, a ‘language in the feminine’ (*parler femme*), centred on the biologically female morphology of the ‘two lips’.

4.3.i Irigaray and christology in the ‘between’

Irigaray is important for Ward, primarily because of ‘the way she opens up new possibilities for understanding Christology and sexual difference’, but within that ‘opening up’ are also some promising pointers towards reshaping the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology too. Reading Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her*, ‘Irigaray rejoices’ that it ‘opens up a space between Jesus Christ and the Christian Church’s appropriation, interpretation and policing of this figure’ and in her own writing ‘maintains this space between the Church and its founder’. This is important for us too as this space – this distinction, this critical distance – is one that Ward himself seems often unable to maintain. Irigaray’s insights into Jesus, then, have the potential to ‘re-open’

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18 Ward 2005b:4, 12 (Ward accuses ‘even Barth’ of making precisely this mistake.)
19 Ward 2005b:1
20 Ward 2005b:122, 144
21 Ward 2000a:105, 113 & passim (see section 3.4.i, above)
22 Irigaray says of Lacan: ‘The question whether, in his logic, they [women] can articulate anything at all, whether they can be heard, is not even raised. For raising it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own. That is, a logic that challenges mastery’. Beyond the ‘one’ that is the logical of the phallus, Irigaray’s ‘other logic’ is the logic of ‘the two’: ‘[a]s for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman “touches herself” all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two – but not divisible into one(s) – that caress each other’ (Irigaray 1985 [1977]:90, 24). See also Ward 2005b:134-5.
Ward’s ecclesiology. ‘Where is the Christ’ for Irigaray, then? On the one hand, like Ward’s medieval church, Irigaray perceives in Jesus himself, says Ward, ‘a space that opens out’ with a suggestive ‘inclusivity’: “in the body of the Son of Man there appears, in the form of a wound, the place that, in women, is naturally open.” In other words, Ward comments, ‘this “Son of Man” bears both phallic and two lip markers’.24 On the other hand, Irigaray is struck by Jesus’ interrelatedness, ‘by his use of touch and how he “is respectful of bodily space, of sensual space, of openings in the skin” of others, and by the way “this man-god does not exist in a triumphant self-sufficiency.”’ “Was he really untouchable?”’, she asks rhetorically, and wonders if – suggests, in fact – ‘he announces – beyond Christianity? – that only through difference can the incarnation unfold’: a ‘sensible transcendental’ that resists both the ‘Gnostic’ dualism between the spiritual and the bodily, and modern individualism, discovering divine transcendence precisely in the inter-relation between different, ‘sexuate’ bodies.25 ‘Christology ... thought through ... Irigaray’s work’ therefore, Ward argues, ‘takes place’ in a ‘between’ space: its focus ‘will not be Jesus’ the ‘male figure’, but ‘Jesus-with’. Christology, the revealing of ‘the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth’, ‘cannot take place simply within himself – as some form of self-realisation’, but only as ‘provok[ing] a dynamic, an economy of desire’.26

Ward’s unilateral kenoticism is evident again here: building on Irigaray’s observation that ““by wishing to give, he or she [the giver] constitutes the other as receptacle”’, he argues that ‘the nature of love ... is not simply a pouring out, an emptying of oneself on behalf of the other, it is the creation, by that kenosis, of a place for the entry of the other’.27 However, there are also traces of a certain symmetry in Ward’s reflections ‘through Irigaray’ that pull against his unilateral tendencies. Reflecting Irigaray’s ‘two lips’ morphology, and her constant return to the ‘between of the couple’,28 Christology, Ward suggests, ‘is not reductively found “within” Jesus;’ he repeats, but ‘manifests itself both “within” him and “between” the other person and “within” that other person also’, such that ‘[w]ithout others his divinity is incomplete’. Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, ‘an historical figure in a Christological and ongoing narrative’, a ‘circulation of attraction and desire’, of ‘revelation’ and ‘reconciliation’, understood as ‘the interplay and incarnating “of divine and human eros”’.29 This is how Ward takes Irigaray’s suggestion ““that the incarnation of the divine in Jesus Christ is a part of something larger [est partielle]”’, something that is the work of the Spirit (as in John’s gospel), but also (for Irigaray) visible, tangible in the relationships of reciprocity between Jesus and his mother, as well as with some of the other women – and men – around Jesus.30 In fact, Ward notes, what

24 Ward 2005b:140, quoting Irigaray 1991 [1980]:166. ‘No doubt,’ Ward observes, ‘Irigaray is aware of medieval Catholic readings of wound in the side of Christ as a vagina opening to give birth to the Church, a place where the waters break and the blood flows’.
25 Ward 2005b:137-8, 141. ‘Sexuate’ is the usual translation of Irigaray’s ‘sexué’ – which might otherwise be rendered as ‘sexed’. Battles have raged over the question of whether Irigaray reifies and ‘essentialises’ two biological sexes (‘male’ and ‘female’), or whether her project is a more subtle form of ‘strategic essentialism’ (the latter term is Gayatri Spivak’s; Irigaray herself prefers the term ‘mimesis’. See e.g. Jones 2000:44ff; see also Ward 1996:228, 2005b:143). What is important here is that Ward’s use of her tends towards the latter.
29 Ward 1996:231-2
30 Ward 1996:227 (cf Ward 2005b:141). Ward notes elsewhere that modern constructions of ‘Christ as Subject’, as ‘monad’, ‘continually proceeds by way of two forgetting: first of Mary, his mother and, more generally, erasure of the feminine [he cites Irigaray here]; and second, a forgetting of the trinitarian relations that deny such Christomonism. To construct a Christology differently is to shape an understanding of both
ultimately ‘disappoints’ Irigaray ‘about Schüssler-Fiorenza’s account is both a reduction of the divine (in women) and a reduction of the human (in Jesus Christ).’

However, while Ward is eager to clarify that ‘the divine (in women)’ should be understood ‘in terms of ... a theosis’, a ‘becoming divine’ only within an ‘economy of response’ to Christ ‘on the basis of his own always prior giving of himself to us’ (as Kathryn Tanner puts it), Irigaray is insistent on a more mutual relationship between Jesus and the women, and not just with Mary, to whom Jesus is indebted by birth, but whose identity is often limited to her motherhood alone. ‘Jesus instructs women,’ Irigaray acknowledges, ‘but he also listens to them and succumbs to the force of their confidence and faith’. For Irigaray, his ‘becoming divine’ is dependent on them, as much as vice versa, the ‘partiality’ of the incarnation is as much about what and who precede and shape Jesus, as what and who respond to him and extend from him (for Ward, the church).

4.3.ii The ‘schizoid Christ’ and the woman with the haemorrhage

Alongside Irigaray, it is Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the ‘schizo’ as a productive, creative ‘desiring-machine’, that assists Ward in answering the question ‘where is the Christ?’, as he tracks in the gospels a ‘schizoid Christ’, ‘a mobile site’ for the production of an ‘economy’ of ‘desire and belief, love and hope’. Again in resistance to the ‘liberal’ understanding of ‘the subject-in-control ... who is in subjection to no one’, Ward seeks to uncover Christology as ‘a relational praxis’, that is, to identify ‘certain operations in which Jesus is the Christ’, ‘operations’ of ‘touch, flow and relation’ which not only produce, but also participate in, such an economy. In the story of the encounter between Jesus and the woman with the haemorrhage – in all three synoptic gospels, but most clearly in Mark’s version (Mark 5:21-34) – Ward sees demonstrated not only the ‘translation from Christ-in-relation to his mother, to other women, to his disciples, to his fellow Jews, and God-in-relation, God as an unfolding activity of giftedness, a trinitarian procession’ (Ward 2000a:114-5).
alienation and anonymity ... to kinship’ which is, for him, at the heart of ‘the Christological operation’, but also what he suggests is a ‘remarkable’ maintenance of ‘a balance of relations between the woman and Jesus’.38 While Mark’s gospel locates Jesus within a ‘space of flows’ (to use Manuel Castells’ phrase39) and frequently describes ‘a force, authority or bodily strength (dunamis) that passes through him’, Jesus is always portrayed (at least in the first part of the gospel) as being ‘in command of these flows and the initiator of operations.’ Here, however, Ward observes, ‘it is the woman’s touch that initiates the healing’, that effects the flow of power.40 The ‘faith’ (pistis) that Jesus recognises in the woman names the embodied ‘act of entrustment’, through which she ‘actively places herself’ in the path of Jesus and his entourage, itself ‘in transit’ from the shores of Lake Galilee to the house of synagogue official Jairus, and places herself also within a different economy to that which has, up to that point, been bleeding her dry of her ‘life and livelihood’, ‘the biological and the economic’.41 Her initiative, Ward suggests, reconfigures not only the space within which she is located, but also interrupts Jesus’ own flow and reconfigures the space between the two of them. From first ‘hearing’ about Jesus from afar, the woman then sees him amid the crowd, and finally approaches and, quite intentionally, touches him, a ‘movement through the senses’ which closes the distance between her and Jesus, both spatially and relationally,42 ‘disrupt[ing] the “spectacle” as “spectacle”’,43 ‘bridging’, ‘disturb[ing]’ and ‘redistribut[ing]’ the flows within which both she and Jesus are situated, and installing an ‘economy of response’ between ‘toucher’ and ‘touched’.44 The woman ‘triggers a divine operation, an eschatological operation ... in which the messianic is performed’ – a ‘reaching beyond the boundaries of oneself to find a place not yet given, a future not yet received.’45

While not claiming that this encounter is typical of the wider gospel narrative, the christological significance of Ward’s reading here is immense. The flow of dunamis, ‘the Christological operation’, the performance of ‘the messianic’, is ‘triggered’ by the woman’s movement, her ‘placing herself’ in Jesus’ path, and her ‘touching’ him. Other than a faint and distanced ‘hearing about Jesus’, this ‘economy of response’ is initiated by her actions, and Jesus’ role seems first of all simply to act (unconsciously) as ‘channel’ for the flow of power, and then to name what the woman has already done.46 Ward highlights the ‘border-crossing’ here – ‘as well as the crossing of theological difference (creator-creation) there is also the crossing of sexual difference (man-woman) and cultic difference (clean-unclean)’ – but he slips a little when he suggests that her touching ‘is a sacrilegious act that

said to her, “My daughter, your faith has cured you. Go in peace, free for ever from this trouble.”’ (Ward’s translation, 2005b:62)

38 Ward 2005b:62-63


40 Ward 2005b:64 (my emphasis)

41 Ward 2005b:63-64 (my emphasis)

42 Ward 2005b:64-65, 68

43 Ward 2005b:77

44 Ward 2005b:65

45 Ward 2005b:67 (my italics)

46 Ward 2005b:66 n.13: ‘The woman is healed and knows it before Jesus pronounces that it was her faith that made her whole. Jesus only names the practice in which the woman participated such that the dunamis was effective.’ Earlier, however, Ward cites Morna Hooker approvingly that ‘Jesus is the source of the power and does not simply act like the conductor of an electric current’ (Hooker 1991:149, in Ward 2005b:62 n.5). It is hard to see how this can be maintained within Ward’s wider exegetical argument here.
Jesus turns into a salvific one’.\textsuperscript{47} her touch itself, as he has been arguing, is the ‘act of entrustment’ which ‘bridges’ and redirects flows, reaching for that ‘place not yet given’.\textsuperscript{48}

Although Ward does not directly reference Manuel Castells in this essay, the political implications of his exegesis are surely not lost on him. Castells has diagnosed a ‘\textit{structural schizophrenia}’ between two spatial logics that threatens to break down communication channels in society, that is, between on the one hand the logic of ‘places’, in which ‘people still live’ and find ‘meaning’, but which are increasingly ‘segmented’ and ‘unrelated to each other’, and on the other hand the ‘structural domination’ of the logic of ‘the space of flows’, within which ‘function’ and ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ in our societies ‘are organised’. Castells’ call, we are reminded here, is for ‘\textit{cultural and physical bridges}’ to be ‘deliberately built between these two forms of space’, lest we find ourselves living ‘life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet’\textsuperscript{49}. Here, in the woman’s movement, placing and touch, she performs an act of ‘bridging’, making a physical connection between disconnected ‘flows’ (hers and Jesus’), discovering a ‘place’ in which a ‘translation’ can happen from ‘alienation and anonymity’ to ‘kinship’. Could it be that the ‘schizophrenisation’ of christology, embodied in this ‘touching’ encounter, might somehow offer therapy for the ‘structural schizophrenia’ of Castells’ diagnosis? At the very least, it seems to reinforce the point Ward begins to develop through Irigaray’s work, that christology might ‘take place’ in the space ‘between’ Jesus and his ‘others’, and that the initiative, the ‘trigger’, might come from \textit{them}, and not just always from \textit{him}: a ‘disruptive grace’ to challenge and change ‘the Son of Man’ himself. This, in turn, has profound implications for ecclesiology – but we will need to follow Ward a little further before we can address those directly.

\textbf{4.4 Openings foreclosed: two versions of an anointing, and other displacements}

Ward’s second Scriptural focus in developing his ‘schizoid christology’ is the story of ‘an extravagant outpouring towards Jesus’: the anointing by a woman which, in Matthew, Mark and John, functions as a critical ‘hinge’ in the narrative as it turns towards Jesus’ passion. While Ward suggests a certain equanimity between the different gospel accounts,\textsuperscript{50} I want to suggest that his shift here from Mark’s gospel to John’s is a move in line with his tendency to close down potential openings for ‘disruptive grace’, in both his christology and his ecclesiology – openings which are unavoidable in the Markan text, but ‘domesticated’ in John. Nowhere is this clearer than in Ward’s statement of the order of initiative and response within John’s narrative: there is, in Mary’s anointing, he claims, ‘\textit{a profound return of that which Mary had received}’, a response in love and gratitude for Jesus’ raising of her brother, Lazarus. Although he wishes to locate both Jesus and Mary in a reciprocal ‘economy of love’, of ‘gift and response’, he cannot seem to escape the hierarchical binaries of divine-man/human-female: ‘[t]here is the reclining male and the female at his feet; there is the teacher and the disciple; there is Christ and one of his believers; there is, theologically conceived, God and a human being, the creative Word and the creature.’ Within this binary, the ‘intervention’ seems to be

\textsuperscript{47} Ward 2005b:66 n.12
\textsuperscript{48} Ward 20005b:66-67
\textsuperscript{49} Castells 1996:428, quoted in Ward 2000a:256 (my emphasis; see section 3.1.iii, above)
\textsuperscript{50} Ward notes that in both Mark and John ‘there is a touching, a liturgical pouring out of oil and a relational exchange that is public’, but wants to highlight ‘different Christological elements, evident in Mark, pronounced in John’, and the ‘clear Christological tendency’ of the story’s ‘construction’ and ‘direction’ in John (Ward 2005b:85-86). In particular, his stated focus is on ‘the paradoxical nature of all relations en Christo that participate in the \textit{kenosis/pleroma} economy’ (Ward 2005b:85 n.69).
located firmly with the ‘divine-man’ Jesus. There is a ‘priority here’, says Ward, ‘and that means there is a politics’: ‘[t]he divine [i.e. in Jesus] reaches out to the human, first and foremost; the human [i.e. Mary] responds and, cooperating with the divine, glorifies God. The reciprocal relation issues from and is sustained by God.’ Mary’s act is ‘a profound obeisance’ which ‘does not overthrow the hierarchies; in fact, it confirms them as the order of things’.\footnote{Ward 2005b:86-88} Absent, it seems, is the Irigarayan possibility of locating christology ‘both “within” [Jesus] and “between” the other person and “within” that other person also’ – or the ‘triggering’ of the christic operation by someone other than Jesus that we saw previously with the haemorrhaging woman.

It is precisely in this context, of Ward’s discussion of the Johannine version of the anointing story, that he locates his exploration of the kenotic / pleromatic economy of divine love which, as we have already observed, turns out to have a definitively one-way flow. As Sigridur Gudmarsdottir observes, despite Ward’s ‘poststructuralist inclination and his stress on flow’, his Christ ends up being ‘more stable, hierarchical, and one-directional’ than ‘schizoid’ because of Ward’s Neoplatonic insistence on ‘a distinction between two levels of reality’ and the ‘asymmetrical’ relationship between them, which (as we noted earlier) ‘presumes a flow from God to humans, which humans can trigger, but not share with the God-man. Ultimately, they receive, not him.’\footnote{Gudmarsdottir 2012:166, 169-70} ‘Who gains’ by such a political ontology, Gudmarsdottir asks: Ward’s ‘ontological framework ... may bring less glad tidings to those on the lower end of the social ladder [than to] those at the top’, she suggests. By tying his political theology into this ‘double plane of existence’ – ‘according to human society or according to the kingdom of God’ – Ward manages on the one hand to ‘point towards another kind of polity’, a ‘participation in oneness’ through submission to Christ, and yet on the other hand to uphold the ‘culturally mediated’ social relationships, positions and hierarchies of the status quo. Historically, as Gudmarsdottir observes, such ‘two levelled’ theologies have ‘both served to give women access to full humanity and to secure a sanctified, submissive role for them within social hierarchies’.\footnote{Gudmarsdottir 2012:168-70} That Ward explicitly sustains the ‘divine-man / human-female’ hierarchy in his discussion of this passage suggests that Gudmarsdottir’s fears are well-founded.

If Ward had allowed himself to stay with Mark’s version of the anointing, however, his christology might have remained more clearly ‘schizoid’ – and his broader theological project more open to the ‘disruptive grace’ of the ‘other’. In Mark’s version, in stark contrast to John’s, there is no evidence for the unnamed woman’s anointing being a ‘return’ of anything: she is, as far as we can tell, a stranger, a new arrival to the narrative. If there is an ‘economy’ (oikonomia) here, it is not that economy of love that was already circulating within the house (oikos) of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, those dearly-loved friends of Jesus (and perhaps an obvious figure for the church itself), but one which ‘breaks in’ from the outside, unannounced, uninvited, interrupting a meal in the house of Simon the leper. There is no ‘profound obeisance’ at Jesus’ feet here, confirming the hierarchies of the status quo; instead, the woman stands over Jesus’ head, in the bold posture of prophet and priest. She anoints him not only as ‘the Messiah King’ but also ‘proleptically for his burial’ (both of these being much clearer, as Ward admits, in Mark than in John)\footnote{Ward 2005b:86 n.72}, enacting an attentive care for his body which will continue – in the enduring, embodied presence of a number of women – to the
cross, the tomb, and into Mark’s intentionally unsatisfactory resurrection day.\(^{55}\) The body of the man Jesus is indeed ‘displaced’ (as Ward has argued at length elsewhere) in this scene, but in a quite different way: a profoundly significant action between the woman and Jesus becomes the transformative ‘gospel’ here as, with profoundly eucharistic echoes, Jesus announces that ‘what she has done’ will be told ‘in remembrance’, not of him, but ‘of her’.\(^{56}\) Ward’s preference for John over Mark here, and the former’s economy of reciprocal love in response to Jesus, seems to ‘domesticate’ the ‘christic space’ within which ‘Christ happens’, neutralising the Markan Jesus’s radical responsiveness to the interruption of the outsider – to her touch as both need and gift, both desire and overflow of \textit{dunamis} – and thus securing a place for the ecclesial body to be similarly defended against disruption from beyond.

4.4.i ‘Economic’ problems and other ‘displacements’

Beyond the reasons Ward acknowledges explicitly here, his preference for John’s account over Mark clearly enables him to develop the idea of an economy of reciprocal love in explicit contrast to the economy represented by Judas (representing, if only implicitly here, Ward’s analysis elsewhere of contemporary capitalism), where embodied relationships are reduced to transactions, financially evaluated, where power is a zero-sum game of competition for authority and ‘the poor’ are a distanced abstraction.\(^{57}\) In John Milbank’s \textit{Being Reconciled} Catherine Keller identifies a similar preference for John’s gospel, “‘where [in contrast to Luke’s] there is no mention of loving enemies, where love seems to endlessly circulate amongst friends – I in you, and you in me, where there are erotic gestures (between Jesus and Mary of Bethany) and where the disciples are described as the Father’s ‘gift’ to the Son, just as the Son is his gift to the disciples’”.\(^{58}\) ‘There is indeed refreshment in this line of thinking,’ admits Keller. ‘For those stretched into networks of relationships edged with impossible demands, haunted by a globalizing ethic of multiple others mutely demanding some other other’s sacrifice – friendship sounds like a restorative model. Yet the gift of (super)natural affinities among a like-minded spiritual elite – definitively male, yet not misogynist, complemented by an occasional exceptional woman – comes with a price’.\(^{59}\) Ward’s project is not identical to Milbank’s, as the former is at pains to insist,\(^{60}\) but Keller’s critique translates well, and resonates too with that of Daniel Miller, who outlines at length Ward’s captivity to what Derrida calls ‘the logic of the proper’: an ‘economy of full return’, ‘the law’ (\textit{nomos}) of the ‘single (and properly-ordered) household (\textit{oikos}) of God’ in which ‘there can be no excess or loss’.\(^{61}\) Over the broad sweep of his project, Miller argues, despite Ward’s insistence on the ‘irreducibly hermeneutical’ nature of human existence\(^{62}\) and the necessary ‘agnosticism’ of the theologian, he nevertheless ‘envisions the Christian community as proper, as authentic, as marked by a distinct identity and therefore present

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\(^{55}\) See e.g. Ward 2005b:38-41

\(^{56}\) Irigaray notes wryly that Schüessler-Fiorenza’s \textit{In Memory of Her} sometimes evokes ‘more through her book’s title than by virtue of its content’ (Irigaray 1997:201).

\(^{57}\) Ward 2005b:88-89

\(^{58}\) Milbank 2003:160

\(^{59}\) Keller 2006:25

\(^{60}\) See e.g. Ward 2015: ‘And I’d say, the language of overcoming isn’t my language, it’s John’s language. Or “outnarrate”, or any of that stuff... That’s not my language, that’s not what I do. I hope, partly because I try to engage in a way that’s not just a stream of names, I try to \textit{engage}...’

\(^{61}\) Miller 2011:99, 100. Miller, after Derrida, defines ‘the logic of the proper’ (\textit{le propre} in French) only through association: ““the proper” (French \textit{le propre}) carries a range of meanings including self-possession, propriety, property, self-proximity, self-presence, ownness’ (97).

\(^{62}\) Miller 2011:90-1 (see e.g. Ward 2000a:258, 2005b:114).
to itself vis-à-vis other communities and cultural expressions. Where he does affirm points which would seemingly call this propriety of the Christian community into question, these points simply become muted or, more significantly, they are incorporated into the broader movement of the proper which is the very definition of analogical participation in Ward’s thought. Highlighting Ward’s ecclesial appropriation of Hegel, Miller traces a movement of ‘subsumption’ in Ward’s writing, beginning with the Incarnation as the ‘subsumption of the human by the divine’, and extended ecclesially in ‘the ongoing subsumption of other communities into the church’. When it comes to providing an account of how different faith communities might come to engage in ‘fruitful interaction’ and ‘shared projects for mutual flourishing’, Miller observes, Ward leaves us only with a vague ‘Who knows...’

There are, then, at least three, interrelated, dangers inherent in Ward’s oikonomia of love: firstly, that we imagine it as a closed system, an ‘endless circulation’ (Keller) without interruption (or Miller’s ‘excess’ or Derrida’s ‘tout autre’) from ‘outside’; secondly, that we conceive such economies in spatial (and oppositional) terms, imagining that we can only dwell in one economy or another – either Judas’ economy of capitalist transactions or Mary’s economy of loving friendship, either the postmodern economy of lack, or the Christian economy of abundance; and thirdly, that we (theologians), ourselves located somewhere inside ‘Christianity’s divine, Trinitarian economy’, attempt to describe – ‘make sense’ of – the whole from our very particular position, with our very particular affinities, ‘appropriating’ the different by imposing on them our own meanings. There seem to be clear parallels here between Ward’s conception of the ‘economic’ and his conception of ‘culture’: while it is crucial to his project that the latter can be transformed, and he is at pains to acknowledge the particularity and diversity of our ‘standpoints’ within it, nevertheless, as we have already seen, in his desire to ‘read the signs of the times’ he risks setting up ‘postmodern culture’ as a monolithic entity, evenly distributed across space, and coloured by his particular perspective as one who is incorporated within it – rather than, to follow Sassen’s argument (in Chapter 1), those who find themselves expelled from it. ‘Christians have tended toward the appropriative,’ argues Anna Mercedes: ‘God is this bread, God was that body. ... When we appropriate one fixed form as the definitive location of Christ, we seek to seal up the boundaries of a body, thus disembodying our incarnation, for any living body is fluid, porous, messy.’ Ward surely seeks to avoid Mercedes’ charge: fluidity is one of his most insistent characteristics of bodies of all kinds. But his tendency to appropriate goes hand in hand with his retreat from the ‘openings’ glimpsed in his engagements with Irigaray and Deleuze and Guattari. This retreat, as I trace it here, is four-fold: a retreat from the challenge of the other; a retreat from the materiality of Christ; a retreat from the particularity of christology; and a retreat from the engagement of praxis.

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63 Ward 2005a:58
64 Miller 2011:97, 100, 88 (cf Ward 2003:153); Nausner makes a similar point (2005:279, as section 3.5.iii, above).
65 There is a direct parallel here with Schmitt’s (explicitly colonialist) linking of ‘nomos’ and ‘territory’, that we highlighted in section 2.3.ii, above. As Marion Grau writes (in critical relation to Ward’s work), ‘[t]his divine economy does not [contra Ward] remain apart from the various intricate, implicated, and messy economies of our world; rather, it is always already in-vested, wrapped up in, and incarnate in it [sic]’ (Grau 2004:225).
67 (section 1.1, above)
68 Mercedes 2011:147. See also Michael Nausner’s use of ‘appropriative’ for what Ward is doing (Nausner 2005:277).
4.4.ii Retreating from the challenge of the other

What are the ‘terms and conditions’, Elaine Graham asks, for Ward’s ‘cultural negotiations’ between ‘the revelation of Christ to the Church (rooted in the Scriptures, the sacraments and the tradition of their interpretation and application)’ and the ‘“signs of the times”’ as we are able to read them – between the voice of the theologian and the voices and faces and bodies of the theologian’s ‘cultural others’? Ward does not want, like Milbank, to ‘outnarrate’, but he does understand himself as acting ‘as a corrective voice’ – not just, as we have seen, a corrective to the sectarian, ‘apolitical, non-incarnational’ mentality of a Christian ‘counter-culture’, but a corrective also to those who seek to erase the distinctiveness of – or draw defined limits around – the theological voice by drawing ‘correlations’ between the sacred and the cultural (after Tillich et al), or abiding by supposedly ‘consensual’ rules for ‘rational public discourse’ (after Rawls and others). These lie in the background to his advocacy for ‘contestation’ and ‘impoliteness’. Ward also rejects what he calls ‘the liberal, Bildung project’ that believed (a belief Ward suggests is increasingly unbelievable) ‘that consciousness-raising promotes liberation and social justice’. But while attacking Ellul for the latter’s rejection of ‘dialogue’, Ward’s own commitment to dialogue is somewhat one-sided. While he agrees, in conversation with Luke Bretherton, that ‘listening [is] a fundamental political practice’, in the next breath he makes it clear that he is primarily interested in ‘clear[ing] a certain space [for Ward himself] to be listened to’. More critically, as Elaine Graham highlights clearly, for all his ‘agnosticism’ and openness to ‘disruption’ he repeatedly defaults to privileging the theological voice: whilst culture, through the work of apologetics, ‘might suggest certain amendments to Christian theology’ (as Ward puts it), it does not have the authority to engage in more fundamental revisions. The “sovereignty of God” is set over and against such worldly considerations as “tolerance, an ongoing conversation between Christ and the world or the continuing relevance of theology to a secular landscape”, as if they bore no resemblance or equivalence to Christian virtue. Rather than pursuing Ward’s commitment or otherwise to a ‘conversation between Christ and the world’, however, we would do better to examine further his engagements with more specific others, both in textual and bodily form.

1. The woman with the haemorrhage and the Syro-Phoenician woman

From Ward’s Deleuze-inspired reading of the story of the woman with the haemorrhage, which opened up the possibility that the flow of divine dunamis might be triggered by the initiative of one of Jesus’ ‘others’, we have already witnessed a retreat from the challenges and gifts of such an initiative. Gudmarsdottir noted, in Ward’s reading of this text, that while ‘humans can trigger’ this flow, they ‘can not share’ it with Jesus: ‘[u]ltimately, they receive, not him.’ When Ward turns to

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70 Ward 2015
71 Ward is scathing of ‘public theology’ for its weak theological articulations and apparent decline in visibility ‘since its emergence from Christian socialism’ (Ward 2009:154 n.86).
72 (See Chapter 3, above)
73 Ward 2000b:104
74 Ward 2009b:7 (my emphasis)
75 Ward 2011:117
77 Gudmarsdottir contrasts this with the ontology developed by Deleuze and Guattari, which is ‘reciprocal and multidimensional, non-hierarchical, and has no common origin’ (Gudmarsdottir 2012:169-70).
the anointing of Jesus, his preference for John’s ‘domesticated’ narrative over Mark’s highlighted this evasion of the possibility of a *dunamis* which ‘breaks in’ with the initiative of a stranger, an outsider, and which positions Jesus as receptive and transformed. As a further stark illustration, we might perhaps not be surprised to see that Ward also retreats from embracing the ‘disruptive grace’ of the ‘other’ in the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman of Mark 6 (which he considers in a parenthetical aside within an argument for the rootedness of Mark’s gospel and Mark’s Christ in a theology of *mimesis*). In Ward’s reading, this feisty Gentile woman is portrayed, remarkably, not just as a model disciple, but as a paragon of unquestioning (feminine!) receptivity: she ‘enters into the kind of discourse Jesus is employing. She does not seek to understand the new symbolic relations being drawn between “children”, “bread”, “dogs” and their conventional meanings. She does not attempt to interpret or resolve the enigma at all. She takes up the mode of thinking and speaking (and perceiving the world) that Jesus performs.’ What Ward conceals entirely, in his (mis-)appropriation of this story, is the element of resistance and challenge that the woman brings, the way in which, if she does indeed ‘enter into’ or ‘take up’ Jesus’ discourse in some sense, she does so with a crafty ‘Yes, but...’ which both wrestles healing power from Jesus (in a similar way to the woman with the haemorrhage, if more confrontationally here), and changes him: his attitude, his direction, the boundaries of his worldview, his sense of ‘the order of things’.

2. Luce Irigaray

In Ward’s engagement with Irigaray we see a similar dynamic of (mis-)appropriation and retreat. Although Ward himself acknowledges a certain ‘forgetting’, in the Christian tradition’ of Jesus’ mother in particular, and of ‘the feminine’ more generally, we have already observed the way he seeks to adopt Irigaray’s suggestion ‘that the incarnation of the divine in Jesus Christ is a part of something larger’ as opening up space for the *church* which extends from him (thereby collapsing the distance ‘between the Church and its founder’ that Irigaray has sought to maintain), whereas for Irigaray herself it is as much (if not more) about acknowledging what and who precede and shape him – and the dynamics of that ‘between space’. Furthermore, as Tonstad has recently highlighted, when Ward appreciatively quotes Irigaray’s observation that in the crucified Jesus ‘there reappears, in the form of a wound, the place that, in women, is naturally open’, he neglects to mention that the context is one of Irigaray’s fierce critique of ‘the Christ handed down to us by tradition’: the reverence of the wound, she says, is a ‘doubling’ of ‘something [in women] already there, that is forgotten, covered over, buried’. ‘Does this mean,’ she asks, ‘that Christ takes upon himself, mimics, the female in order to effect the passage back and beyond that creature whose flesh constantly incites men to lose control’? This is the tradition, she continues, which consigns to Mary the role of ‘dumb virgin with lips closed, [who] occasionally receives the favour of a word, which she must bring into the world in the shape of a child of God. ... Recepiacle that, faithfully, welcomes and reproduces only the will of the Father’. For Irigaray, Mary is more than ‘merely the instrument of conception’, ‘a receptive-passive female extra’ – she is ‘a divine source’. Ward has progressively backed away from engagement with Irigaray over time. Her notions of ‘divine becoming’ and ‘sensible transcendence’ may indeed, as he has suggested recently, ‘need to be developed [more] rigorously’ than she has herself, but her work represents an embodied challenge, not simply a new body of theory on which

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78 Ward 2005b:45
to draw. To label two of her most significant concepts ‘actually quite vacuous’ suggests a desire to neutralise their challenge, to retreat from further engagement.\textsuperscript{81} Ward’s admission, at one point, that he ‘put[s] words into Irigaray’s mouth’\textsuperscript{82} is not something Irigaray herself would have stood for, and perhaps reveals his attempts (however unconsciously) to silence her critique. We theologians (I write as a male theologian especially) should feel here the full force of Althaus-Reid’s protest (from a not-altogether different context): ‘We are all Marys with gigantic divine phalluses stuffing our mouths, and not necessarily by our own will’.\textsuperscript{83}

3. Emmanuel Levinas

More than Deleuze’s, more than Irigaray’s, the conception of the other’s challenge that most seems to ‘haunt’ Ward’s work is that of Levinas. As we have noted, while Ward follows Levinas’ redemptive ‘movement out to the other’, he insists that what the latter misses – ‘in the unending emptying of oneself’ – is the ‘constitution’ and ‘resourcing’ of the ‘I’ by the ‘transit’ of the ‘plenitudinous grace’ of God: that kenosis is not ‘without telos’, does not ‘issue from and into absence’, but is intertwined with pleroma. Nevertheless, we have also seen how, repeatedly, Ward evades Levinas’ most insistent critique: that in positioning the ‘summons’, the ‘accusation’, of the other as prior to the self Levinas is positioning ethics as prior to philosophy – an ‘exteriority’, ‘recognised in the face of the stranger, the widow, the orphan’, which ‘calls our human productions and fabrications’ (our poiesis, we might say) ‘into question’, which ‘forever disrupts’ the ‘circulations’ of our ‘economies’, our attempts to ‘return to the homeland of the Same’.\textsuperscript{84} Ward rejects the ‘violence towards the self’ of Levinas’ ‘accusatory’ ethics, and the inevitable paralysis of ethical judgment it entails as ‘I freeze before the endless possibilities for putting [infinite responsibility] into action’: ‘[e]thical action, as such, becomes arbitrary because its universalism overrides the particularity of where I am and the bodies I am more responsible for because of where I am’.\textsuperscript{85} Nevertheless, just as the silent, faceless, homeless body on the Oxford Road continues to ‘accuse’ Ward through the final pages of Cities of God and ‘haunt’ him beyond, so too, it seems, does Levinas’ ethical critique of philosophy’s (and theology’s) tendency towards ‘totality’ – in particular, Ward’s tendency to neutralise, or (mis)appropriate the potentially ‘disruptive grace’ that comes in the challenges of ‘others’, by absorbing them into the confident poiesis of theological discourse.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{81} Ward 2015
\textsuperscript{82} Ward 2005b:138 (see n.33, above)
\textsuperscript{83} Althaus-Reid 2000a:102-3
\textsuperscript{84} Ward 2005b:78. See also Noble on Levinas: “Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.” ... It is the “I” who determines the interpretation of the other, who opens up or closes down the space in which the other is allowed to exist’. Instead, Levinas proposes, ‘“metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted – in relations with [people]...”’ (Noble 2013:74-5).
\textsuperscript{85} Ward 2000a:175. Compare Ward’s assertion here to Gutierrez’s reading of the ‘Good Samaritan’ parable: ‘it was the Samaritan who approached the wounded man and made him his neighbour. The neighbour ... is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek.’ (quoted in Noble 2013:17; see also Rieger 1998:138).
\textsuperscript{86} Virginia Burrus makes a similar point to mine here, in relation to Ward’s resistance to feminist critique: ‘[t]o ignore the sexism inhering in the formative texts and formidable doctrines of Christianity and to imagine that it can be eliminated seem equally flawed responses. ... [I]t is possible to theologize without resort to the heresiological habit, via creative and creatively ambivalent reappropriations of a complex and diverse tradition, in dialogue (in acts of translation and negotiation) with whatever voices may seem most helpful and relevant in a given moment. ... I think Ward could do so if he chose: but then the theology would not be “orthodox”, much less “radically orthodox”. It would not need to justify its own claims by proclaiming (by

A fourth source of critique might helpfully be introduced here: the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan plays an ambivalent role in Ward’s work, where the latter takes up the former’s analysis of the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolic’, and also – more implicitly, but significantly for Ward’s theology (as we have seen) – his attention to ‘the phallus ... as the governor of desire’. Alongside the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolic’, however, Lacan also develops a third term, ‘the real’, which Ward considers only in passing, and largely filtered through the lens of Lacanian Slavoj Žižek, who for Ward simply ‘reverses the metaphysics [of presence] by offering a negative ontology’, a metaphysics of ‘lack’, of ‘the Void’. For theologist Joerg Rieger, however, Lacan’s notion of the ‘real’ highlights ‘something [that] has been lost or, more precisely, repressed’ in the struggles in Western philosophy between the imaginary and the symbolic orders, and in theology between ‘the self and the text’ (or, as he later refers to it, ‘the tradition’). If the thrust of Ward’s project can be characterized, as I have argued here, as seeking to reject (and reverse) modernity’s turn to the individual (and the resulting ‘social atomism’ of ‘the postmodern city’) for a response both ‘within and beyond’ postmodernism’ which seeks (a return to) an ‘ontologically founded community’, then we are invited by Rieger to ask what is repressed in this move from one pole to the other of the self-text/tradition binary: the textual (or ecclesial) turn, he argues, ‘[n]o doubt ... gets us beyond certain modern forms of individualism’, but this ‘postliberal resistance ... does not necessarily lead us beyond the construction of gated communities.’ To be sure, Ward is forthright in rejecting the ‘privatised’, ‘neo-tribal’ communities conjured by some representatives of postliberalism, but it is far from clear that he escapes Rieger’s concern that, in turning away from the individualism of modernity, ‘[t]he texts of the church tend to take over a position of control that strongly resembles the control of the self.’ What will guarantee, Rieger asks, ‘that the individualist narcissisms of the modern era are not

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87 Ward 2000a:169 & passim. See also Ward 2005b:133-5, 206-14, 250-3, 263-4 & passim. Irigaray, as we have seen, is a critical student of Lacan. As Beverley Clack highlights, ‘Lacan’s central concern ... with culture ... has led to different interpretations of his apparent sexism or lack of it. For some feminists, he is an enemy to be defeated; for others, he simply exposes the phallocentric basis of human culture’ (Clack 2000:121). Rieger makes the crucial point that ‘Lacanian analysis is useful only where it is understood that Lacan does not describe the way things are and always will be, but rather the way power and authority are structured in specific social contexts, laying the ground for transformation and change’ – that is, in North America at the end of the ‘ego’s era’, in which ‘the modern self [has been] caught up in narcissistic structures that manifest themselves not only in personal relationships but also in the economic and political realms where this self has managed aggressively to draw everything into its force field and to exclude the rest of humanity’ (Rieger 2001:86-7, 130).

88 Ward 2000a:169

89 Rieger 1998:75 (cf Rieger 2001). Rieger quotes Ellie Ragland-Sullivan here: ‘It has been said that “if Lacan had proposed only the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, we could fit him comfortably into the binary tendencies of Western philosophy.”’

90 Rieger 2001:94
simply converted into collective narcissisms in the postmodern era?  

91 What ‘the discourse of the tradition really wants’, he argues (Lacan calls it ‘the discourse of the university’) ‘is the “subject being built up as insufficiency,” a self that it can teach and mould into its own image.’ Central here is ecclesial formation: ‘[t]he goal of this model is to integrate the uninitiated (students, non-Christians, and so on) into the system, enabling them to repeat and reproduce the language and tradition of the church’, the ‘overall purpose’ being ‘the production of culture’.  

92 ‘Unless we can reconnect with what we have repressed and excluded,’ argues Rieger in Lacan’s wake, ‘it will always come back to haunt us.’ This is surely what we witness in Ward’s work, with the oft-returning figure of the homeless person on the Oxford Road. What, then, will it take, Rieger asks, ‘to shock a community into realizing those who are radically excluded from its cultural-linguistic boundaries, be it the human others or the divine Other?’  

93 What we need, he goes on to argue, putting Lacan into mutually-enlightening conversation with both Latin American liberation theology and the feminist theology of Mary McClintock Fulkerson, is a Christian theology which ‘grow[s] out of “attention to the continual tendency of ... the church not-to-see things.” The questions are, “Who is the stranger?” and “Who is ‘unintelligible’ now?”’  

94 Rather than being another form of ‘identity politics’ to which Ward is allergic, this insight is, says Rieger, a challenge to such politics: an approach to theology, instead, where ‘receptivity, listening, and reflecting are more important initially than establishing foundations and identities’.  

95 Such theologies of liberation, rather than placing the self central and ‘universalizing their own concerns and discounting others’, in fact “emerge from particular gaps in faith’s reading of reality – the ‘fissures and cracks.’” The encounter with others challenges the control of self and text and opens up the theological enterprise, creating new space for encounters with the [divine] Other,’ in the hope that “the terms of good news we might receive if we were formed to receive from the other will surprise even those of us who tell stories about the oppressed.”  

96 While this seems to come close to what Ward means by ‘the poiesis that narrative installs’, Rieger’s ‘turn to others’ (Lacan’s ‘discourse of the analyst’) is emphatically not ‘a turn to

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91 Rieger 2001:97, 94. When Rieger sketches the ecclesiologies of a few postliberal pastors and ‘church consultants, we might hear more than passing resonances with Ward’s own work: ‘On Sunday [people] feel as if they need to “receive something”... people are “desperate for meaning”... the turn to the presence of God in the reality of the church... “Before we can change the world, we must first submit to change ourselves. Call it conversion.”... “Healthy congregations turn on the lights in a dark world”... “Which people group in the circle around our church has the greatest needs?”... The church is in the center; it is the focal point. There is little doubt about the integrity of the church and its people, properly converted and formed, assuming not only that the church can indeed help others in need by reaching out (a mutual relationship does not seem to be required) but also that the church could not possibly be part of the problem that needs to be addressed’ (Rieger 2001:94-5). Compare Ward’s insistence, in my interview with him, on a church that is ‘or should be, one of the lights in what is actually a very difficult situation, urban situation ... The church could actually be a help, an enormous help, but it needs the resources to actually be able to do that.’ When pressed for a concrete example of ‘the church in the city being what you would like the church to be’, after the longest pause of the interview, Ward responded: ‘No... I can give you one in a village.’ After describing an evening of inter-faith conversation in the village hall, he suggested that the reason it worked so well was ‘because the church is central to the village, because the church had the village hall, which was also next to the pub, because of all these things it had the resources, it had centralised resources to stage events of that, at that particular time – and that’s what I mean: here it had the resources to do that, and it employed those resources.’

92 Rieger 2001:148
93 Rieger 2001:129, 86
95 Rieger 2001:106
passive victims’, as Ward’s most unilateral conceptions of agape suggest, but in fact places ‘the other ... in the position of leadership and agency’ – an agency nevertheless ‘profoundly different from the modern self’, not that of ‘the autonomous individual, in control of others, but someone aware of the web of the often oppressive relationships within which she or he lives’. 97

The theologian, then, like the Lacanian analyst, must learn to put herself or himself in “a position of articulated receptivity, of deep listening”, rather than claiming “the pretension of speaking the truth”. 98 ‘The goal’, says Rieger, ‘is not so much to speak but to listen and, in this way, to make others speak’. The theologian needs to learn a certain ‘theological decontrol’ (the term is Frederick Herzog’s) to ‘read between the lines and envision what is repressed’, to pay attention to ‘to the silences in the church’ (and beyond), to ‘conflictive discourses’ and the intersections of traditions, and (beyond Levinas) ‘to the question of who put the [marginalized] other in [their] place [of marginalization] – while holding open ‘the ultimate place of authority’ not for any one (or collective) human voice (even that of the marginalized other), but ‘for God’.99

4.4.iii Retreating from the materiality of Jesus

If Ward’s retreat from a truly ‘schizoid’ Christ allows him to displace the challenge of the ‘other’, then Lucy Gardner highlights a second retreat, from the materiality of Jesus into the discourse of christology: the displacement of ‘Christ, the Word of God ... by words about Christ’. The first hint she catches of this is in Radical Orthodoxy’s list of the central sites of Christian theology as ‘the Trinity’, ‘the Church’, ‘the Eucharist’ and, in between the first and second, not ‘Christ’ but ‘Christology’.100 Ward’s essay in that volume, Gardner notes, then serves to justify this oddity, exploring as it does ‘the thoroughly Johannine theme of the properly Christological displacement of Christ’s body’, but in the process ‘elid[ing] Christ with Christology’ (and ‘participation in theology’ with ‘participation in God’, a recurring tendency in the volume more widely) in a way that leaves Christ ‘more obscure, eclipsed even, than witnessed to in a Christology which is itself thereby displaced from its proper displacement’.101 We have seen repeatedly in Ward’s work that ‘theological discourse’ itself is identified not only with ‘participating in’ but with ‘performing the presence of Christ’: ‘[t]o do Christology,’ he writes in the introduction to Christ and Culture, ‘is to engage in a Christological operation; to enquire is to engender Christ; to enter the engagement is to foster the economy whereby God is made known to us. To do Christology is to inscribe Christ into the times and cultures

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97 Rieger 2001:154
99 Rieger 1998:105, 106, 111, 131; 2001:157-8. “[W]e need first of all to think historically, rather than to pontificate categorically, about our social realities,” Rieger argues, quoting Herzog. ‘Applied to theology and the church, this means that “we need to be keenly aware of the shift from theologizing about an ideal church,” the focus of many liberal and traditional theologies, “to analyzing the actual church”’ (Rieger 1998:109, emphasis in original). Gudmarsdottir, likewise, argues that '[i]f anything good can come out of [Ward’s use] of the traditional framework of Neoplatonic mystical theology in Christianity for the oppressed of the polis, such ontological proposition must', in Gudmarsdottir’s view, ‘go hand-in-hand with careful analyses of social oppression’ (Gudmarsdottir 2012:170). Rieger’s description of the theologian here is close to that of Tim Noble, who adopts Jean-Luc Marion’s concept of ‘l’adonné’ (‘the one who receives itself from what it receives’): ‘the theologian receives his or her calling as theologian precisely in the collision with the other, who is encountered in his or her complexity and which [p]recisely and only as other ... are also a gift, an authentic gift which conditions the truth of what the theologian writes’ (Noble 2013:96-7).
we inhabit''. But does such theology as Ward’s make Christ, or Christology, visible? Gardner is sympathetic with Ward’s efforts to ‘re-sensitise’ our ‘spiritual senses’ so that we rediscover our sense of participation ‘in the world’ and ‘in God’, while acknowledging that we have never ceased to so participate. She is, however, less sure than Ward ‘how ... we [are] to come to participate in this sense again’, and is unconvinced that Ward attends sufficiently ‘to the interactions between our sensory and our spiritual senses’, to the processes by which the body (as ‘sheer material, in all its specific, finite, determinate, meaningless indeterminacy’) is ‘deposed “into” thought, covered with thought and drenched with meaning’.

Gardner offers the beginnings of a response in a turn again to the gospels, and to a scene absent – a ‘singularly odd omission’, she suggests – from Ward’s ‘series of tableaux in which the displacement of Christ’s Body is explored as a paradigm of the instability of created reality’: that of ‘the Deposition’, the taking-down from the cross of Jesus’ dead body – by Joseph of Arimathea (watched, helped perhaps, by Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of [James and] Joseph at least, if not also by ‘the mother of James and John’, Salome and some other women) in the synoptic gospels, and by Joseph and Nicodemus in John’s gospel. For Gardner, this is ‘surely the paradigmatic moment in which Christ’s Body, in all its materiality, is moved and displaced from one place to another, rather than simply banished from place altogether’. ‘What seems to be lacking’ in Ward’s account, Gardner continues, ‘is an attention to the attentive removal of the body, an “abiding” with it and its mute materiality, as it moves from one suspension (the Cross) to another (Holy Saturday), suspended, as it were, not over-against the void’ (as Radical Orthodoxy casts theology’s task) ‘but between suspensions.’

More can be made of Gardner’s perceptive point here: in the Deposition, Jesus’ body is not simply ‘suspended’, as if by an invisible wire – it is held, carried, laid down, by the intimate touch of human hands. As a dead body, moreover, it is utterly dependent on the initiative of others. Here, definitively, in his ‘mute materiality’, Jesus cannot speak, cannot embody divine initiative, cannot even ‘give himself’ into others’ hands. Could this be why Ward omits this scene? Where might the ‘performance of Christ’ be located here, were he to attend to this moment? I will revisit this question in the final chapter of this thesis.

4.4.iv Retreating from the particularity of christology

A further retreat Ward makes explicit in Politics of Discipleship, where he announces his intention ‘to “humanize” the body,’ to ‘put the sôma back into the sarx’. We recall his argument (stretching at least as far back as Cities of God, but outlined with great clarity here) ‘that the body can be valued positively and participate in political agency only when it is viewed metaphysically and made heavy with meaning’, and thus the necessity of a transcendent (for Ward, analogical) worldview. Here, however, he goes further: ‘it strikes me that beginning with the human body, even if it belongs to Jesus of Nazareth, capitulates, to some extent, to modern individualism’. This ‘exaltation of the

102 Ward 2005b:2. See also Ward 2005b:177: ‘The politics of interpretation, the endless figurations of the body of Christ are, then, that which constitutes the very participation of the human in the divine, such that in each historical epoch, as in each distinct geographical-cum-ethnic location, something new is expressed, revealed, produced in a divine/human cooperation about the body of Christ. We are called to make meaning in God. That is, Christian theologians have to render visible the operation of the Word, the body of Christ. ... Theological reflection upon that embodiment is itself a participation in that extended embodiment as it moves through time and space and redeems the material.’

103 Gardner 2000:135, 140

104 Gardner 2000:140
individual’, he argues, was paralleled by ‘the loss of an ontologically founded community – that is, a community rooted in a sense of belonging to one another, to a social order, to a cosmic order ordained and sustained by God’ – and it is this which he seeks to reverse. His focus now switches, he tells us, from the body as ‘isolated subject’ to ‘the corporations the body is mapped on to’, from Christology to ‘the body politic’, and the ecclesiology which it enables Ward to bring to the foreground. As Hiebert notes, ‘[t]his turn is curious, given Ward’s earlier development of a kind of phenomenological Christology that attempts to tell the story of the body of Jesus Christ differently, and that explicitly acknowledges that all accounts of such difference must necessarily remain open to correction, critique, and supplementation’. While acknowledging Ward’s concern – with Agamben – with ‘a problematic privileging of the physical body as the new subject of politics’, and ‘a reductive materialism that fetishizes the physical body as an object’, Hiebert suggests ‘that a great deal of Ward’s earlier volume on Christ and Culture can helpfully be read as a Christological companion ... that already embryonically anticipates the theo-political trajectory of his politics of discipleship without privileging individual bodies as such’.106

We might then, with Hiebert, understand ‘Ward’s hesitation’ here ‘as a supplementation or reconfiguration of his earlier Christology that endeavours to be more responsive and responsible to its contemporary context’.107 What, however, might be lost in this ‘switch’ of focus – what Bretherton has called the ‘ecclesial turn’ – from Christology to the (ecclesial) ‘body politic’? Here we must return to the silent body on the Oxford Road, and Ward’s apparent paralysis in its ‘accusing’ presence. We witnessed a ‘turn’ there, too: from Ward’s sense of ‘aloneness’ before his ‘accuser’, to the imperative (to himself) to ‘find a way of joining with those who are also ashamed’ – a ‘solidarity’ of a kind, if not with the homeless person closest to him in this moment. Recall Ward’s insistence that ‘bodies only speak if and when they are made heavy with meaning’, and that meaning only comes with participation, incorporation. As Ward perceives this particular homeless person, she or he is, almost by definition, excluded from ‘the body politic’, ‘unincorporated’, and thus lacks the ‘weight of meaning’ for her or him to ‘speak’ to Ward (figuratively, at least – if not perhaps also literally). What place is there then, in Ward’s ecclesial turn, for the ‘unincorporated’?

Sharon Betcher raises a similar question, as one excluded and marginalized because society has labelled her ‘disabled’. From that perspective – with its ‘cognate resonance with the biologized “waste” of globalization’, as Betcher puts it – Ward’s ‘strong ontology of participation’ is, she suggests, insufficient to counter the fear and distrust engendered in those generally deemed ‘[in]capable of contributing’.108 Moreover, Ward’s continual ‘displacement’ of, distancing from, the physical body of Jesus Christ is problematic for Betcher because it risks colluding – ironically, considering Ward’s stated intent – with the exclusion of vulnerable bodies for which postmodernity is already all too guilty:

> [W]hat shall we make of this Christic wound that allows for its own disappearance, a wounded body made more spiritually capacious because it is displaced? As one with some experience of bearing what for this culture appears as stigmata, I wonder how this torture

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105 Ward 2009:225-7
106 Hiebert 2014:294-5, citing Ward 2005b:175-8, in particular p.178: ‘all accounts of the body of Jesus Christ remain open for correction, critique and supplementation. None of them is beyond contestation’.
107 Hiebert 2014:295
108 Betcher 2014:40
victim, this victim of imperial power, this uncivil grotesque (Isaiah 53), comes to be so easily disappeared and what that disappearance effects. The colonized, the body – visually fixed as haemorrhaging, bleeding, stigmatic ... – can never disappear, can never pretend to transparency. Rather, our bodies circulate outside invested desire, with civility patrolling any allowance of/for their desire. As Zygmunt Bauman, among others, persistently points out, for the bodies of those who are “absentee landlords” and in the culture of public appearance, disappearance or transparency is the norm of power. Thus Ward’s dispersion of the wounded body, its “translocationality,” unwittingly serves not the broken bodies of postmodernity, as he had hoped, but the absentee landlord class who live an absence of presence to relational accountability.109

What is required, Betcher suggests, is not the displacement, but the remembering, of ‘the stigmatic, because colonized, body that resisted cultural power’s disappearing act’, the rereading of Christian iconography ‘as decisively crippled [Betcher’s term for placing ‘disability’ centrally as a hermeneutic lens] – as engaging “wounds” that refuse displacement’. We cannot find ‘the muscle named “responsibility”’ simply ‘by shutting our eyes’, and practising ‘analogical idealization’, Betcher chides Ward. Rather, we need to practise ‘empathic interdependence’ by looking attentively: ‘the iconography of the inappropriate/d other can instead promote a geography of resistance opening off from feeling with and for the wound of the other, a geography of assuming pain, and our empathic engagement, as of the nature of human life.’110 To flesh this out further, Betcher then proceeds to read the ‘suffering servant’ text Isaiah 53 as ‘a therapeutic ritual’, ‘a liturgical passage for working through disgust’: ‘like the meditative engagement of an icon, this narrative passage works to transform the attitude of the reader – moving through aversion toward self-recognition, both in terms of accepting appropriate culpability in ethical offloading and for the projectional, judgmental declaration of naming someone as a “misfit”. ‘Rather than justifying vicarious suffering,’ says Betcher, ‘it exposes the mechanism of social scapegoating’.111 Ward’s acknowledgment that ‘the smell of poverty ... makes me retch’ suggests that Betcher’s suggested therapy might just possibly prove helpful in helping him practise the attentiveness that his silent ‘accuser’ demands of him.

4.4.v Retreating from the engagement of praxis

One final retreat must be named, and that is Ward’s retreat from the engagement of praxis. There is ‘a surplus of meaning to consider in radical orthodoxy,’ says Marcella Althaus-Reid, ‘produced by juxtaposing the term “orthodoxy” with “liberation”’ (we have noted already Althaus-Reid’s suggestion that liberation theology is RO’s ‘beloved enemy’). ‘At least from the perspective of the established liberation theology term,’ she continues, ‘that surplus should be orthopraxis. However, there is no orthopraxis in radical orthodoxy. Paraphrasing Gutierrez, there is no one stopping at Ayacucho112, at the location of human suffering and destitution, to ask how we can find the beauty and glory of God in the corner of the dead. Radical orthodoxy does not travel well, except on ancient

109 Betcher 2014:40-41. In his advocacy of ‘transcorporeality’, distinguishing his position from Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘endless dissemination’ of the body as ‘metaphysical genocide’, Ward insists: ‘We cannot afford the disappearance of the body. Too many bodies have disappeared already’ (Ward 2000a:95).
110 Betcher 2014:41
111 Betcher 2014:42-43
112 Ayacucho, Althaus-Reid explains, ‘is a very poor, largely indigenous city in Peru where, between 1980 and 1993, approximately thirty thousand people were killed and six hundred thousand made internal refugees in the war between the Shining Path guerrillas and government forces’ (Althaus-Reid 2006a:107 n.2).
Greek and medieval European tours. Is Ward guilty of Althaus-Reid’s charge? Luke Bretherton believes he is, frustrated that Ward’s ‘powerful and prophetic mode of description’, and his limiting of ‘faithful politics’ to ‘modes of cultural production’, leave Ward ‘too nervous about action, too polite perhaps, to suggest what should be done’: ‘without any clear engagement’ with accounts of ‘constructive forms of Christian political action’ it is ‘difficult to see how the “theological imaginary” Ward hopes to develop can in any meaningful way “transform aspects of the civic imaginary”’, as Ward himself hopes to do. If Ward is to play a part in reversing the ‘depoliticizations’ he has charted with the aid of Colin Crouch, he must surely (as I suggested in chapter 3) find ways to prise ‘politics’ from the clutches of a wealthy, market-driven elite, to recover popular politics as a work of ‘production’ and not merely ‘consumption’, to proliferate spaces for ‘dialogue’ and ‘contestation’ across multiple differences, and to discover and strengthen the political agency of the poor and marginalized, beyond simple zero-sum games. Ward offers precious few suggestions, however, for how these shifts might take place. Similarly, on the micropolitical level, his paralysis before that homeless person on the Oxford Road suggests a similar absence of ‘concrete action’ – or if action, Althaus-Reid’s ‘orthopraxis’, is not absent, it is at least indefinitely delayed. Instead his ‘beginning’ of a response, we have noted, lies firmly in the practice of theology: in ‘the reappropriation of analogical relations, the delineation of a theological cosmology’, in ‘getting our metaphysics right’ before we can expect to change ‘processes, economic or political’.

We have already noted Burrus’ suggestion that Ward’s ‘orthodoxy’ is in some senses dependent on the fear of ‘heresy’, and Ward’s wrestling with Augustine’s own tension regarding heretics. In the tension between ‘modesty’ and ‘confidence’ that Ronald Kuipers identifies in Ward’s work, however, Kuipers sees presented ‘certain temptations’ that he thinks ‘we would be well advised to guard against’ – not least among them the desire to ‘get it right’. While he acknowledges that ‘Christianity in the sense Ward intends must show itself to be the healing word that our broken world so desperately needs to hear, and would be diminished without’ (in CTW Ward states most clearly that ‘[o]ne can only judge a practice by the kind of transformations it produces – the kind of knowledges that build rather than destroy social relations’), Kuipers nevertheless sees parallels between Ward’s project and Charles Taylor’s, for whom it is of central importance that ‘the Christian understanding of agape, ‘God’s love for the world’, ‘provides a better account of the good’ than the alternatives, secular or religious. ‘Christianity gets something right here that other positions do

113 Althaus-Reid 2006a:116. Rieger notes that ‘[i]n touch with the poor, theology begins to understand what most theological reflections on eschatology do not realize, namely, that our concepts “limp after reality”’ (Rieger 1998:175, quoting Gutierrez, who is distinguishing his position from that of Moltmann).
116 (section 4.2, above)
117 (section 3.3, above)
118 Kuipers 2009:9-10, 12
119 Ward 2005a:172. Note even here the identification between ‘practice’ and ‘knowledges’.
120 Kuipers 2009:10-12. For Taylor, what is distinctive in the Christian account of agape is that ‘[t]his is a bond where each is a gift to the other, where each gives and receives, and where the line between giving and receiving is blurred. We are quite outside the range of “altruistic” unilateralism. Could it be,’ he continues, ‘that, in a very different way, something analogous lies behind the sense of solidarity between equals that pushes us to help people, even on the other side of the globe? The sense here would be that we are somehow given to each other, and that ideally, at the limit, this points us towards a relationship where giving and receiving merge’ (Taylor 2007:702, quoted in Kuipers 2009:11, my emphasis). Although Ward explicitly
not,’ observes Kuipers of Taylor’s position. ‘The cultural importance of this epistemic status lies in Taylor’s claim that “getting it right will help to strengthen it.”’ In Ward’s Politics of Discipleship, then, Kuipers sees a similar sense ‘of the importance of “getting it right”’ – of ‘something more or less akin to a theoretical account, one that is better able to explain or justify the pursuit of and longing for universal solidarity than other accounts currently on offer’. But how important is it, Kuipers asks, ‘to “get it right” here, to have all of our theological and metaphysical ducks lined up in a row?’

Taylor himself warns, Kuipers notes, that it is precisely ‘when we take ourselves to have so gotten it right’, when we define ourselves by ‘the very goodness of the goal’, as its ‘builders and defenders’, that the way is opened ‘to our grounding our self-integrity on a contrast case who must be evil as we are virtuous’. ‘There is no general remedy against this self-righteous reconstitution of the categorizations of violence,’ Taylor acknowledges, ‘[b]ut there can be moves, always within a given context’, of renunciation – renunciation of our victimhood, of our innocence, our rightness – ‘the very opposite of the instinctive defence of our righteousness’, moves ‘which can be called forgiveness, but at a deeper level ... [are] based on a recognition of common, flawed humanity.’

While Kuipers cannot imagine Ward disagreeing with Taylor here, and sees Ward’s work as ‘full of warnings against precisely such self-righteous presumption’, he suggests, nevertheless, that in ‘insisting’ on the importance of ‘getting it right’ we (Ward, specifically) ‘have not taken Christian renunciation far enough’: ‘we ought not to confuse the task of being salt and light to a world desperately in need of such things with attempts at theoretical self-justification’. Rather (and here Kuipers reads both Luke 18:19 and a Wittgensteinian aphorism), ‘[k]nowing I am not good, and cannot make myself good, paradoxically frees me for the Good. The witness of such goodness will not be found in any theoretical account, but rather in the fruits of a life so animated. ... What is more, renouncing such attempts at theoretical self-justification may also give those tempted to engage in them the eyes to see and the hearts to affirm goodness wherever they find it, no matter how much our broken world falls short of the ideal.’ ‘[I]t is no accident, then,’ Kuipers concludes generously, ‘that Professor Ward’s book ends with a list of people whose actions by themselves bear witness to the agape which is gracefully at loose in our world. On my argument, that is precisely where we should be pointing, and nowhere else.’


\[\text{incorporates Taylor’s ‘network of ever different relations of agape’ into his account of ‘the apophatic body of Christ’, as I have argued he repeatedly gravitates towards exactly the kind of “altruistic” unilateralism’ that Taylor rejects.} \]

122 Kuipers 2009:12. Writing long before Ward or Taylor, David Nicholls cautions against ‘the almost universal assumption [he is writing about ‘anglo-catholic theology’ in particular] that if only we could get our theology straight we would then be able to deduce our ethics and politics’. By contrast, he reflects, the leaders of the Oxford Movement ‘were aware that belief and practice are dialectically related; religious truth is perceived by acting upon it’ (Nicholls 1984:36).
123 Kuipers 2009:12
125 “There is not one good person on earth. No one is good but God” (Luke 18:19)
126 “What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural” (quoted in Kuipers 2009:13).
4.5 A ‘mended middle’? Ward’s awkward appropriation of Gillian Rose

How might we help Ward overcome his paralysis that morning on the Oxford Road? I am reminded of Gillian Rose’s work of political philosophy which (as Kate Schick summarises it) ‘begins always with diremption, with the brokenness of theory and actuality’ and ‘works towards comprehension [never complete] of this brokenness, resisting rigid dualisms and one-sided analyses, in favour of a speculative negotiation [not mending] of the broken middle’, rooted in ‘a dogged acceptance of uncertainty and equivocation’ which is nevertheless not the kind of ‘radical uncertainty that would lead to political paralysis’, but instead ‘insists always upon the need to “stake oneself!”’, ‘to risk, fail, learn and risk again, in pursuit of a “good enough justice”’. There are undoubtedly some resonances between Ward’s and Rose’s projects, not least when Ward insists on the need to ‘risk encounter’ from a position without any guarantee of ‘purity’ or ‘innocence’. But Ward’s retreats from such encounters, his aversion to taking the risk of action in the interests of ‘getting it right’, perhaps tell us more about his theology. Indeed, when Ward explicitly refers to Rose in his introduction to Christ and Culture, we witness there precisely his retreat from such difficult ‘negotiations’: ‘Barth’s Christology,’ he suggests, ‘is a negotiation of what Gillian Rose called “the broken middle” in terms of a unique person (Jesus Christ). What I am attempting in these essays is to see how in and across this broken middle there is constructed a set of relations, a divine and dynamic operation that constitutes an embodiment (the body of Christ, the body of the Church, the sacramental body, the social body and the physical bodies of each of us).’ How much is Ward’s theology of the body of Christ a dream of a ‘mended middle’ (a dream Ward insists is already at least partially realised), rather than the difficult work of, in Rose’s terms ‘bearing its rupture’?

Vincent Lloyd argues that ‘Ward invokes Rose as a name to support a project from which she would most certainly dissent’: contrary to Ward, Lloyd insists, ‘the middle is not the site of the sacred’; it is precisely ‘the rhetoric of the sacred’ that ‘evades’ the difficulties of ‘negotiating the middle’.

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128 Schick 2012:5-8, 13
129 ‘An adequate Christian response is one which listens to the many voices, the many claims for attention in the postmodern city. It risks encounter, knowing that its own voice is never pure, never innocent. It also speaks: announcing to the postmodern city its own vision of universal justice, peace and beauty, and it criticises the structural injustices, violations and uglinesses which resist and hinder the reception of that vision’ (Ward 2000a:70).
130 Ward 2005b:22 (my emphasis)
131 Lloyd 2007:6, 9. Lloyd has in focus here Ward’s footnote referring to Rose in the context of discussing Irigaray’s ‘between’ (2005b:148 n.72), and also his description of the ‘sacred space’ opened up through allegorical interpretation, a ‘liturgical’ space ‘which is constantly transgressing its own dimensions, a space that cannot be located “here” or “there” because it is a space that cannot be contained, a space that deconstructs its boundaries’ (Ward 2005b:240; see also a reference to Gillian Rose’s Feminism and Geography in Ward 2000a:56). If Ward is here seeking to appropriate Rose for his own project, then Lloyd gently highlights a fatal flaw in Ward’s attempt. He notes that in Feminism and Geography Rose (1993b) writes that ‘space is “multidimensional, shifting, contingent”’, and ‘suggests that “spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside – are occupied simultaneously.”’ She also contrasts ‘“transparent” spaces associated with “imperialism” which marginalize difference with [the] fluid, “fragmented,” and “provisional” spaces’ examined by feminist geography, and which she develops further in a 1997 examination of community arts projects in Edinburgh. The problem, as Lloyd points out, ‘is that in 1997 the brilliant philosopher Gillian Rose was not immersing herself in the arts community of Edinburgh. Rather, she was, as we say in Middle America, pushing up daisies.’ The Gillian Rose of feminist geography is still alive, Lloyd points out, and ‘presently teaches at Open University’; the deceased Rose ‘remains deceased’. The ‘slippage between the two Roses could quite possibly be unconscious and is at any rate certainly understandable’, Lloyd acknowledges, but in their ‘disaggregation’ it becomes clear that in
Although Ward himself refers to Rowan Williams’ appreciative article on Rose’s work, \(^{132}\) ‘[t]he theological implications that Williams and Ward draw from Rose are nearly opposite’, observes Lloyd. While both understand “the middle” as the site about which theology speaks, for Ward, something positive can be said about the middle. It is anchored (better: sanctified) by its relation to the specific individual, Jesus Christ. Williams’ theology is negative: God does not mend the middle but echoes its brokenness. We cannot think or speak about God except as absence, an absence which reminds us of our imperfection and encourages us not to give up the work of witness. \(^{133}\) Following ‘in the wake’ of Rose, Williams’ challenge to Ward is to be found in what the former calls the ‘hard’ question ‘of how the very experience of learning and negotiation can be read as something to do with God’. \(^{134}\) Ward too is interested, as we have seen, in ‘negotiation’, and allows some space for the possibility of the ‘disruptive grace’ of the theologian’s ‘cultural other’, but in the end it seems always to be the theologian alone who is able to ‘perform Christ’ in the world, and who shows only limited signs of learning from those prior negotiations. Ward retreats from the challenge of the other into a tendency to appropriate ‘others’ for his own project, from the materiality of Jesus into the textuality of christology, from the particularity of christology into the universalizing trajectories of ecclesiology, and from the messy terrain of praxis into the ‘tidiness’ of ontological description. Rose’s critique of the quest of postmodern political philosophers and theologians for the ‘New Jerusalem’, in fact, seems uncannily apt in relation to Ward’s project: it is the quest, says Rose, for ‘a collective life without inner or outer boundaries, without obstacles or occlusions, within and between souls and within and between cities, without the perennial work which constantly legitimates and delegitimates the transformation of power into authority of different kinds.’ \(^{135}\)

4.6 Holding open the ‘opening’: returning Ward to his senses

To finish, for the moment, our consideration of Ward, we might helpfully highlight one final retreat in his work: Ward’s retreat from his own particularity and situatedness as theologian and human being. This is meant less as sharp criticism and more as a tracing of that ‘deposition’ of ‘body’ into ‘thought’ that Gardner began to trace for us, and in which all theological articulations, whether spoken or written, are unavoidably engaged. Ward is more articulate than many theologians about seeking to appropriate the latter, Ward avoids the challenge posed by her, that he – in common with his RO colleague Milbank as well as a/theologian Mark C Taylor – ‘refuse[s] the broken middle’ (Lloyd 2007:10-11; cf Rose 1992:278, 1993a:37-51).


\(^{133}\) Lloyd 2007:14

\(^{134}\) Williams 1995:9

\(^{135}\) Rose 1996:16. Michael Barnes’ engagements with Levinas, de Certeau, Bhabha and Rose, in the context of specifically inter-religious dialogue, produces some striking parallels (in both language and conclusions) with much of my argument in this chapter, and with our exploration of Coles’ work in the following chapter. Barnes develops ‘an account of dialogue as the “negotiation of the middle”, a mutual process of learning, of critical questioning and respectful listening, which “imagines the possibility of harmonious difference”’ (Barnes 2002:231-2). Like Ward, Barnes constantly returns to the Eucharist ‘as the energising heart of the Christian “school of faith”’ through which ‘Christians learn how to act as host and respond as guest’ (237). Beyond Ward, he affirms a Christ who ‘continues to question and disturb the same by speaking with the voice of a disarming otherness’, a Christ who is both ‘God-with-us’ but also ‘a God who is “other” and “elsewhere”’ (241). ‘Christian discipleship,’ he argues, ‘will be marked not just by a constant attention to the “tactics” which take time and wait upon the right moment, but also to the sort of place which makes possible both the time of waiting and the time for resistance’ (254). It is the fleshing out of some of those ‘tactics’, and some of those ‘places’, within the particular context of the urban margins, that is the task of the final two chapters of this thesis.
his own ‘habitus’: his social location, his socio-political commitments, his visceral and emotional reactions to the places he inhabits and the people he encounters. Nevertheless, as I earlier inferred from Keller’s and Miller’s critiques of Ward’s language of oikonomia, our descriptions of an apparently universal ‘economy’ (or indeed ‘culture’) are always and inevitably coloured by our very particular position within it, with our very particular ‘affinities’ — and it is this nexus between the particular and the (apparently) universal that presents the greatest temptation to impose our own meanings on that which is ‘other’.136 If ‘we’ who are so tempted are to ‘unwind’ this temptation, as liberation and postcolonial theologians have made very clear, we need not only to develop (and sustain) our receptivity to the locations, agency and meanings of ‘others’ (as I am arguing throughout this thesis), but we also need to hold on to an attentiveness to the particularity of our own locatedness, our own embodiment, our own ‘habitus’.

Although there is little autobiographical detail in his writing, in interviews Ward has spoken openly about his roots. Born (in 1955) and brought up in inner-city Salford, at the age of 14 (with the disappearance of his father and shortly before the death of his mother from a genetic condition) he and his three brothers were taken to live with his grandmother nearby — the grandmother who already, some six years earlier, had encouraged the young Graham to consider the possibility of going to university some day. Winning a scholarship to Cambridge to read English and French happened at about the same time (during sixth form) that Ward joined a charismatic house church for a little while, which gave him a ‘grounding’ in Christian faith and the first sense of vocation to some kind of Christian ministry. His desire to question took him beyond that movement, however, and into Anglican priestly ministry (ordained deacon in 1990), and finally into academic theology in his early 40s. Even then, the formative influence of his grandmother remained with Ward, in wanting theology ‘never ... to be just a set of ideas’ but ‘to relate back to real lives’.137 When Ward took up a teaching post at Manchester University, he lived back in the house in Salford where he was born, and was struck both by the first-hand experience of increasing inequality around him, and also by his own inability to ‘speak even to my next-door neighbours... We just didn’t have a vocabulary that either of us could share...’138 This, however, should not perhaps be surprising. The 45-year-old Ward of Cities of God (2000) and, even more recently, The Politics of Discipleship (2009) is now a world-travelled Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics, whose eyes were ‘opened ... to the excitement of the city’ by his ‘first glance of New Orleans, coming over the freeway from the airport’139 and who, when ‘arriv[ing] in Cape Town’ both noticed ‘the stark contrast between the destitute and the moneyed’ and, ‘sip[ping] the country’s best Pinot Noir’ from a terrace bar on the waterfront, contemplates ‘the city [as] a giant emporium, a theme park for trading that stands at the edge of the world’.140 This older Ward is honest about his taste for ‘fine wines and fine foods’, and his visceral reaction to ‘[t]he smell of poverty’ and ‘[t]he hardened features of the desperate’ to be found ‘in certain parts of Manchester’.141

Ward is perhaps less explicitly aware, however, that when he names his ‘cultural others’, he exposes also his own positioning: ‘Afghans being bombed’, ‘people starving in Ethiopia’, ‘farmers and

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136 (See section 4.4.i, above)
137 quoted in Duckles 2014
138 Ward 2015
139 Ward 2000a:1
140 Ward 2009a:77-8
141 Ward 2000a:241 (section 3.2, above)
metalworkers in Senegal and Zambia losing their livelihood’, and ‘the homeless person curled into a tight ball, sleeping on the street’ – all betray, as we have already noted, a sense of ‘otherness’ as passive victimhood, and more than a hint of ‘foreignness’. Ward is at pains to lament the mutual injuries done by ‘[t]he ghettoisations and the segregations of racism, sexism, class, and ageism done in my name, condoned by my silence’, but his apparently limited discomfort with colonial/imperial metaphors and language suggests, as I have argued above, that he has not yet fully grasped the tragic consequences of those processes, and the extent of his own participation in them. Ward is not alone, however. As we noted with Paul Gilroy (in Chapter 1), British (and more specifically white English) identity is entangled in a ‘postimperial melancholia’ which is unable ‘to face, never mind actually mourn’, both the ‘loss of imperial prestige’ and the ‘[r]epressed and buried knowledge of the cruelty and injustice’ of the British empire (itself entwined with the history of Christian mission). While the intention of Ward’s whole theological project is oriented towards strongly resisting the ‘xenophobia’ with which Gilroy charges white British culture, at the heart of that project is profoundly affective imagery (Barth’s ‘deepest, darkest immanence’), an ‘expansive’ ecclesial trajectory, and a theological ‘confidence’ that acknowledges few of theology’s sometimes tragic (if often unintended) consequences, which seems more captive to an ongoing imperialism than he dare admit. Furthermore, recalling Skeggs’ observations that the ‘fluidity’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ of middle-class (and specifically middle-class white male) identities themselves depend to a significant extent on the ‘fixing’, and then appropriation (as ‘commodities’), of ‘other’ identities (‘black’, ‘white working-class’, ‘female’), we might wonder how far Ward’s theological mis-appropriations (of Irigaray, for example), his desire to ‘fix’ (in both senses) the ‘world’, and his investment in the ‘fluidity’ of bodies, are also profoundly rooted in his own white, middle-class, male particularity. The sincerity of his political commitments is not in doubt: what I am wanting to question is the extent to which Ward’s retreat from his own situatedness (into the voice of ‘the theologian’) in fact erects obstacles to him achieving his stated goals.

‘I am a male, Christian theologian who openly advocates same-sex unions, who has friends dying or living with the fear of AIDS, and a family who lives the shadows, embarrassments and sufferings of a genetic disorder’, Ward confesses: a profoundly personal grounding for his theology of embodiment that is hospitable to difference beyond the simple binary of gender, for an ecclesiology which ‘transgresses’ the boundaries of the (still institutionally homophobic) Church of England. But in his quest to ‘make bodies visible’, to enable them to give ‘voice’, he succeeds only partially. David (dying of AIDS) and Jon (his partner of 12 years), blessed by Jim (a gay Presbyterian minister who also has AIDS) appear vividly in Ward’s text; other ‘others’ (‘black’ others, female others, poor others) are present only in more hazy terms. Conversely, while in my 2015 interview with him he aired some of his frustrations with the ‘anti-academic’ and increasingly ‘managerial’ Church, with

\[142\] Ward 2005a:135-6 (section 3.4.ii, above)
\[143\] Ward 2000a:92 (section 3.4.i, above)
\[144\] (section 4.2, above)
\[145\] (section 1.1, above)
\[146\] (section 1.1, above)
\[147\] Ward 2000a:96
\[148\] At the time of writing (2017), the Church of England still refuses officially to conduct or bless same-sex marriages, and to permit its gay clergy to minister if they are themselves married.
\[149\] Ward 2000a:81
‘dwindling resources’ made available to the ‘grassroots’, we have also seen him to display somewhat ‘managerial’ anxieties of his own, about the ‘vulnerability’ of the dispersed church, distanced from the ‘control’ of the ‘institution’, to ‘making mistakes, making compromises, being blemished’. His exasperation that the Church of England itself is, ‘albeit in a different way ... as marginal as so many of the poor’ as portrayed in its *Faith in the City* report, and his admiration of the ‘centralised resources’ of one Oxfordshire village church – which ‘had the village hall, which was also next to the pub’, and which enabled it to ‘do’ things – clarify two significant points for my reading of his work: firstly, that his comparison between these two kinds of apparent ‘marginality’ functions at least in part to obscure the profound difference between them; and secondly, that Ward’s flirtation with ‘marginality’ in fact only thinly conceals a longing for, even insistence on, a much more ‘central’ voice for the church within society – as might have been fitting, traditionally, for one who is (now) a well-published Regius Professor of Divinity in Oxford.

4.6.1 Reversing Ward’s ‘retreats’

Can our ‘habitus’ be changed? From where might ‘disruptive grace’ come? How might the ecclesial flow be interrupted, and the work of negotiation of the broken middle be brought to the foreground of the church’s concern? Ward offers a compelling, erotically-charged ontology of desire and giftedness, that might (in a similar way to Charles Taylor’s project) both frame and energise the quest for inter-human, inter-corporeal, solidarity, and also enable us to shine a spotlight on our manifold resistances to such solidarity, our distorted desires that perpetuate the atomisms and fragmentations ever-present in the postmodern city and our globalised world. It is in Ward’s *christology*, however, that he most convincingly goes beyond the problematic ‘ideal type’ of Rose’s theologies of ‘New Jerusalem’, as we catch glimpses of ‘the Christic operation’, the performance of the messianic, in the complex interrelatedness between Jesus and his ‘others’, in physical touch and the flow of divine *dunamis*, touch and flow which interrupt, disrupt, bridge and redistribute the flows already in motion in the world, and which, crucially, can be triggered not just by Jesus, but by others he encounters – and who approach and interrupt him – as both ‘gift’ and ‘challenge’. If we can discover, or develop, strategies by which to hold this ‘opening’ open, and resist Ward’s tendency towards premature foreclosures, then we will have truly found in Ward a rich resource for a faithful, yet radically receptive, church in the urban margins.

To Ward’s retreat from the challenge of the other, therefore, we would need to supplement his reading of the ‘haemorrhaging woman’ text with readings of other gospel texts that show that this is not simply a single disruptive anomaly; building on the insights of Irigaray, we would need to develop further a narrative of a ‘receptive Christ’, much more radically shaped by those who precede and encounter him. We would need, furthermore, to face more squarely the Levinasian

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150 Ward 2015
151 (see section 3.5.i, above)
152 (see section 3.3, above)
153 Ward 2015
154 The comparison could be made here with the ‘nomadism’ of postmodern philosophers which Ward critiques sharply: ‘Nihilism issuing from an account of being in exile can do nothing for the plight of the refugee. The work of Derrida, Vattimo and Taylor simply announces that we are all dispossessed persons and in a continual state of being dispossessed; we are all nomads. The corollary of that confronts the refugee with the claim: “You are nothing special. You merely give poignant expression to the condition of being human”’ (Ward 2005b:81).
challenge which ‘haunts’ Ward’s work: the critique and disruption of philosophical ‘totalities’, of ‘circulatory economies’, by what is ‘exterior’, outside – whether in the ‘face of the stranger’ or the faceless body of a sleeping-bag-shrouded rough-sleeper. Following Rieger and Lacan, we would need to develop further our practices of ‘receptivity, listening, and reflecting’, our willingness to place the ‘real’ or repressed other in a ‘position of leadership and agency’ – to learn the art of ‘theological decontrol’ as we intensify our attention to what, up until now, the church has failed to see or hear.

This intensified attention would also then begin to reverse Ward’s second and third ‘retreats’, from the materiality of Jesus into the textuality of christology, and from christology further into ecclesiology. We would more intentionally attend, following Betcher’s lead, to those bodies ‘incorporated’ neither in the ‘body politic’ or the (visible) ecclesial body, to those bodies ‘fixed’, rendered ‘grotesque’, and excluded by the circulations of ‘mainstream’ culture and its entrenched investments in ‘fluidity’, ‘civility’ and ‘disgust’. We would also attend more carefully, as Gardner suggests, ‘to the interactions between our sensory and our spiritual senses’, to the processes by which material bodies are ‘deposed into thought’ and ‘drenched with meaning’ (or, indeed, rendered ‘meaningless’) and, most materially, to the ways in which actual bodies are actually attended to, held, moved and ‘dis-placed’: paradigmatically – christologically – in the gospel narrative of ‘the Deposition’ of Jesus’ dead, ‘abandoned’ body by a small group of radically attentive women and men.

Finally, returning Ward from his retreat from praxis, his paralysis of action, will involve, as I have suggested through engagements with both Kuipers and Rose, a certain ‘renunciation’ of our ‘rightness’ (and our need to get our theory ‘right’) and a willingness to ‘risk, fail, learn and risk again’, accompanied by ongoing practices both of penitence for the more-or-less tragic consequences of our failings, and of the discovery and affirmation of ‘goodness wherever [we] find it’. Williams’ insistence that we concentrate on the ‘hard’ question ‘of how the very experience of learning and negotiation can be read as something to do with God’ suggests that there is more to be discovered in Ward’s christological ‘opening’ than has, as yet, been articulated.
Chapter 5

*Engaging Romand Coles as post-liberal ‘theologian’ of receptivity*
5.1 Introduction

In the work of Graham Ward we have found a rich ‘participatory ontology’, which seeks to address the atomisms and fragmentations, the disembodiments and depoliticizations, of the postmodern city through an understanding of Christian discipleship as formation within the body of Christ and ‘performing Christ’ within the world. We have also highlighted a spectrum of ecclesiological ‘stances’ in Ward’s work, from the ‘modest’ witness of a very concrete, fallible church ‘vulnerable’ to the ‘disruptive grace’ of non-ecclesial ‘others’, to the ‘confidence’ of the eschatologically-realised body of Christ as the place of transcendent ‘order’ and light set over against the ‘deepest, darkest immanence’ of a disordered world. The more confident Ward’s tone becomes, the more clearly he articulates a ‘one-way flow’ of loving action – from God, through the church, into the world – which we have shown to have the characteristics of a masculine sexual, and imperialist logic, and which performs in Ward’s work – however unintentionally for its author – a four-fold retreat: from the challenge of the other, from the materiality of Jesus, from the particularity of christology, and from the engagement of praxis. In a few of Ward’s christological reflections we catch a glimpse of an ‘opening’ that resists this ‘one-way flow’, but it is an opening that is quickly closed down. To hold open that ‘opening’, we need to move beyond Ward in various ways, outlined at the end of the previous chapter.

To make that move ‘beyond Ward’, I turn to the work of Romand Coles. There is much that Ward and Coles share. Both agree that ‘liberal democracy’ has reached a point of terminal crisis,¹ and are determined to find spaces to think and act ‘outside’ the imperialist space of neoliberal capitalism. Both find in Augustine’s thought a place to begin (if not necessarily to end) their own reflections. Both draw, appreciatively but critically, on continental philosophy. Both are committed to the embodied relationality of human being and the ‘micro-political’ level of human interaction. Both are explicitly attentive to ‘reception’ and ‘flows’. There is also much in Coles’ work, however, that responds precisely to some of the absences and retreats we have identified in Ward, and develops them in promising directions. Firstly, Coles is a political theorist who engages deeply both with other contemporary political theorists (one of the ‘absences’ in Ward’s work highlighted by Luke Bretherton) but also with ‘actual forms of contemporary ... political witness’ and ‘concrete public action’ (another of the lacunae Bretherton identifies in Ward’s work).² In Coles’ ‘visionary pragmatism’ he does not just present an analysis of our contemporary political condition which extends what Ward has begun for us, but also offers an approach to re-connecting theory and practice that goes beyond Ward’s nervousness about risking action and is open to learn through

¹ In language as apocalyptic as any of Ward’s, Coles describes the ‘perfect storm’ into which ‘democracy’ is ‘about to plunge’: ‘mounting waves of transnational corporate and financial power, myriad fundamentalisms, neofascist megastates, gargantuan media conglomerates, ruthless neo-colonial power, bloody state and nonstate terrorism, and environmental catastrophe’. ‘Perhaps the most formidable challenge today’, suggests Coles, ‘comes from new modes of power that weave tightly several of the above in political articulations capable of penetrating social life ever more deeply, thoroughly, relentlessly, flexibly, and resiliently’ (Coles 2005:ix). Most recently, Coles suggests the ‘catastrophe’ is, now, already ‘under way’: ‘[a] hypermalignant form of capitalism is entangled with ecological collapse, unfathomable inequality, ruthless privatization of the commons, the dismantling of democracy, intensifying xenophobia, “new Jim Crow” racism, permanent war, and the destruction of higher education as a space for critical and creative inquiry’ (Coles 2016:1).

² Bretherton 2009:2-3
taking such risks. Secondly, through appreciatively critical examinations of MacIntyre’s, Augustine’s and Milbank’s strongly ‘teleological’ accounts, and a not-uncritical defence of Derrida’s ‘ateleological’ openness, Coles articulates a means by which theological ‘totalities’ and ‘circulatory economies’ might be disrupted by an attention to their ‘others’, without capitulating to the kind of paralysis of ethical and political judgment with which Ward charges Levinas (and which Coles acknowledges as also a danger in Derrida’s approach). Thirdly, then, Coles offers rich descriptions of ‘concrete’, embodied practices of receptivity to the gifts and challenges of particular, embodied ‘others’, giving a priority to listening (alongside other, non-verbal modes of receptivity) that is much more extensive than that which Ward insists is developed ‘only in prayer’.

Some of these practices of receptivity will, after engaging with Ward, have a distinctly ‘eucharistic’ ring to them, and I will draw out those resonances more explicitly in the concluding chapter. They are not, however, entirely coincidental, as Coles engages often, and with an appreciative attentiveness, to the ‘body practices’ of the Christian community, particularly through extended engagements with the work of John Howard Yoder,\(^5\) Rowan Williams,\(^6\) Jean Vanier\(^7\) and Charles Taylor\(^8\) – and a long-standing friendship, dialogue and partnership in both teaching and writing, with Stanley Hauerwas.\(^9\) Add to these a briefer, but highly significant, skirmish with the liturgical ecclesial ethics of Sam Wells and colleagues,\(^10\) and hopefully it is already clear to see why I consider Coles a profoundly promising ‘theologian’ to help us develop Graham Ward’s work in a more radically receptive direction. There is, however, something rather unusual about Coles’ ‘theology’: while deeply receptive to much in the Christian tradition, Coles is not a Christian. He is, in his own words ‘[a] member of no church’\(^11\) – but rather, ‘a sympathetic but non-Christian radical democrat’.\(^12\) This shift from Ward’s ‘radical orthodoxy’ to Coles’ ‘radical democracy’ is one which we will need to examine more closely, but for the moment a brief definition should suffice: ‘radical democracy refers to political acts of tending to common goods and differences. Such acts are dynamically responsive to a world that always exceeds our terms and settled institutional forms.’\(^13\) This is the living tradition within which Coles situates himself,\(^14\) while he both ‘preaches’ and practises a receptivity to other

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\(^3\) Coles’ engagements with Augustine have at times set the latter in dialogue with Foucault and Merleau-Ponty (Coles 1992a), and Kant, Adorno and Habermas (Coles 1997).

\(^4\) Coles 1992b

\(^5\) Repeatedly (especially in dialogue with Hauerwas), but most specifically in Coles 2005a:109ff.

\(^6\) Coles 2008b

\(^7\) Coles 2008c

\(^8\) Hauerwas & Coles 2010


\(^11\) Coles 2005a:110

\(^12\) Hauerwas & Coles 2008:3

\(^13\) Hauerwas & Coles 2008:3 n.4. Hauerwas & Coles go on to note: ‘[i]f “democracy” were not so persistently deployed as a rhetorical weapon to advance so many anti-democratic institutions and practices, we could simply say “democrat.” “Radical democrat” is a rhetorical effort to distance ourselves from the erosion of the term “democrat” that results from this deployment.’ Coles’ radical democracy builds in large part on the work of political theorist Sheldon Wolin, whose understanding of ‘politicalness’ (as the ‘capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life’) is proposed by Luke Bretherton as a better alternative to Ward’s more limited, Weberian / Schmittian conception of the political as ‘an act that entails power’ (Bretherton 2009:6, 4).

\(^14\) We will examine Coles’ understanding of ‘tradition’ below, particularly through his engagement with MacIntyre (see Coles 2005a:79ff).
traditions – with Christianity prominent among them.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, Coles argues, it is in the mutual engagement between Christianity and radical democracy that pregnant possibilities may be found: ‘it may paradoxically be the case that cultivating some of the most important wealth of each tradition hinges precisely on the capacity of each to vulnerably and imaginatively engage the other. It may be at the complexity of this border between radical ecclesia and radical democracy that each might renew and radically reform itself beyond the abstractions that are making each go blind and deaf.’\textsuperscript{16}

It is to this ‘border-land’ engagement that this chapter turns. Just before we do so, however, I need to just register one possible, and significant, counter-argument against choosing Coles as a ‘corrective’ to Ward at this point. Graham Ward, as we noted at the end of the previous chapter, is a white male, and ‘middle-class’ by virtue at least of his training for the Anglican priesthood, his professional status as a leading academic theologian, and the cosmopolitanism of his tastes and travelling. Romand Coles is also white and male, has reached the academic heights of ‘professor’, and a citizen of the USA who has lived and worked both in the US (in Northern Arizona and North Carolina) and, currently, in Australia (at the Institute for Social Justice of the Australian Catholic University in Sydney). Why, in the light of our critique of Ward’s masculine sexual, and imperialist, logic, do I not turn to attend in depth to the reflections on someone much more clearly ‘outside’ that logic: someone who, to frame it in that logic’s own terms for a moment, is not-male, not-white, not-middle-class, and not someone with a national identity entangled with either the fading imperial power of Britain, or the rampant imperial power of the United States? I would offer two immediate, but tentative, answers to this challenging question. The first is that Rom Coles is what Rom Coles does: while on the surface his social location looks very similar to Ward’s, his ‘habitus’ – his ‘performance’, both within and beyond his writing – is quite different. Alongside the receptivity to ‘others’ that is at the heart of his academic work, Coles is also an activist, someone with a history of immersing himself in, and engaging receptively with, the places, people and politics at the (geographical, social, economic and political) margins of the urban areas in which he has lived and worked. The insights he has gleaned from those engagements, and the power of his commitment to both practised and theoretical receptivity, are not negated by his particular (and privileged) embodied identity; if anything, and this leads to my second point, they are in some ways given added weight because of it. Despite frequent universalising pretensions, there is nothing universal about the theory and practice that comes from white, middle-class males. There is much that can be learnt, however, from the work of a white, middle-class male who, aware of his privilege and the temptations to imperialism, deliberately renounces them in a receptivity towards his ‘others’. I follow Coles’ path, then, seeking not just the ‘undoing’ of some of Ward’s more dangerous tendencies, but the ‘undoing’ of some of my own, and some of those of the church of which both Ward and I are a part.

5.2 Returning to the challenge of the other

In Ward’s work, we saw a strong commitment to ‘cultural negotiations’, and to making spaces for ‘contestation’ – in which he understands his own theological voice as a ‘corrective’, not just to an

\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, as Hauerwas and Coles say in their introduction to \textit{Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary}, ‘Coles thinks that Christianity might matter for how radical democracy is understood and, more importantly, practiced.’ (Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:11)

\textsuperscript{16} Hauerwas & Coles 2010:358-9
‘apolitical’ Christian sectarianism, but also to those who would seek to limit, or erase the distinctiveness of, theology by enforcing supposedly ‘consensual’ rules for ‘rational public discourse’ (such as those proposed, differently, by Rawls and Habermas). We observed also, however, how Ward’s insistence on ‘speaking’ limited his own capacity to be receptive to challenges from his ‘others’, leading him to (mis)appropriate or dismiss the work of some of those who might give him greatest insight (Irigaray, Levinas), and render his ‘cultural others’ largely as passive victims, whose potential for creative agency is overlooked.17 We also highlighted the ways in which his description of the body of Christ as an expansive ‘erotic community’ that ‘occupies a space transcending place, walls and boundaries’, does not just identify it, like global capitalism, as a ‘comprehensive system that allow[s] for nothing outside [itself]’, but appears to be resigned to the unavoidability of imagining a movement which, as Ward himself admits, is intertwined with ‘a continuing history of colonialism, zealotry, hatred, prejudice and violence’.18

Coles, as we shall see, shares Ward’s concerns about both sectarianism and rationalism, but is a vocal critic of any pretensions to imperial ‘edgelessness’ – a tendency he discerns in ‘Western civilization’ at least as far back as Plato – a dream ‘of a reality without wild edges, a world encompassed within one Reason’. Where ‘border lands’ have historically been acknowledged, they have most often been made ‘zones of destruction, boundaries between warring countries’, edges ‘indicative of an evil that lies on the other side’, edges which constitute ‘regions to be forever thrust back and ultimately eliminated at the moment when we conquer the other’.19 At the same time, Coles argues, that same history has been ‘haunted’ by the ubiquity of edges, ‘marked by many barren boundaries; those between master and slave, capitalist and worker, humans and nature, male and female, white and black, “normal” and “abnormal”’. In each case, the ‘hegemonic category’ has sought ‘to master and determine its other’, and yet ‘the unmastered voice and being of the other’ is also precisely that which is to be ‘eliminated’. Even ‘where a difference is constituted and perpetuated as essential ... the dynamic is fundamentally edge-denying insofar as it seeks to obliterate the other’s otherness.’ The master-slave distinction, to take the most obvious example, is sustained precisely to keep the slave beyond the boundaries of personhood.20 ‘So long as edges and diversity remain anathema,’ Coles warns, ‘we are doomed to a politics and life of explicit or insidious conquest, a politics that seeks to obliterate the otherness of others and in so doing devitalizes the human and natural world.’21

One of the central tasks of Coles’ project, then, is to expose and resist this tendency towards imperialising conquest within political thought. While in Coles’ work can be heard many echoes of

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17 (see section 4.4.ii, above)
18 (see sections 3.5.i & 4.2, above)
19 Coles 1992a:2. Elsewhere, Coles explains his use of the term ‘other’: ‘to gesture towards those whose ways of being and ways of describing being are significantly different from - even contest - one’s own or those of one’s communities. It is a general term that describes the wild recalcitrant discrepancies that the world both offers to and withdraws from us. The term's generality is crucial in order to emphasize an aspect of existence that always exceeds and overflows our specific understandings and expectations of specific others at any moment. At the same time, the danger of this term, and generality generally, is that it risks becoming empty and formalistic. To avoid these dangers one must oscillate between general evocations of otherness and specific stories of others which help infuse “otherness” with vitality’ (Coles 1992b:350 n.2). Coles’ textual practice is one which I have attempted to follow within this thesis, in my examination of both Ward’s and Coles’ work, and also in the ‘grounding’ of my theory in my own context here.
20 Coles 1992a:2
21 Coles 1992a:3
Ward’s critique of the ‘depoliticizing’ discourse of political liberalism, it is in Coles’ critical examination of the ‘turn to tradition’, as found in the work of both Alasdair MacIntyre and recent Augustinian and postliberal theologians, that we discover both additional nuance to our critique of Ward, and resources to enable us to move beyond his limitations.

5.2. ‘Traditionalism’: particular visions of flourishing and ‘overconfident’ communities?

MacIntyre’s critique of political liberalism deeply informs Coles’ own: ‘a profound sense that “the costs of consensus are paid by those excluded from it”’; that the function of ‘the rhetoric of consensus’ is ‘to conceal’, rather than escape, ‘the depth of our conflicts’; that ‘immediate issues’ tend to be falsely ‘sever[ed]’ from ‘beliefs and traditions’ underlying them; and that ‘posing at bottom a ... brand of ahistorical, decontextualized selves’ functions to ‘deflect critical interrogation’.22 If ‘the seemingly endless and deep incommensurability that marks modernity’s numerous conceptions of good and justice’ is to be our starting-point, Coles suggests, with MacIntyre, then ‘our convictions remain radically arbitrary, our economics continue to be structured by rapacious laissez-faire capitalism, and our politics are still characterized by irrational impositions of bureaucratic control in the name of an illusory “reason.”’ Yet ‘the way beyond these problems and to the possibility of intelligent judgment in the midst of them,’ for MacIntyre, ‘is through an indefinitely long-term deepening and widening of genuine contestations – paradoxically eclipsed by “pluralism” – not through their attenuation.’23

Here Coles interprets MacIntyre against the grain of political liberal readings, which tend to construe him ‘as suggesting a retreat to isolated, homogeneous, and inwardly turned local communities that cultivate their own traditions and avoid contact with difference’.24 MacIntyre is not advocating, Coles argues in the form er’s defence, a return to ‘the heroic age’ of ‘the “proper”’, in which ‘morality and social structure [were] one’, but rather for an attention to ‘those classical and Christian societies which understood themselves as having emerged from’ the heroic,25 and in particular to a medieval context characterized by diversity, complexity and conflict, and to a Thomist Christianity, ‘influenced by and reflexively form[ing] this context in ways that produce a deep affirmation of the historical, teleological character of human coexistence.’26 The particular kind of common life articulated by MacIntyre’s Thomism, however, rather than being a ‘neo-Aristotelian politics unified around a single

22 While Coles refuses to condemn the political liberal ideas of ‘society as a system of fair cooperation between free and equal persons’, or the ‘difference principle’ which affirms ‘only those inequalities that are advantageous for the least well-off’, or ‘the abstention from using coercive power to force doctrinal conformity’, as ‘bad things’ in themselves, he nevertheless argues that ‘[w]hen the project of establishing fundamentals establishes itself as fundamental, as the single most important task of political thought and action, it begins to undermine its highest aspirations from within. ... it slides into the activity of stridently insisting on itself and dismissing others in expressions that repeat “reasonable” several times per sentence, until the word begins to look and sound like a whip’. Political liberalism for Coles, as for Ward, is ‘too disengaged; it seeks to stand above heterogeneity,’ by ‘offering a vision of politics with a vitiated sense of political contestation and engagement’, while at the same time ‘marginalizing’ and ‘excluding’ potential political contributions inspired by ‘visions of flourishing’ that ‘exceed’ the terms of ‘public reason’ as political liberalism defines them (Coles 2005a:xx-xxii).

23 Coles 2005a:80-81
24 Coles 2005a:81-82
25 Coles 2005a:79
26 Coles 2005a:84
27 Coles 2005a:87-88
vision of the good’, as alleged by Rawls and his political liberal colleagues, is instead “partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument about where we are and where we ought to go.” [The end of human life], Coles notes, ‘is more fundamentally a question for us than it is a determinate answer.’ We may be ‘storied selves’, as the heroic age would have had us understand, but the telos ‘that would order our diverse practices and strivings must be understood in the general form of the narrative quest itself.’ If there is a ‘unity’ in this vision, then, it is ‘less a transparent achievement’ than the tradition’s ‘teleological horizon’. Nevertheless for MacIntyre that unifying telos is, Coles argues, essential:

Without a unifying project of striving to bring coherence to diverse goods, practices, and virtues in order to care for morality and the good as such, the historical dialogue in which human beings can exercise their always open and incomplete rationality is virtually impossible, and the virtues are devitalized. Absent a unifying telos, MacIntyre argues, individual claims and particular goods become so heterogeneous in their fundamental structure (each becomes close off from the others, the past and the future) that they can no longer genuinely engage and contest one another. Each particular notion becomes worldless, loses the horizon that relates it to the others and to a larger whole in a way that both grants it a certain stability and opens it to meaningful interrogations. Fundamentally atomistic and closed in structure, such “goods” become purely arbitrary preferences. ... The teleological horizon of the good provides a space in which questions and genuine argument might be possible, provoked, meaningful, and powerful. Without this, the contingency and partiality of our concepts and relations are so radical as to be in essence unintelligible, unquestionable, and irresolvable.

The similarity to Ward’s argument here is striking: MacIntyre’s ‘teleological horizon of the good’ sounds remarkably like Ward’s ‘analogical worldview’, within which engagement, and contestation, are made possible; and where MacIntyre’s telos is ‘the narrative quest itself’, Ward’s Christian community ‘believes in teleology without being able to predict the future’, and recognizes that ‘[w]e do not know how the story ends.’ For Coles, however, within this very specific teleological horizon there reside both the pregnant possibilities and the critical problems with MacIntyre’s kind of ‘tradition’. On the one hand, it makes space for ‘vulnerable engagements in conflicts among those within and between traditions’, as ‘integral to a tradition’s wellbeing’. Communities ought to not only tolerate dissent, MacIntyre argues, but have an “active and enquiring attitude towards radically dissenting views”, with a necessary ‘vulnerability’ that acknowledges that ‘historical beings never know ... how their encounters will turn out.’ MacIntyre’s work, Coles observes appreciatively, ‘valorizes those modes of being that harbour a certain generosity toward a future that exceeds the grasp of every present’, which is itself ‘inextricably entwined with a generosity toward the present, exemplified by the vulnerable relations with those whose visions stand at a distance.’ There is a

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28 Coles 2005a:79
29 Coles 2005a:89 (my emphasis)
30 Coles 2005a:88-89
31 Coles 2005a:90-91. Note the similarities here with Ward’s argument for the necessity of an ‘analogical worldview’ (or ‘participatory ontology’, as his RO colleagues might put it) and for political ‘contestation’, against an ‘atomistic’ secular world (sections 3.3.ii, 3.4.ii & passim; cf. section 2.5.ii).
32 (see section 3.5.1, above)
33 Coles 2005a:92-93
creative ‘tension-dwelling’ at the heart of MacIntyre’s ‘utopic’ vision: ‘there is no real generosity toward the others without a sense that one’s own present community does not yet possess a transparent calculation and grasp of the truth that remains futural for us; and there is no generous opening toward the future that is not born in and borne by the enlivened sense of finitude wrought by vulnerable engagements with others whose differences bring it vividly into the foreground.’

On the other hand, however, the logic of the ‘unifying telos’ drives MacIntyre towards a sense of truth ‘rooted in and aimed at [a tradition’s] legitimate historical endurance’: an endurance which requires engagements and conflicts which ‘render ourselves maximally vulnerable’ for the tradition to learn and develop, but through which it can ‘gain a legitimate self-confidence’, a confidence – Coles notes with concern – that MacIntyre believes his own neo-Thomist tradition ‘does and should’ gain… and in no small quantity. MacIntyre’s ‘affirmation of vulnerability’ is specifically limited ‘to the possibility of coming up short in encounters with other traditions’, not to ‘the likelihood that we will learn crucial things from these others who see the world differently’. ‘Lacking this sense – and bolstered by “confidence” – declarations of fallibility can function,’ Coles suggests, ‘more as an alloy of superiority in one’s shield against others than as an opening.’ Here we might see Coles critique translating over into Ward’s project: Ward too affirms a certain ‘vulnerability’ between bodies – generally, in the ‘transcorporeality’ inherent in his analogical worldview, and more specifically, in the church’s openness to the ‘disruptive grace’ of its ‘others’ – but he also, like MacIntyre, tends towards a particular kind of ‘confidence’, both that such gracious disruptions are assumed to be more the exception (‘possible’) than the norm (‘likely’), and also that (as Ronald Kuipers put it) ‘the theological perspective he (so impolitely) promotes does indeed possess “the goods”, not only ‘to combat the various malaises of modernity he describes’, but to be able to make sufficient ‘sense’ of ‘the stranger’ (to make them ‘heavy with meaning’) such that they are rendered no longer strange.

Coles identifies three further problems with MacIntyre’s rendering of tradition, all of which have uncanny parallels, for Coles, with the limitations of political liberalism. First, just as political liberals such as Rawls and Habermas seek to exclude what Rawls calls ‘comprehensive doctrines’ which ‘exceed’ the boundaries of ‘public reason’, so in MacIntyre Coles sees an ‘unambiguous’ affirmation of ‘practices of “enforced exclusions … preferments and promotions”’ by ‘intervening authorities’, to ‘secure a necessarily extensive area of unquestioned agreement’. Second (the obverse of the first), whereas in political liberalism Coles discerns a ‘presumptuous stance of many in the professional managerial class who seek, from on high, to implement political policies on others, whom that managerial class objectifies’, he highlights also MacIntyre’s urging of his readers to a humble ‘faith in authority’ which precedes ‘rational understanding’, as a necessary requirement of community membership. Third, Coles points to an unacknowledged but powerful ‘comprehensive

34 Coles 2005a:98-99. ‘MacIntyre’s vision of flourishing, at its best, moves between images of specific places and modes of questing toward the good, on the one hand, and a searching eye for the more displaced, radically interrogative, and indeterminate places between the modes he calls his own and those other spaces of practice whose efforts at thriving he would support and critically engage, on the other’ (Coles 2005a:99).
35 Coles 2005a:92-93
36 Coles 2005a:100
37 Coles 2005a:100-1
38 (see section 3.4.iv, above)
39 Coles 2005a:9-10
40 Coles 2005a:xxi
41 Coles 2005a:104
doctrine’ in Rawls’ work itself: the repeated, and fearful, remembrance of ‘the absolute depth of ... irreconcilable latent conflict’ which Rawls attributes to the ‘wars of religion’ and their ongoing ripples.\(^{42}\) Such a ‘visceral-perceptual stance’ is also to be found in MacIntyre’s writing (e.g. in examining the ‘crafts’ and ‘practices’ involved in deep-sea fishing and within the Marines) which, Coles argues, renders consensual dimensions of community (such as ‘solidarity, moral agency, virtue, and disciplined practice’) against a background of a profoundly dangerous – and dangerously ‘other’ – world. ‘Integral to sustaining a sensibility in which [MacIntyre’s] ideas make sense – as their condition and their effect – are analogies that intensify our sense of the dangerous (the abyss of battle, the abyss of the sea) in proximity to our discussions of moral goods.’ Radical dissent from those communally-agreed ‘goods’ is thus affectively associated with the utmost danger.\(^{43}\) While Ward is not a vocal advocate for either the intervention of, or unquestioning allegiance to, institutional ‘authorities’, we have seen ample evidence in his work of a ‘visceral-perceptual stance’, strongly resembling MacIntyre’s, which sets the ‘order’ of the ecclesial community in opposition to the ‘deepest, darkest immanence’ of a disordered world.

For Coles, this profoundly affective dimension in MacIntyre’s work is itself rooted a ‘radical “commitment”’ that the latter shares, once again, with Ward: a commitment, grounded in an Augustinian conception of Christianity, ‘to one central negative thesis: that no substantive rationality, independent of faith, will be able to provide an adequate vindication of its claims ... [that] each in its own historical development will exhibit its own failure ... incoherence or resourcelessness.”\(^{44}\) This ‘radical’ commitment is, in many senses (both political and theological), ‘foundational’ for MacIntyre – and for Coles’ disagreements with him – and we will return to examine it in more detail shortly. For the moment, in summary, we note that Coles ‘take[s] leave’ of MacIntyre’s ‘traditionalist project’ precisely at the point where the latter, whether explicitly or implicitly, ‘give[s] the task of pursuing the teleolog[y] of [his] particular tradition priority over the task of rendering [himself] receptive in engagements with others.’\(^{45}\) Even when a tradition, such as MacIntyre’s neo-Thomism, claims to affirm a ‘vulnerability to other traditions’, that in itself – ‘[i]n a way that is not without resonances with political liberal “tolerance”’, Coles notes – ‘can become a mantra that reinforces an increasing sense of the superiority of one’s own “vulnerable” tradition over all the others’ traditions (which aren’t vulnerable). When this happens, a certain overconfidence can undermine responsiveness and generate fortress-like defences within which it is very difficult to hear the others one is called to engage.’\(^{46}\) With no small amount of irony, Coles discerns imperial, edgeless tendencies reasserting themselves, even in those such as MacIntyre who claim to be heralding empire’s demise. And with this warning against ‘overconfidence’ that might apply equally to Ward’s project, we turn to Coles’ examination of Augustine, and of Ward’s Augustinian colleague, John Milbank.

5.2.ii Augustinians, ‘outsides’ and ‘one-way’ caritas

Repeatedly in Coles’ writing he returns to the theological work of Augustine, albeit with distinct ambivalence. On the one hand, he finds in Augustine a ‘thinker of edges’ \textit{par excellence}: someone

\(^{42}\) Coles 2005a:8
\(^{43}\) Coles 2005a:105-6
\(^{44}\) Coles 2005a:103
\(^{45}\) Coles 2005a:xxiii
\(^{46}\) Coles 2005a:xxiv (my emphasis)
who, situated on the particular edge ‘between paganism’s decline and the rise of Christianity’, might also help shed some light on some edges in our present world, not least within ‘the current mixture of survival and erosion of Christianity and its secular legacy’. Augustine offers ‘a penetrating analysis’ of the ‘obliterating egoism’ that is ‘one of the central dangers of our age’, a ‘mode of being’ that, in ‘taking’ itself as the ground of being, ‘transforms the edge into a war zone as it seeks to master all that is not the self’. In his proposed alternative, ‘the confessing self’ – which ‘turns away from the lust to dominate the world and toward the depths of its soul, where it seeks to fashion even its most fleeting desires in obedience to God’s truth and morality’ – Coles discerns ‘a profound recognition that others too are deep, diverse participatory signs of God’s polyphonic voice rather than beings flattened to their “being-for-the-self.”’ On the other hand, Coles argues, Augustine’s relation ‘to what does not “face God”’ is disturbingly ‘monological’. The ‘one True Voice’ of God might have ‘polyphonic’ expressions, but it has ‘absolute hegemony’: ‘non-Christian difference’ becomes ‘discordance’, ‘discord’ indicates ‘error’, and ‘error is to be eradicated’, with ‘no possibility of a dialogue’. 

This is the ‘Augustinianism’ that grounds MacIntyre’s ‘radical “commitment”’, touched on above, to the ultimate failure of any rationality ‘independent of faith’. It is a similar Augustinian ‘commitment’ that concerns Coles in Milbank’s work. Influenced by MacIntyre as well as Augustine, Milbank (as we saw briefly in Chapter 2) ‘seeks to unite virtue with difference in his transfiguration of charity,’ striving – ‘admirably’, in Coles eyes – ‘to embrace a Christianity with diverse voices and temporal flux.’ ‘Christian community’ is ‘not a vision of homogeneity’, but ‘is to embrace the uniqueness of all its members as particular mysterious expressions of God’s gift of caritas, the movement of [which] is receptive of, generous toward, and in fact proliferates the wild multiplicitous diversity of creation.’ ‘It is thus through receiving and giving that we participate in the unfolding of his gift and being’. On the other hand, Coles continues, ‘to reject the flow of caritas is’, for Milbank, ‘to tend toward nothingness.’ It is this which Coles finds most troubling about Milbank; it also returns us to the central questions emerging from our consideration of Ward’s work. What theological sense are we to make of those who locate themselves ‘outside’ the ‘body of Christ’? How are we to understand those who appear to ‘refuse’, resist, or even initiate flows contrary to, the seemingly one-way flow of divine caritas? And can we even imagine a church which might be receptive to, even in need of, such alternative flows?

Let us address first the question of Christianity’s ‘outside’. ‘The space for being that is created by [Augustinian] Christianity is,’ Coles argues, ‘thoroughly constituted ... by a single divine order in

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47 Coles 1992a:8-9
48 Coles 1992a:10-11
49 Coles 1992a:172-3
50 Coles 1992a:11
51 Coles 1997:3-4
52 Coles 1992b: 333. ‘Storied Others’ (Coles 1992b), Coles’ extended review article on Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*, was published in 1992, the same year as *Self / Power / Other* (Coles 1992a).
53 Coles 1997: 2 (my emphasis)
54 (see sections 3.3.v, 3.4.iv & 4.2, above)
which the sense of all things is to be located.\textsuperscript{55} While ‘the Church’, for Milbank, is to be identified with that ‘radically “external” relationality’ ‘outside’ (and yet ‘included’ in) God,\textsuperscript{56} those who self-consciously place themselves outside ‘the Church’ (Coles himself, for one), those who through their ‘narratives and social practices’ – by which we are all ‘thoroughly constructed’ – do not explicitly ‘refer [their] desire to God’, are therefore, within Milbank’s worldview, reduced to a status of ‘sin’ and ‘non-being’. Conversion, albeit in a carefully specified sense, becomes an imperative: if the church is to “enact the vision of paradisal community” of harmonious difference, which interrupts humanity’s ‘otherwise ubiquitous cycle of violence’, then it is the theologian’s task to persuade people, ‘that the life of Jesus, the Triune God, and charitable practice are definitively preferable to all else.’ ‘Alongside an aesthetic of differential charity,’ in Milbank’s rhetoric as much as in the content of his theological vision Coles discerns ‘an aesthetic of compulsive singularity: a sense that Christianity “alone” is the “only” truly good discourse and therefore will a priori approach its others through the task of “out-narrating”.’ There is a centuries-old ‘internal’/‘external’ struggle going on here, Coles notes, ‘to articulate a notion of Christian diversity while insisting upon its singular legitimacy and hegemony with respect to the non-Christian.’\textsuperscript{57}

Just as political liberalism conjures its ‘ghosts’\textsuperscript{58} and MacIntyrean ‘traditionalism’ cultivates its lurking ‘dangers’, so Coles (as a white American) finds himself ‘haunted’ too when considering Milbank’s version of Augustinian Christianity: he is haunted by ‘the collective cry of tens of millions of Native Americans who met physical and cultural extinction in the face of the European sword and cross’; haunted not just by those murdered by violent conquistadors, who saw them as ‘an evil substance to be sliced or enslaved’, but as much if not more by those deemed ‘insubstantial’ – ‘nothing, non-Christian’ – by those missionaries ‘of more “charitable” persuasions and traditions’ (such as Las Casas). In these latter, apparently ‘nonviolent’, encounters, what led to the ‘cultural extinction’ of the natives was the combination of the conviction that ‘narratives and social practices’ are vitally important in constructing our human identities, and the inability to see any narratives and social practices ‘outside of the one true Christian story’ as having any substance at all.\textsuperscript{59} It is a danger from which Milbank is far from immune, Coles suggests, as the former’s conception of Christianity, like Augustine’s, ‘deconstructs [ontological] conceit at the level of individual selves only to inflate it at the meta-narrative level’.\textsuperscript{60} Just as political liberalism, for Coles, has a ‘diminished sense of tragic remainders’ which both fails to comprehend the cost of its exclusions and makes itself ‘a priori invulnerab[le] to those who would contest it from beyond its own horizon’,\textsuperscript{61} so Coles highlights in Milbank’s work – as in Ward’s, as we have repeatedly noted – a ‘tragic insensibility’ to the

\textsuperscript{55} Coles 1992a:172-3
\textsuperscript{56} Coles 1992b:338 (cf Milbank 1990:424)
\textsuperscript{57} Coles 1992b:331-3, 337-8. It is almost, Coles suggests, as if ‘Milbank frantically multiplies the space for differences within, as part of a strategy to constitute a textual appeal that can withstand his perpetuation of the negation of difference without’ (Coles 1992b:338).
\textsuperscript{58} Coles describes political liberalism as both ‘haunted by a ghost it conjures up’, in its ‘sense of [the] absolute tragic depth’ of human conflict, attributed to the power of ‘comprehensive doctrines’, and ‘relieved of a ghost it conjures away’ with its ‘diminished sense of tragic remainders’ (Coles 2005a:23, original emphasis).
\textsuperscript{59} Coles 1992b:332-3
\textsuperscript{60} Coles 1992b:349, a critique which resonates strongly with Rieger’s (Lacanian) suggestion that, in postliberal or ‘traditionalist’ theologies like Ward’s, ‘[t]he texts of the church tend to take over a position of control that strongly resembles the control of the self’, and ‘the individualist narcissisms of the modern era’ risk being ‘simply converted into collective narcissisms in the postmodern era’ (section 4.4.ii, above).
\textsuperscript{61} Coles 2005a:23, 5.
destruction wrought in the name of expansive, unilateral communication of ‘the one true Christian story’. Furthermore, just as Coles noted in MacIntyre a slippage from theoretical ‘vulnerability’ towards a rhetorical ‘overconfidence’, so he observes in Milbank’s text that ‘the possibility of a tradition without recourse to external supplementation seems actually to slide ... into an imperative that there be no such supplement.’

Ward does not, as we have seen, so consistently as Milbank deploy such exclusivist rhetoric, but it does appear sporadically: ‘to understand the body of Jesus we can only examine what the Church is and what it has to say’; ‘it is only in prayer that the discipline of listening is developed’; ‘[t]here is redemption only in this movement out to the other’, which itself is ‘only possible within an economy of the gift in which I am constituted in the transit of plenitudinous grace’; ‘[o]nly to the extent to which we can receive God’s unconditional love for us will we be able to pass it on, pass it forward.’ Ward’s ‘only’ is concerned less with what Coles has just called ‘difference without’, and more with the ‘direction of flow’. As Coles reads Milbank, however, the two are intrinsically linked: ‘God is “the source of all charity” – the source of all beings’ differences and we acknowledge our reception of his gifts and become “co-worker” with him in the elaboration of divine charity by transmitting a charitable love to others.’ Coles summarises Milbank’s version of ‘analogue’ participation in language deeply resonant with Ward’s noted above: to be charitable, to participate in ‘the Christian metanarrative’, is to receive and to pass on the gift that is ‘an instant in the infinite serial emanation of God’.

As an ‘internally differentiated dynamic flow, a giving always moving beyond itself,’ such a rendering of divine caritas is ‘less stable than a self-identity’, Coles acknowledges. ‘Yet even as in some sense dynamic, even in its movement, the fount of giving is self-identical insofar as this flow does not receive – and even precludes reception of – alterity’. Or, as Sigridur Gudmarsdottir noted of Ward’s christologically-focused political ontology, the presumption is of ‘a flow from God to humans, which humans can trigger, but not share with the God-man. Ultimately, they receive, not him.’

As I noted in my discussion of Ward’s insistence on the impassibility of the ‘triune Godhead’, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to directly consider the possibility of divine receptivity – let alone to imagine what Coles’ suggestion of ‘a dialogue in which God is illuminated in the critical light of his other’ might possibly mean – but we can, and must, address the question of receptivity at the more ‘immanent’ levels of both christology and ecclesial practice. Christology will come into clear focus in the final sections of this chapter. Here, however, we will take a first foray into Coles’ engagements with ecclesiology, as he pursues with forensic care the twin issues of ‘edges’ and ‘directionality’ in his critically appreciative reception of a book co-edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells, The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics. Responding to the central claim of Hauerwas and Wells that ‘God gives his people everything they need to follow him’, Coles first

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62 Coles 1992b:334
63 Daniel Miller does read Ward as claiming ‘that it is only the Christian community which fully or properly participates in the divine,’ and therefore ‘understand[ing] non-Christian existence in a privative manner, meaning that the non-Christian creation fails to fully “be,” insofar as it does not properly participate in God’ (Miller 2011:95 n.55).
64 Coles 1992b:336
65 Coles 1997:2 (my emphasis)
66 (see section 3.3.v, above)
67 Coles 1992a:173
68 Hauerwas & Wells 2004:13
acknowledges that ‘what Christian could not believe this to be true?’, but goes on to explain his ‘worry that this claim is often inflected in ways that risk more than it should, by projecting an imaginary of the church, ethics, and discipleship primarily as an interior volume, a prior preparatory space (separated from the world) that is the most elemental space-time of the formation of peoplehood.’ Or, to recall the words of Ward’s that we have examined in considerable detail, ‘the context of this formation is the church, in all its concrete locatedness and eschatological significance’.

Coles is not worried about ‘sectarianism’, a charge often levelled at Hauerwas – ‘[t]hese pages lean with passion toward hospitable engagement with and service for the world beyond the church’ (and we could say just the same of Ward) – yet he is concerned that ‘the liturgical imaginary on these pages threatens to establish a sense of the church in a manner that may at least vitiate the possibilities for such receptivity, and that may possibly steer Christians in markedly different directions – directions that render such relations with others less likely and less fruit-bearing.’ He cites as an example the ‘imaginary of “concentric circles”’ embraced by Gerald Schlabach: centred on the eucharist, stretching out, through ‘the Church’, to ‘leaven and nourish’ ‘the entire universe’.

This ‘concentric imaginary’, as Coles puts it, ‘that governs most of the essays’ in the Companion: constitutes the borders between church and world in a way that makes the border secondary to an interior volume that is at the center and that only prepares for rather than is itself partly constituted by the borders themselves. This accents in turn,’ he notes, ‘the voice of the church, its service to the world that it “leavens and nourishes”,’ construing itself as ‘the footwasher (but not also in need of being foot-washed by non-Christians), as Eucharistic host (but not also in need of following Jesus’s call to non-Christian tables and of sitting at the lowest spot), and as server more generally (but not also in need of being served by others beyond church walls in order to be able itself to serve). ... It is as if there is a people called and gathered prior to encountering others, rather than a people equiprimordially gathered and formed precisely at the borders of the encounter.

We noted, in our discussion of Ward’s leaning (at times) towards an ‘apophatic’ ecclesiological stance, that a church that is ‘made to appear’ through a series of social ‘acts’ and ‘interactions’, could potentially be imagined as a church where all interactions are ‘border negotiations’, and all spaces of encounter are spaces of Christian formation. We also observed there, however, how Ward’s tendency to slide from ‘interaction’ towards unilateral ‘action’, and from ‘boundary negotiations’ towards ‘boundary-transcending’, tends to render such potentially formative borders invisible. Nevertheless, what Coles has here begun to point towards is precisely the possibility of ‘holding open’ that ‘opening’, first glimpsed in Ward’s work, to a fundamentally dialogical rather than monological relationship, an understanding and appreciation of the formative gifts and challenges of ‘outsiders’ that necessarily shakes and questions any built up sense of internal ‘confidence’. It is to this ‘opening’ that we must now give our full attention.

5.2.iii Derrida, deconstruction and ‘ateleological openness’

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69 Coles 2008c:210-11
70 Schlabach 2004:369
71 Coles 2008c:212 (see also 2008c:222, 226).
72 (see section 3.5.ii, above)
73 (see section 3.5.iii, above)
Alongside political liberalism, and the kind of ‘traditionalism’ of MacIntyre and the Augustinians, the third broad stream of political thought Coles scrutinizes, ‘construed variously [as] genealogy, deconstruction, and postmodernism’, emerges ‘in radical resistance to what are viewed as essentializing, power-saturated, and endlessly recolonizing interpretations and practices of democracy oriented by principles [political liberalism] or specific histories [traditionalism]’, accenting instead a continual ‘ateleological’ openness to others and to the future, a ‘flow of becoming ... that always remains significantly “not yet”’.  

In the work of Nietzsche, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, Nancy and others, Coles finds not an advocacy of ‘an utterly nonsensical and empty politics of “the new,”’ for which they are often ‘misread and dismissed’, but rather diverse efforts towards the fostering of a ‘dialogical sensibility’ and ‘a tensional ethics and politics of “questioning the limits” of what is given as natural and necessary’.  

In engagements with Derrida and colleagues, Ward’s work is at its most ambivalent – and perhaps shows most clearly signs of his theological development over the years. Ward is the editor of The Postmodern God (1997), which features texts by, and appreciative reflections on, Derrida, Lacan, Levinas, Foucault, de Certeau, Irigaray among others. Ward also wrote a monograph on Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology (1995), reading the theologian through the lens of the philosopher. By the time he began publishing his ‘cities trilogy’ (2000, a year after the publication of Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology), however, he had already begun to place ‘postmodern desire’ and ‘Christian desire’ into fierce opposition. Lacan, Levinas and Irigaray all continue to feature in Ward’s texts, but they do so largely as foils for Ward’s arguments against what he now labels (in good ‘Radical Orthodox’ manner) as postmodern ‘nihilism’ or, as we have seen in the case of Irigaray, as a limited ‘opening’ to serve a rather different trajectory to Irigaray’s own.  

Defending Nietzsche against the charge (from Milbank, specifically) of ‘nihilism’, then, Coles reads the former as warning of the dangers of precisely the kind of ‘one-way flow’ of caritas that both Milbank and Ward are promoting. ‘[T]he impulse toward monological giving,’ as Coles interprets Nietzsche’s argument, ‘has a persistent tendency to turn into an unbinding totalizing disdain for the other’: ‘conjure yourself as the sun’ (that is, one who ‘emanates’ generosity without an inextricable receptivity to the gifts of others) ‘and you risk – even if you call gift-giving the highest virtue – developing an awesome and monological sense of superiority.’  

Rather than resigning himself to a nihilist vision of ‘power as mastery’, Coles argues, Nietzsche is in fact a positive advocate for the necessity of ‘difficult dialogues with a recalcitrant world and others’: ‘what generosity is can only be gathered in painstaking dialogical discernment with the other before me.’ Such dialogues therefore involve ‘continually and carefully approach[ing] and grapple[ing] with’ the other’s ‘transcendent specificity’, in order both to give us ‘the possibility of enhancing the fertility of our existences’, and to enable us to give ‘real and appropriate gifts to others rather than risk ‘an oblivious “rubbing the other out”’.  

Similarly in Derrida’s work, the claim that the other’s otherness is only ever mediated to me through ‘a kind of “deportation” in which the other is snatched from “its own site” and brought towards my own site’, Coles reads not as resignation ‘to the ubiquity of nihilistic violence’, but as an ethically

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74 Coles 2005a:xxvii  
75 Coles 2005a:xxiv  
76 Coles 1992b:341  
77 Coles 1992b:343 (see also Coles’ reading of Nietzsche in Coles 1997:15-23).
nonviolent commitment to ‘repeatedly deploying discourse - from which we can never entirely extirpate violence - in order to uncover and make war upon the violence of discourse.’\textsuperscript{78} This ‘ethos of difficult dialogue’, Coles argues, aims at ‘a “community of the question”’, which ‘protects and engenders’ an ‘interrogative generosity’ in order to ‘thwart concealment and rend an opening towards the other through which aspects of imperfect receptivity and offering become possible.’\textsuperscript{79} Here Coles’ defence of Derrida is very close to Daniel Miller’s Derridean critique of Ward’s analogical ‘economy’ as being captive to ‘the logic of the proper’, within which ‘there can be no excess or loss’, and which effectively mutes any questions and challenges from those outside it.\textsuperscript{80} What Coles makes of Derrida, therefore, is crucial for our quest to ‘hold open’ the ‘openings’ in Ward’s work.

Coles’ examination of Derrida is almost a mirror-image of his explorations of MacIntyre. Where MacIntyre, at his best, seeks to sustain and foster a tension between ‘teleological direction’ and ‘receptive engagement’ with others, but tends at times to collapse that tension towards prioritising telos, Derrida advocates a similar tension, but tends to accent too often an ateleological openness, collapsing the tension in the other direction, and ‘risk[ing] incapacitating ethical and political responsibility.’\textsuperscript{81} This, we recall, is precisely Ward’s critique of Levinas. It brings us close to the heart of Coles’ political proposal, so it is worth proceeding slightly more slowly. As Coles reads Derrida:

a substantial portion of his work gives philosophically profound expression to what he ... calls a “double contradictory responsibility”: to dialectically develop the dialogical traditions one inherits, on the one hand, and to “anticipate the unanticipatable” (become more hospitable to and be opened by unwonted otherness beyond the horizons one recognizes as one’s own), on the other hand. Either task alone tends to engender blindness and violence, and hence Derrida calls us to cultivate ethical and political judgment and to experiment with political action on the discordant interrogative edge between the two.\textsuperscript{82}

So on the one hand, Coles highlights a strong teleological dimension in Derrida’s work, drawing on and working with ‘our particular, ... radical dialectical democratic traditions’: to shape our ‘arts of respectful, responsible, and open communication’; ‘to articulate the ethical-political sense – the institutions, practices, principles, languages, rights, habits, affects, and so on – of our responsibility to and for each other’; and ‘to critically discern legacies of damage and alternative promises in order to rework (often radically) broader future horizons.’\textsuperscript{83} On the other hand, vital to Derrida’s work – and a key strategy that Coles draws from it – is that ‘the movement of [his] thinking ... must interrupt itself repeatedly and abruptly with tropes such as “and yet”... Responsibility requires the cultivation of discourses that repeatedly fold back on themselves and rub their discrepant articulations against the grain to animate receptive engagements with others and otherness.’\textsuperscript{84} Derrida argues, says Coles, ‘that we must relax our teleological energies periodically, rhythmically, like blinking our eyes, so we might practice an enlightenment (of double responsibilities and double suspicions) more infused with “listening.”’\textsuperscript{85} Acknowledging that ‘[o]ur teleologies often harden into structures of insistence

\textsuperscript{78} Coles 1992b:346-7
\textsuperscript{79} Coles 1992b:347
\textsuperscript{80} (see section 4.4.i, above)
\textsuperscript{81} Coles 2005a:xxv
\textsuperscript{82} Coles 2005a:xxiv (my emphasis)
\textsuperscript{83} Coles 2005a:147, 149, 154.
\textsuperscript{84} Coles 2005a:277 n.14 (my emphasis)
\textsuperscript{85} Coles 2005a:165 (my emphasis)
that deny the differences and distances that might open our cultures and history to otherness’, then, ‘[w]e must also repeatedly mobilize our yearning for and receptivity toward unpredictable encounters with others beyond our heading in ways that draw this latter accounting into deep questioning.’

Thus far Coles goes with Derrida, but in important ways Coles judges that Derrida both goes too far, and not far enough. Firstly, in Coles’ judgment Derrida ‘overplays the “contradictory” character of the teleological/ateleological antagonism’: there is, Coles argues, ‘much to support a view of these twin responsibilities as related not only in contradictory manners but also in manners that might nurture one another. Some teleologies nurture receptive generosity toward otherness far more than do other teleologies. The development of some lines of action, authority, and power can, in part, enhance practices of radical hospitality.’ Conversely, ‘[e]ncountering others who, after a long struggle, come to be recognized as having made vital and unexpected contributions to a political history can in some ways extend teleologies – sensibilities, pedagogies, practices, institutions – that are fashioned with an eye toward the importance of encountering and being transfigured by those beyond extant borders.’

Secondly (and echoing one of Ward’s principle concerns with Levinas), Coles worries that ‘Derrida’s strong accent on the transgressive aspect of language’, which in turn often ‘accent[s] efforts to release others from our interpretive grasp toward a radically indeterminate sense of difference and futurity’, ends up ‘mobiliz[ing] us toward a problematic version of the asymmetry between self and other.’ While ‘Derrida performs a very textured deconstruction of the self’ – in terms such as ‘difference, contingency, mediation, deportation, violence, blindness, and finite responses to otherness’ – his resistance to ‘generalizations that would extend these themes in relation to others’ risks ‘conceal[ing] far more than it reveals’ and ‘a complicity with violence as great as the one it resists’. ‘Are not the others also sites of deportation, finite openings entwined with blindness and violence?’ Coles asks. ‘Are not the others also born in and borne by networks of mediated sociality that always carry, in varying degrees, historically specific modes of suppression that exceed the power of any single person’s ability to resist completely? Does not the other also have responsibilities to the “double contradictory law”? Derrida might well reply ‘of course’, says Coles,

86 Coles 2005a:157 (my emphasis)
87 Coles 2005a:xxv (my emphasis). More recently, Coles has made a similar argument in relation to Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (one that Ward draws on significantly in his work). While Bourdieu acknowledges, says Coles, that ‘[c]ultural contact, class and generational conflicts, double binds, and various crises of disadjustment’ can ‘dislocate’ established patterns of ‘habitus’ – ‘throw them ‘into question’, open ‘new spaces ... in which we have a “margin of freedom” that can alter practices’ – nevertheless, ‘there is precious little in his writing to suggest that body practices themselves can be structured in ways that tend to generate imaginative critical interrogations, flexibility, energetic quaking of an push-back against the limits of the self-evident, and radical transformation. These spaces of possibility open only when and because gaps, blips, and mismatches – failures of articulation – occur.’ Drawing on recent neuroscientific research on ‘mirror neurons’, as well as developing Connolly’s work on resonance, however, Coles suggests that, ‘to the extent that we cultivate them’, ‘our dispositions and capacities for generous perceptions of difference, receptive sensibility and dialogue, intense questioning, imaginative interpretation, radical challenges to injustice, and the cocreation of commonwealth, as well as a profound sense of political time as pregnant with possibility, are themselves born in and cultivated by mimetic intercorporeal practices, rather than disembodied subjective powers of cognition and autonomous symbolic interpretation’ (Coles 2016:56-7). Not only can our ‘habitus’ change, in other words, but it is possible to nurture a ‘habitus’ that is intrinsically disposed towards a receptivity to ‘others’ and to change.
[b]ut too often these insights are lacking or comparatively undeveloped." Instead, metaphors such as the 'innocence' and 'indeterminacy' of the other paradoxically 'overdetermine' the other in ways that radically conceal and curtail questions for and from the other, 'position[ing] the other at the height of unquestionability': yet 'much that we might learn from others alternatively comes from and must negotiate what is not "disarmed" and like a "newly born child"; and much that I might teach others must address the condition they share with me of responding to others who exceed their perception.\(^89\)

Thirdly (Coles again paralleling Ward closely), political judgment\(^90\) is rendered 'useless': '[e]very time we respond to an other', bound by Derrida's 'absolute, unconditioned obligation', 'we sacrifice and betray the other others, each of whom would also command us infinitely' – '[w]e simply cannot know to whom to give'. There are, however, 'better and worse ways to respond to the “other others.” Indeed responding ethically to each other in her singularity immanently requires responding to and for the other others, as each other is in her singularity born in and borne by this nexus of responding and being responded to.'\(^91\) Finally, while Coles' Derrida mostly goes too far down an ateleological path, there are also limits to his openness to 'the other': his work 'remains too wedded to a philosophical project that almost never ventures into nor is marked by engagements with “others” beyond European philosophical horizons. The few times he does engage such others ... one gets the sense that they are being absorbed into his philosophical project rather than participating in its development in more substantive ways\(^92\) – precisely a charge that I have been putting to Ward's work.

Although Coles’ discussion of Derrida is among his most extensive engagements with deconstruction, his critique in passing of Jean-Luc Nancy is also worth noting, particularly in its location between Coles’ repeated resistance to imperialism on the one hand, and his concerns over Hauerwas and Wells’ ‘concentric’ liturgical ethics on the other. While in the latter, Coles questions the possibility of an entirely ‘internally’ self-sufficient preparation, Nancy’s call ‘to a radically indeterminate opening to otherness’ would deny the possibility of any meaningful ‘preparation’ for the ‘advent of the other’: '[t]here is no way to prepare, cultivate, or strive to practice an ethos ... because “everything has yet to be done: everything has yet to be learned”... All preparation is preclusion.’ And yet, Coles reminds us, ‘though identities are always and everywhere exposed to the arrival of others,’ from the perspective of the ‘underside’ of history ‘most others with which we are familiar historically have mobilized intensively to variously deny, degrade, enslave, assimilate, and obliterate the otherness of this event. We would quit preparing for the arrival of these others – the “new” we know only too well – only at the cost of our own subjugation.’ Instead, says Coles, '[t]o learn and to teach to live well will always involve preparations and disciplines that engage questions of direction and limitation. We tend toward stinginess and poverty when we forsake these tasks.'\(^93\) Here Coles touches on the ‘liberative’ driving force between much contemporary ecclesial political theology, Ward’s included: it is the liturgical ‘preparation’ of the church that equips it to ‘battle’ with

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\(^{88}\) Coles 2005a: 179 (my emphasis)

\(^{89}\) Coles 2005a: 180

\(^{90}\) Here I draw on Gavin Hyman’s distinction between the ‘ethical’ and the ‘political’ – the latter taking account of ‘other others’ (see section 2.2, above).

\(^{91}\) Coles 2005a:181

\(^{92}\) Coles 2005a:xxv-xxvi

\(^{93}\) Coles 2005a:195-6
neoliberal capitalism for ‘the soul of the city’. On the other hand (and the central argument of this section), that ‘preparatory’, teleological work needs to be done hand-in-hand with a hospitable receptivity to ‘other others’ who might be as marginalized (socially, politically, economically, culturally) as, if not more so than, the church – and who may well bring both gifts and challenges, surprising, unwonted (to use Coles’ term), to the conversation.

5.2.iv A two-fold proposal: tension-dwelling between the teleological and the ateleological

From the different imperialisms of political liberalism and Augustinian Christianity, through the differently-strung tensions of MacIntyre and Derrida, Coles arrives at an articulation of a two-fold proposal at the heart of his work. Beyond political liberalism’s ‘misconstrual of the tragic aspects of our situation’, Coles proposes, firstly, a more genuinely ‘tragic sensibility’ which ‘stretches its listeners between calls to the importance of articulating, mediating, and striving toward the highest values of a community, on the one hand, and painful evocations of the unacknowledged suffering often wrought by a community’s ideals (or constitutive failure in light of them) and the inextinguishable need to be transformed through receptive engagements with those a community marginalizes and subjugates, on the other. Tragedy thus informs and energizes political judgment and action by situating us at the crux of this tension.’

Secondly, then, Coles is seeking ‘ethical modes of learning how to live that are stretched between the need for teleological directness ... and ateleological receptivity to the otherness beyond the horizons of our teleologies (or eschatologies).’ Where both MacIntyre and Derrida risk, at least at times, ‘collapsing’ this tension in either the teleological or ateleological direction, Coles proposes not simply ‘find[ing] the “right” tension’, or the ‘maintenance of properly adjusted tensions’ (in the manner of a carefully-tuned string on a musical instrument), but something ‘more like perpetual reanimation of our dis-adjustment’. Coles’ argument with both MacIntyre and Derrida is that ethical and political ‘responsiveness’ risks ‘wan[ing] as one pole of responsibility is diminished in the face of another’. Both teleological and ateleological duties are ‘infinite’, such that, ‘while they ... participate in relations of overlap and supplementation’, nurturing and enhancing each other, they also ‘greatly contest each other, suspect each other, call each other to silence.’ ‘Moderation may be an important part of responsibility,’ Coles acknowledges, ‘but the task as such is not moderate. Each pole of our responsibility is greatly endangered at the mean (if such a thing were imaginable between infinities): at the zero point where our responsibility to others often loses the vitality of both its illuminating orientation and its capacity for savouring disorientation to a monotonous, immobilized, weakened, and complacent sensibility.’ There is an unavoidable ‘messiness’ in these ‘practices’ and ‘arts’ of ‘tensional juxtaposition and alternation’: ‘[p]eople are rarely “good” at them – even if we are worse when we cease to try. Moreover,’ says Coles, ‘these arts of responsibility are always articulated in the murkiness of complex historical judgments:

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94 Coles 2005a:2 (my emphasis). See also Williams 2016:142-151 for a similarly insightful summary into the value of tragedy (in conversation with Gillian Rose), and Williams 2016:112-115 & 124-127, which locates that within a specifically Christian theological conversation (in particular, that between Milbank and Donald MacKinnon).
95 Coles 2005a:6 (my emphasis)
96 Coles 2005a:182 (my emphasis)
97 Coles 2005a:182-3
How much and what kinds of human organization most engender responsiveness to others? What levels of disorientation and disorganization open us to otherness? How might we entwine these? What levels and types of disorganization might provoke individual and collective forms of closure? What levels and which types of ambiguity disrupt egoisms? Which allow it to run wild? Always required, as Derrida puts it, is “a complex and constantly re-evaluated strategy.”

In Coles’ writing, however, we see less of a single ‘strategy’, however ‘complex’ and open to ‘re-evaluation’, and more what Ward might call an ongoing work of poiesis. Coles discovers and develops metaphors with affective power, persuasive power (the ecological fecundity of the ‘ecotone’, and Merleau-Ponty’s conception of ‘flesh’, to name but two), and also to ‘constellations’ of practices, from a wide diversity of sources and traditions, which both enliven the imagination and begin to stretch out possibilities for action, while always seeking to ‘perpetually reanimate’ the tension between ateleological ‘receptivity’ and teleological ‘orientation’. In the work of Chicana (Spanish-speaking Mexican-American) feminist and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, Coles is drawn to the way she ‘energetically enact[s] and solicit[s] ... “mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways.”’ In contrast to an ‘easygoing consumerist hybridity’, Anzaldúa’s ‘new mestiza’ cultivates “divided loyalties,” not simply in terms of those to whom she offers herself but also in terms of those people(s) and traditions from whom she seeks to learn; an understanding of tradition as ‘traditio’, ‘a new way of passing on (in the sense of “carrying forth,” “letting pass,” “living,” “dying”) tradition,’ in which ‘both traditional and treasonous yearnings and possibilities are entangled with one another’; and ‘torn virtues’, which (with more than faint echoes of Gillian Rose here) ‘call and help us to stay in the middle, in the profoundest moments, playing teleological and ateleological accents and insights against each other’. Coles finds in Anzaldúa’s writing both the kind of ‘tragic sensibility’ which political liberalism lacks – ‘stories of the dangers and the subjugations, of the hopeless confusions that can result, of the potential lack of justice and possibility in the “new territory,” even newly generated territory’ – and what he calls ‘a “nepantilist generosity”: a generosity that elaborates itself – internally and in communities with others – in dialogues torn between different sensibilities and visions of the future; a generosity torn between, on the one hand, the pursuit of what appear to be among the best political directions, principles, and practices that have been illuminated thus far ... and, on the other, its sense of the radical need to listen attentively to the voices and visions that come from places it cannot or has not yet illuminated.’

Here, then, I am arguing, is the central gift and challenge that the ‘ecclesial outsider’ Coles brings to the ‘ecclesial insider’ Ward: the cultivation of a more genuinely ‘tragic sensibility’, and the ‘perpetual reanimation’ of a ‘dis-adjusted’ tension between ‘teleological directness’ (with Kuipers, we might call...
5.3 Returning to praxis: developing a ‘visionary pragmatism’ for practised receptivity

To return Ward to the engagement of praxis, we recall, we needed to find ways of renouncing a need to ‘get our theory right’, and of daring to ‘risk, fail, learn and risk again’. We are also seeking to develop practices of receptivity and listening to ‘the other’ – in particular those ‘others’ who find themselves ‘unincorporated’ in, or ‘expelled’ from, the ‘circulatory economies’ of both our contemporary world and our theological imaginings. Thirdly, in our efforts to ‘rematerialise’ Ward’s ‘post-material’ worldview, we are seeking to renew our attention to the actual, material processes by which actual, material bodies are rendered meaning-full (or meaning-less). With all three (interrelated) quests, Coles offers helpful and rich resources, and we will explore some of the most significant among them in this section, beginning at ‘the edge’, and ending at ‘the church’.

5.3.1 The fecundity of the ‘edge’

Throughout Coles’ work, a central recurring metaphor is that of the ‘edge’. At the very beginning of his first book (Self / Power / Other: Political Theory and Dialogical Ethics), he compares the location of his project to the ‘ecotone’, the boundary ‘between two different ecological communities – for example, between a forest and a meadow’, noting that such ‘special meeting grounds’ ‘often harbour a greater variety and density of life than either of the two distinct communities alone’, thus ‘charg[ing] such border zones with evolutionary potential’.106 The ‘ecotone’, etymologically, stems ‘from the Greek oikos, or habitation, and tonos, or tension’, thus ‘call[ing] our attention to the life-engendering character of the ambiguous tension-laden dwelling that emerges at the intersection between differently constituted regions’. Coles’ attention to the ‘ecotone’ is, we might observe, a fundamentally different kind of attentiveness (and a necessary corrective) to that which focuses on the ‘economy’ (which links the oikos with the nomos, or law) and is caught up, as we have seen, with the dangers of appropriation and colonisation of what is ‘other’.107 In Self / Power / Other, Coles is particularly attentive to ‘the pregnancy of edges’ between ‘self and other’ and ‘within the self’. He seeks ‘the beginnings of an ethos attuned to the value of edges and to those differences whose communication makes them [the edges] fertile,’ a task which, he senses, is ‘one of the most

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104 (see section 3.4.iii, above)
105 We will return to flesh out both of these concepts in more detail in Chapter 6.
106 Coles 1992a:1, quoting ecologist Barry Lopez (my emphasis)
107 Alongside Daniel Miller’s argument that Ward’s ‘economics’ is caught up with the (appropriative) ‘logic of the proper’, we might recall the strong connection between nomos and ‘space or territory’ in Carl Schmitt’s political theology (section 2.5.ii, above). Schmitt may have taken the link to its extreme, but his work highlights again the need for a ‘tragic sensibility’ to the ‘colonising’ dangers of deploying ‘economic’ language – to which Coles’ attention to the ‘ecotone’ offers a necessary corrective.
fundamental dimensions of our efforts to reshape our contemporary social and political world.\(^{108}\) On the Augustinian border between ‘being’ and ‘non-being’, between the ‘confessing self and all he [Augustine] views as non-Christian ontological conceit’, Coles suggests that there is in fact not a sharp cliff-edge into the abyss, but an ecotone containing ‘a multiplicity of alternatives, a variety of differences whose intermingling might form fertile edges and offer possibilities for existence worthy of our embrace, consideration, tolerance, engagement, awe, encroachment: something more than an assignment to nothingness.’\(^{109}\)

More recently Coles returns to this concept of the ‘ecotone’, with specific attention to culture, quoting a passage from Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of Dostoyevsky, to which he finds himself returning repeatedly:

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\text{One must not ... imagine the realm of culture as some sort of spatial whole, having boundaries but also having internal territory. The realm of culture has no internal territory; it is entirely distributed along the boundaries, boundaries pass everywhere, through its every aspect, the systematic unity of a culture extends into the very atoms of cultural life, it reflects the sun in each drop of that life. Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries: in this is its seriousness and significance; abstracted from boundaries it loses its soil, it becomes empty, arrogant, it degenerates and dies.}\(^{110}\)
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Coles expands Bakhtin’s cultural claim, in dialogue with Hauerwas, to suggest ‘that the edge-effect, or ecotone, becomes the metaphor not just for the possible meeting ground between different communities, but, more importantly, for the character of generative life-giving places and modes of dwelling as such.’ Contrary to the ‘liturgical imaginary’ that understands ‘formation’ happening primarily (and primordially) at the ‘centre’,\(^{111}\) ‘edge-places’ are, Coles insists, the places that generate life: ‘vulnerable’, ‘unpredictable’ edges ‘run throughout our lives’ and it is to these kind of edges, ‘live[d] ... vulnerably’, that we are called.\(^{112}\)

Coles is not blind to the dangers of ‘border lands’, however: they have historically (as we have already noted) often been ‘zones of destruction’, as the imperial dream of ‘edgelessness’ has sought perpetually to ‘thrust [them] back’ and ultimately ‘eliminate’ them. His receptive engagement with Anzaldúa’s work (someone who herself grew up on the Mexican-American border, and also writes from ‘the multiple borderlands between several developing traditions’ of struggle and thought) also faces squarely the cost of repeated ‘crossings over’ and ‘being crossed’ – ‘the movements back and forth across the borders of culture, nation, race, gender, ideology, values, and language that surround and run through her [the Chicana]’. ‘This crossing,’ Coles notes, ‘has been forced upon the Chicana and other feminists of color through multiple forms of hybridity and subjugation that make it impossible to be harmoniously “at home” in any single group’. And yet, at the same time ‘it turns out to be her most vital ethical resource for leaning into the future and “making herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking” in manners conducive to human wisdom, freedom, and justice.’\(^{113}\) One of the vital lessons Coles learns from Anzaldúa, and other feminists of color, that

\(^{108}\) Coles 1992a:1-3

\(^{109}\) Coles 1992a:51

\(^{110}\) Bakhtin 1984:301 (in Coles 2008b:175)

\(^{111}\) (see section 5.3.iii, above)

\(^{112}\) Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:15

\(^{113}\) Coles 2005a:xxvi, 192
better perception and knowledge of things like the condition of the least well off, the relationship between these conditions and dominant practices, modes of effective response, and the political will and emotion necessary to mobilize action all hinge upon more-frequent engagements with those suffering from various modes of exploitation. ... They suggest that the cultivation of everyday practices for more-receptive encounters with the least well off are inextricably entwined with any real hope of building and sustaining more-just background institutions.' Redistribution and recognition are ‘inseparable’, and jointly demand ‘a proliferation of spaces and practices of political encounter and participation’, and ‘a different structuring of relations within such altered spaces’. And because ‘distributive injustice is enacted and sustained by structures of cultural perception, affect, knowledge, and geographies of spatial, temporal, and (dys)functional distributions of the bodies of different peoples,’ then what is needed to challenge it is ‘a “theory and politics of the flesh” – analyses of power and possibility at the level of bodily perception, abstraction, and emotion – and a call for a more contestatory politics involving both the mobilization of subjugated peoples and discomforting work by those more powerfully positioned to see and hear them differently (to see their desires, pleasures, sweat, and embodied visions of the good).’

At the edges of Ward’s ‘economies of desire’ (both postmodern and Christian), Coles’ call for a ‘proliferation’ of spaces of political ‘participation’, and ‘a more contestatory politics’, not only echoes Ward’s own call but – in its additional commitments to ‘more-frequent’, ‘more-receptive’ encounters (between the ‘subjugated’ and the ‘more powerfully positioned’), and both a ‘theory and politics of the flesh’ – goes beyond it in vital ways.

5.3.ii ‘Visionary pragmatism’

One of the crucial ‘edges’ at which Coles insists we must work (and does so himself), then, is that between ‘transformative visions’ and ‘movements trying to make real change’, two dimensions that have increasingly become detached from one another, with the ‘hyperprofessionalization’ of even some of the more ‘critical’ portions of the academy’, but also in the way more ‘[p]ragmatic sensibilities too often lose connection with the creative provocations, affective intensities, and expansive horizons of radical vision’. What Coles calls ‘visionary pragmatism’ therefore seeks to reconnect the two, ‘pragmatic’ in its ‘relentless’ efforts ‘to contribute to desirable changes in our lived worlds’, and ‘visionary’ in the sense that:

it maintains an intransigent practice of peering underneath, above, around, through, and beyond the cracks in the destructive walls and mainstream ruts of this world. It lingers in eddies, catches cross-currents, and cultivates new flows that spill through these cracks and flood beyond the banks. It has an unquenchable appetite for visions that come from beyond hegemonic common sense or exceed it from within, and it devotes itself to looking for clues of these, listening to whispers near and far that articulate suggestive possibilities beyond the assumed boundaries, and seeking modes of political engagement that help inspire, energize,

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114 Coles 2005a:203-4 (my emphasis). Responding to the possible charges that feminists of colour are either trapped within the bounds of political liberalism, or claim the (‘comprehensive’ or ‘totalizing’) ‘confidence’ with which traditionalists can sometimes be charged, Coles argues that not only is their work ‘born of struggles and alliances across multiple modes of life, groups, and selves in which much ongoing tension-filled difference of history and aspiration remains and is encouraged’; they also ‘draw from multiple sources ... to cultivate modes of being more affirmative of difference as such’; and finally, this affirmation ‘hinges on a sensibility that highlights the importance of receptivity to the unownted, to the fecundity of the ateleological. It does not, then, aspire to be “the whole”’ (Coles 2005a:209).
inform, and enact them. The ways we think, work, and act are forever informed and inspired by visions – both immanent and transcendent – that again and again call us to “do a new thing” that nurtures democratic possibilities and ecological flourishing. *And doing new things may nurture such visions.*

For Coles ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are intertwined, but in contrast to the impression given by both liberation theology’s cyclical methodology and Milbank’s ‘single, seamless, theory/practice’, the ‘cycles and spirals’ of visionary pragmatism are far from easy, being sometimes ‘like vivifying vortices in which theory and praxis rapidly confirm, expand, and intensify’ each other, and yet at other times ‘confronting nearly insurmountable challenges, failures, and turmoil’, which thus ‘call us to tarry with profound critiques of modes, processes, and convictions we hold most dear – and then engage in difficult acts of radical reformation’. In the following two sections, then, we will first accent the ‘pragmatic’ dimension, as we consider three of Coles’ focal practices of ‘radical receptivity’, and then turn to accent the ‘visionary’ dimension, as we seek to learn, from both ‘David’ and ‘Goliath’, ways of ‘chang[ing] the conventional contestation – or game – to enable victories deemed highly improbable’.

### 5.3.iii Radical democratic practices of receptivity

If Ward, in common with other ecclesial political theologians, has something of an ‘allergy to identity politics’, Coles too is dissatisfied with it. Dominant analyses of civil society tend to follow Albert Hirschmann’s typography of ‘exit’, ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’, he notes. When conflict develops within an association, Hirschmann observes, ‘individuals have the choice of (1) speaking up [voice], (2) maintaining the association at the cost of suppressing the conflict [loyalty], or (3) leaving the association [exit].’ Associations ‘can combat exit by cultivating loyalty’, and they can ‘cultivate loyalty ... through enabling the possibilities for exercising voice’. However, just as Hirschmann ‘argued that economists had “a blind spot, ‘a trained incapacity” for perceiving the importance of voice and that students of politics similarly missed the importance of exit,’ Coles argues that ‘the “exit, voice, and loyalty” frame issues in a “trained incapacity” to discern the importance of receptivity.’ The ‘radical democratic’ practices – which Coles has learnt through involvement in the community-organizing work of the Industrial Areas Foundation – of ‘listening’ (juxtaposed to ‘voice’), ‘world-travelling’ (as opposed to ‘exit’) and ‘tabling’ (beyond simple ‘loyalties’) are therefore presented as ‘supplement[ing] and challeng[ing]’ elements of Hirschmann’s paradigm. They also promise to both supplement and challenge Ward’s ecclesial project, offering concrete practices – and through them, stirring an alternative vision – which might help develop an ecclesial ‘habitus’ less prone to ‘penetrative’ and ‘imperialist’ modes of speech and action.

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115 Coles 2016:1-2, 18-19 (my emphasis)
116 Milbank 1990:251
117 Coles 2016:176
118 Coles 2016:9
120 Coles 2005a: 217-8. Cf. Bretherton 2010:98-101, who focuses particularly on ‘listening’ as an additional practice which positions the church in relation to others, whether they are poor or powerful, as one of *active contemplation*, and locates ‘contemplation of God and others as the beginning point of public action’.
121 Coles 2005a:218
122 Coles 2005a:220
(1) Listening

While IAF organizing ‘is very much about cultivating hitherto disempowered democratic voices,’ its approach ‘strongly accents and front-loads the arts of listening.’ ‘Front-loads,’ says Coles, because long before it ‘makes any attempt to articulate a new coalition’s substantive vision and voice, it patiently cultivates horizontal relationships by emphasizing practices of listening between individuals and among the religious institutions, political associations, and neighbourhood groups that it tries to weave into a deep alliance that will bridge differences.’ Listening is understood as ‘less a single capacity than a complex art that must be developed in a variety of different kinds of relationships’ and settings, ‘for reasons that are epistemological as well as ethical and political.’ What you hear depends on where you listen. And so a foundational building block of IAF organizing is hundreds of ‘one-on-ones’, conversations sought out with ‘current or potential participants’, not to try ‘to voice and sell the IAF message’, but to ‘prob[e] the visceral depths of [the other’s] public perceptions and involvements’, to ‘open lines of dialogue, paths of relationship, and political possibility that might otherwise be shut tight.’

Listening well involves an active and powerfully provocative aspect in which the one listening solicits others to listen to themselves more attentively and hopefully better than they might have done before. Listening, therefore, is an art cultivated through the active negotiation of discrepant points in a constellation of agonistic concerns that together might make it possible: a receptivity that paradoxically aims at a moment of passivity; a provocative, immanent engagement with the words of the others so that they might hear themselves better; an imaginative activity in which one tries to picture oneself in the position of others in the Arendtian sense of wondering what one would think if one resided in this other life; critical interventions that aim to bring one’s own perspectives into play with the others while attentively listening to their responses, in a way that generates friction from which new understandings might emerge from both participants – if we are listening carefully.

This accent on listening is not simply ‘as a means to voice, just judgment, and power’: it works with the assumption that our capacity to listen is integral to democracy and justice themselves. The ‘radical curiosity’ that draws out from us our stories, and ‘the political passions and perceptions that we so often hide’, creates the context within which ‘relationships are formed and deepened’, and ‘in which a rich complex critical vision of a community develops along with the gradual articulation of alternative possibilities.’ As relationships deepen, ‘bonds are formed that are more capable of enduring the rough and tumble of more-agonistic politics,’ and ‘participants begin to develop increasingly relational senses of their interests and orientations in ways that often transfigure the senses with which they began.’ Self-interests are not simply aggregated, or harmonised into consensus: ‘what ... materializes is a growing articulation of interest as “interesse – which means to be among or between.”’ Overlapping concerns and visions emerge and are contested within a space stretched out by relationships of practised, generative, mutual listening.

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123 Coles 2005a:220-1
124 Coles 2005a:221
125 Coles 2005a:221-3
(2) World-travelling

Listening, however, is often insufficient in itself. ‘In a world as structured and segmented as is ours by gated geographies and social practices of oblivion (the various physical, symbolic, visceral, and psychological walls between neighbourhoods, people of different races and classes, citizens and foreigners, and so on),’ says Coles, we need to abandon the liberal idea ‘that we are likely to hear one another well simply by communicating in a relatively neutral place – across whatever table located wherever between us’. Such an idea ‘greatly obscures and possibly undermines the task at hand.’ So ‘rather than speaking so easily of a common world that we already share – a space we cohabit that separates and relates us in a way that provides a uniform sound chamber that works equally well for the myriad voices and ears of a polity, we might do better to say (or to say too) that we do not share the same world today... Or that ... the trope “common world” distorts our condition at least as much as it illuminates.’ The fundamental practice of listening, then, must be accompanied by ‘literal bodily world-travelling that might begin to bring together our segmented experiences’. 126

In contrast to the dominant story of ‘getting out’ as the individual’s salvation from places of urban decline, Coles advocates an ‘escape from the oblivion and gated structures within which one’s self, capacity to receive the others, place, and associations have been largely confined and constructed. The movements out to other places – and back – foster a deeper and more complicated relationship of difficult hope within a broader urban area. Far from being a leaving, ... world-travelling is a to-and-fro, a way of beginning to dwell in an urban space as a “frontier” where relationships are new, uncertain, challenging, disruptive of the reigning order of things, and democratically renegotiated across often-trying divides.’ Central to the practice of the IAF ‘is the continual movement of meetings and members around the various neighbourhoods and institutions of an urban area’ and periodic ‘neighbourhood audits’, walking the streets of ‘strange neighbourhoods with strangers, taking inventory of the conditions ... and gaining an initial sense of the shape of lives we have never experienced. This actual world-travelling bends, broadens, and nurtures one’s hearing and vision, and it transfigures the imagination as our bodies experience the reverberations of music in strangely worn buildings, the textures of worn doors, a patched broken window, buildings sloping and shedding paint.’ 127

Coles acknowledges here IAF’s debt to Arendt – in particular, her understanding of ‘the development of political judgment in terms of a “representative thinking” in which “one trains one’s imagination to go visiting”’,128 – but he suggests that ‘there are ways in which dimensions of the practices significantly outstrip some of the theory that informs and inspires them.’ ‘[T]oo often in Arendt’s work it appears that her construal of imagination and judgment truncates listening more than listening is allowed to weave a more radically open sensibility into judgment,’ Coles argues. Where Arendt, imagining herself looking ‘at a specific slum dwelling’, is suspicious of the judgments of the ‘inhabitants, for whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition’, Coles argues for ‘a receptive and generous countenancing’ of ‘other people’s actual expressions of their experiences and judgments from very discrepant standpoints,’ and the necessity of ‘travel[ling]...
receptively to the places where their skin most often lives, breathes, struggles, feels, judges, articulates, and expresses itself.’

(3) Tabling

Grounding the practice of ‘world-travelling’ further, Coles attends, thirdly, to the tables (literally, as well as more metaphorically) around which IAF members gather. In a discussion which returns us to the central problematic of so-called ‘public theology’, Coles highlights the often-difficult tension ‘between the need for tables of democratic engagement and the element of marginalization that always seem to accompany each democratic table’; the tension, that is, between ‘those who already have a seat at the table’ and those who do not, and may well represent a different, even ‘disturbing’, position. The table, Coles reminds us, is ‘both and inclusive and exclusive space’. Again starting with Arendt, Coles proposes a radical democratic practice of ‘tabling’ that goes beyond the ‘solid relatively stable “table” of Arendt’s common public realm of separation and relation’, but is more concrete than ‘the “spiritualistic séance table” that might “vanish from our midst” with which [Arendt] represented the space of mass society in which we are simultaneously neither related nor separated.’

Firstly, then, the IAF table:

is continually moving, from this neighbourhood to that, from this religious or secular institution to that... Each institution that participates in the coalition takes a turn hosting the meetings of the broader group... The aim and effect is to work subtly on the limits that might accompany each incarnation of the table by relocating it repeatedly to different places where previous limits are variously made more apparent, perhaps transcended, perhaps rendered less operative, less rigid. In small but important ways – ways both visceral and more explicit – the coalition’s modes, limits, possibilities, and sense of itself are slightly reconfigured with each move of the table.

Coles draws on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, here, to suggest that it is through the very differences and contrasts of the experiences of the ‘moving table’ that ‘a heterogeneous “we”’ begins to emerge. Secondly, Coles describes the ‘dramatic actions’ of the IAF which ‘encroach upon and refigure officially sanctioned representations of “the public,” as well as the experiences of the official representatives of the public.’ As well as mobilizing for ‘traditional public meetings’, the IAF organizes its own public accountability meetings, at best ‘artfully and reflectively crafted “public dramas”’, into which ‘elected officials (and the media) are called to participate’ but in a place, and ‘with an agenda, process, and temporality that is not of the official’s design or custom’:

Suddenly, those who typically preside – and who are seen to preside – over the “common” public space find themselves situated in a common space where they are decidedly not in control, a common space where the topics under discussion, the framing of these topics, the duration allotted to various speakers, the mood in the room, and so forth are

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129 Coles 2005a:226-7
130 Coles 2005a:230-1
131 Coles 2005a:231-2
132 Cf Coles 1992a:133
disproportionately organized by the people of neighbourhoods mostly ignored by the
hegemonic halls of public deliberation.\(^{133}\)

In a dramatic reversal, the usual presiders are ‘no longer the ones deciding who among these others will be “included” as serious voices in the discussion and how, no longer the ones deciding who and what will not. Rather, they now find themselves as the “others and otherness to be included,” initiated into the world by others, figuring on their ground.’\(^{134}\) This reversal, itself, evokes a ‘common space’ within which Coles, the atheist, appreciatively approaches the rich polyphony of the Christian tradition, not simply as an ‘outsider’, but as one who desires to ‘table’ with Christians in the sense he has outlined here. It both ‘supplements and challenges’ Ward’s theological politics, which is (as we have demonstrated at length) so strongly centred around the church’s eucharistic table, from which the broken bread – and with it, the love of God – is ‘taken ... out into the world’.\(^{135}\) Coles points us towards the profound significance of being guests around ‘other tables’ and, in the ‘to-and-fro’ of ‘world-travelling’, of ‘bringing back’ to the eucharistic table the ways in which our hearing and vision, our imagination and our bodies, have been ‘bent’, ‘broadened, ‘nurtured’ and ‘transfigured’. These three, interwoven, receptive practices, of listening, world-travelling and tabling, begin to outline the possibility of ‘alternative flows’ running counter to Ward’s unilateral (‘pleromatic-kenotic’) agape, but flows which we might (to anticipate my final chapter) still understand as fully participating within Ward’s ‘economy’ of divine love. In Coles’ more recent work, moreover, his own ‘speculative ontology’ emerges with great clarity, with ‘flows’ appearing as a crucial feature. It is to this work, therefore, that we now turn.

5.4 Learning from ‘David’ and ‘Goliath’: fleshing out a ‘visionary pragmatism’

As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, Coles shares Ward’s pessimism about the current state of ‘liberal democracy’ and, indeed, deploys language as apocalyptic as any of Ward’s readings of ‘the signs of the times’.\(^{136}\) Central to Coles’ analysis in his most recent book, Visionary Pragmatism, is his adoption and development of William Connolly’s description (himself indebted to Deleuze and others) of the ‘evangelical-capitalist resonance machine’: ‘a resonant “assemblage composed through relations ... between heterogeneous elements’ (corporations, institutions, media, practices, experiences, attitudes) ‘that simultaneously enter into one another to some degree, affect each other from the outside, and generate residual or torrential flows exceeding the first two modes of connection.”’ This assemblage ‘engenders a spiritual ethos [what Ward would call a ‘worldview’] in which extreme inequality, fundamentalism, generalized ressentiment toward difference and ambiguity, as well as bellicosity and indifference toward future generations, the poor, foreigners, and the planet often intensify one another’ as different elements ‘resonate’ together, transcending the lines of simple, deterministic ‘cause and effect’.\(^{137}\)

At least two elements of Coles’ description are significant for the explorations in this thesis, then. The first is his renewed attention to flows – which we saw both in Ward’s cultural analysis (drawing

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\(^{133}\) Coles 2005a:232-3

\(^{134}\) Coles 2005a:234. Coles is describing here almost the turning inside-out of the limits of ‘public theology’ that we explored in Chapter 2, the creation: he acknowledges, of ‘a more genuinely “public” space’ (Coles 2008b:187-8; cf n.167, below).

\(^{135}\) (see section 3.3.v, above)

\(^{136}\) (section 5.1, above, especially n.1)

\(^{137}\) Coles 2016:37-8 (emphasis mine)
on Castells’ ‘network society’) and in his theological argument (describing the ‘pleromatic-kenotic’ flow of divine love, into and through the church). At times metaphorical, at times intensely material, Coles ventures a ‘speculative ontology’ of ‘flows’ here, with potential both to add weight to Ward’s challenge against the ‘catastrophic’ status quo, but also to question the unilateralism that we have seen is central to Ward’s proposals. Secondly, in Coles’ understanding of ‘resonant causality’, again we see glimmers of hope that, to use Coles’ own image, in the contemporary ‘battle’ between a capitalist ‘Goliath’ and radical democratic ‘Davids’, we might both ‘learn from Goliath who has [himself] learned from David’, but also avoid ‘becoming ourselves what is horrendous about Goliath’.\(^\text{138}\) In a world of resonant, rather than simply linear, causality,\(^\text{139}\) we might discover insights in the old biblical story, Coles argues, into ‘how underdogs and social movements can alter the spacing, timing, and practices of encounter in ways that change the conventional contestation – or game – to enable victories deemed highly improbable’.\(^\text{140}\) For Coles there is no question of succumbing to the ‘gigantism’ with which Petrella charges much liberation theology:\(^\text{141}\) in both ‘grassroots experimental practices’ and ‘visions that promise serious resistance’, he discerns the possibility of assembling elements of a ‘counter-machine’ (pace Connolly) which might ‘generate resonance relational energies’ that ‘turn up ... our receiving volume’, and ‘cultivate a poignant and increasingly general sense of ourselves, others, the world, and time as fecund with the “not yet”’. Just as Ward has an abiding concern for ‘transformative practices of hope’, so also for Coles ‘hope’ goes deeper than simply offering ‘“reasons to be cheerful”’ – as we shall see.\(^\text{142}\)

5.4.i Re-visiting Ward’s ‘economies’ with Coles: ‘mega-circulations’, ‘disbelief’ and ‘polyface flows’

Where Ward retains a recurring concern for power as control of space – the ‘sovereignty’ or ‘disciplinary power’ of the all-seeing ‘panopticon’ – Coles invites us to focus even more intensely (drawing on Foucault’s later work) on power as investment in flows: what Foucault calls ‘governmentality’ or ‘security’, and Coles conceives in terms of the ‘mega-circulations ... of grains, food, goods, finance, fertilizer, waste, people, military, energy, water, pharmaceuticals, and so forth’. These ‘mega-circulations’ move ‘people, nonhuman beings, and things about in ways that significantly engender, invest, and govern our bodies to enhance concentrated productivity’, and that have ‘major impacts on our (in)capacities for attention, excitement, perception, distraction, desire, comprehension, and incomprehension – that in turn tend to enhance the circulatory powers that give birth to them’.\(^\text{143}\) ‘Governmentality’, for Coles, does not only ‘situate circulations of the hungry poor within a market structure that generates regulated-but-not-eliminated scarcity that perpetually stimulates flows of cheap, precarious, and productive labor’, but also ‘begins to infiltrate hunger as appetite by operating on a range of factors to affect dispositions that enhance circulatory power. Indeed, in contrast to the logic of sovereignty that says “no” to desire, for security, “the problem is how to say yes ... to this desire ... [how to do] everything that stimulates and encourages

\(^{138}\) Coles 2016:27

\(^{139}\) And here we might observe Coles exceeding both the economic ‘determinism’ with which Ward charges neo-Marxists such as David Harvey, but also the temptations towards a cultural determinism to which Ward seems to fall prey himself. The assumption that we can ‘change the world’ either by ‘changing the economics’ or by ‘the productive transformation of culture’ alone – attending, that is, only to isolated elements of the ‘resonance machine’ – is too simple (cf section 3.1, above).

\(^{140}\) Coles 2016:9 (my emphasis)

\(^{141}\) (section 2.4.iii, above)

\(^{142}\) Coles 2005a:x, 2016:39 (original emphasis), 52.

\(^{143}\) Coles 2016:73-5
this self-esteem, this desire, so that it can produce its necessary beneficial effects” – at least for those who are deemed “pertinent” rather than “impertinent.” Security, or governmentality, is a ‘centrifugal force’, that ‘moves outward’, that not only ‘insinuat[es] itself into’, but also ultimately ‘instigat[es]’, ‘engineer[s]’ and ‘proliferat[es]’, ‘flows that circulate across space and into the future’, in ways that ‘reconstruct the world and human beings’ – and ‘eliminat[e]’ what it cannot ‘incorporate’, ‘redesign’ or ‘co-opt’ – precisely in order to maximize the ‘megaflows of circulatory power’ themselves.

The resonances with Ward’s description of the ‘economy’ of ‘postmodern desire’ are already striking: in this ‘placeless’ ‘space of flows’ (as Castells described it), ‘certain forms of desire’ are both ‘promoted and patrolled’, forms which sustain endless, never satisfied consumption, and which actively cultivate our ‘desire to be ignorant’ of the costs of that consumption. Where Coles is more attentive than Ward, however, is to the material as well as ‘immaterial’ circulations in this economy: human beings are not simply ‘disembodied consumers’ of the products of ‘immaterial labour’; human bodies themselves are made to circulate, and, when deemed ‘impertinent’, are also cast ‘out of circulation’. Resonant with Saskia Sassen’s analysis of ‘expulsions’, Coles points us to the spaces ‘outside’ the dominant ‘economy’, in a way which Ward’s ‘economics’ simply does not allow. For Ward, we recall, the oikonomia is imagined as a closed system, an ‘endless circulation’ without interruption from ‘outside’; different ‘economies’ are conceived in spatial, oppositional, and mutually exclusive terms; and the theologian’s claim to describe the ‘economy’ as a whole risked universalising his very particular standpoint – and subsuming any different ‘others’ into that project. Coles, by contrast, suggests that this common misconception, which tends towards ‘reifying’ systems as essentially ‘closed uniform totalities’, is itself a consequence of neoliberal power’s ‘Wizard of Oz effect’, ‘whereby the order projects an ideological mirage of its omnipotence’. By contrast, ‘a much suppler sense of system dynamics’ is more alert both to the contingency of present ‘assemblages’ (they could have been arranged quite differently), and to the complex, coexistent relationships between diverse processes (Coles suggests ‘internal, external, nested, crosscutting, mixed, oscillating, or episodic’, among other ways of inter-relating) which allow for the possibility not just of challenge, but of ‘co-optation’: of ‘transformations toward remarkably different settlements and equilibria’.

Where the ‘governmentality’ invested in ‘mega-circulations’ seeks to ‘proliferate oblivion’ to the ‘manifold requirements for the diverse flourishing of humans, nonhuman beings, and ecosystems’, then, Coles reminds us (drawing on the insights here of Gustavo Esteva) that such mega-circulations depend on our ‘believing in them: they require the active engagement, uptake, reproduction, and extension of a multitude of micropractices, dispositions, perceptions, desires, bodily movements, and interpretive acts’ – Coca Cola or Marlboro, as Esteva puts it, have “no real existence” or power where people ignore them. Hope of change, for Coles, carries echoes of Ward’s description of Christian ‘cultural politics’: the ‘micropractices’ of ‘encountering, negotiating and interpreting the

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144 Coles 2016:76
145 Coles 2016:76, 83-4 (original emphasis)
146 (see sections 3.1.ii & 3.3.iv, above)
147 (section 1.1, above)
148 (see section 4.4.i, above)
149 Coles 2016:118-9, 148
150 Coles 2016:84-5
world’. Coles too invites us to acts of ‘interpretation’, movements of what Esteva calls ‘disbelief’: ‘myriad collective ways in which we might move and organize to resist these [mega-]circulations, detach, and initiate alternative flows’. In ‘marked contrast’ to the ‘postmaterialism’ highlighted by Ronald Inglehart and lauded by Ward, however, Coles points to ‘a growing proliferation of movements organizing around a new materialism’, focused on ‘cultivating radically democratic and ecologically sustainable relationships amid flows of goods, people, food, energy, medicine, water, finance, and so forth’. Such movements know, he suggests, that the transformation of ‘large-scale formal institutions of power’ can only happen in the wake of ‘major shifts in desire, pleasure, vision, aspiration, practice, relational networks, and active organizing capacities – all of which are most effectively cultivated beneath, around, and beyond corporatized states and regimes’.

Coles is not proposing an ‘alternative economy’, therefore, nor simply ‘alternative circulations’ within the ‘neoliberal system’ as it currently is, but rather the proliferation of ‘flows’ with a markedly different quality to that of the ‘mega-circulations’: flows which are both ‘decentralized’ and profoundly ‘receptive’. Developing the approach found in the unusual farming practices of Joel Salatin, Coles advocates an ‘ethos’ of ‘receptive “polyface” flows’, ‘akin to a responsive dance with ever-shifting boundaries and practices drawn forth through profoundly receptive engagements with myriad forms of life and interconnections that “are not of one’s own making.”’ Coles notes ‘Polyface’ flows invite us to ‘be drawn into the orbits’ of our fellow creatures, ‘into eccentric – rather than egocentric – ethical-corporeal movements’, that are not concerned with self-maximization (and we might include ecclesial self-maximization here), but with an ‘intensification’ of relationships of mutual transformation. Developing his earlier reflections on ‘world-travelling’, Coles argues that there is a necessity for both ‘rooting’ and ‘routing’: ‘cocreat[ing] roots in a place not by creating new modes of exclusive territoriality (e.g., mini-sovereignties, nostalgic enclaves, xenophobic localisms, communities of depoliticized withdrawal), but by ‘going to places and people with whom we must relearn how to see, think, imagine, work, and act’, and by ‘attentively immersing ourselves in ecosystems at numerous scales’, ‘participating with the movements of other beings and things’, ‘letting them circulate around us and attuning ourselves to their flows’.

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151 (section 3.4.ii, above)

152 Coles 2016:84-5, 90. Coles goes on to qualify his sense of political priority here, recognising ‘that both a politics of flows and political engagements with formal state and national institutions are necessary to catalyze transformations at a pace necessary to thwart and adapt to climate catastrophe’ (2016:91).

153 On Salatin’s ‘Polyface Farm’ in Virginia, he approaches (and encourages others to approach) the fields of his farm, ‘on all fours’, attempting to imitate the ‘symbiotic relationship’ between animals and their habitat, seeking to ‘experience with profound resonance and all his senses’, attending to and mimicking the movements of cows and chickens – and ‘seek[ing] to draw others into similar mimetic movements’. The echoes of Levinas’ attention to the ‘face’ are deliberate here: Coles seeks to correct Levinas’ double inattentiveness, ‘both to how the widely varying potentials of faces are [actually] revealed and concealed in relational practices, and to how nonhumans may also call us to ethical engagements’ (Coles 2016:96-8).

154 Coles 2016:97. There is a strong resonance here (although Coles does not pick it up explicitly) with Rowan Williams’ suggestion that God is in ‘the connections we cannot make’ (Williams 2000:41, quoted in Coles 2008b:183; see section 5.5.ii, below).

155 Coles 2016:98-100

156 Coles 2016:106-7 (my emphasis)
5.4.ii Politics of shock and countershock

A second aspect of Coles’ analysis of the ‘capitalist machine’ (going beyond Ward’s work) is his observation, with Naomi Klein, of the way the ‘machine’ uses ‘shocks’ – both those of its own direct making, such as those deployed in war, torture and responses to ‘terrorist attacks’, in government spending cuts and economic deregulation, and less directly-engineered shocks labelled ‘natural disasters’ – to perform a ‘catastrophic levelling and scrambling of recalcitrant relationships, social topographies, and associational powers, followed by the relatively unhampered development of antidemocratic relationships, institutions, and powers.’ ‘Shock politics’, for Coles, ‘acts as a kind of “preemptive repression” that clears the field for new circulations, resonant energies, and electric flows of political, economic, and social power that would otherwise face resistance from those previously in place or emerging.’

Alongside the vital ‘quotidian’ practices of radical democracy, then, Coles outlines the necessity of an ‘evanescent’ ‘politics of countershock’ (such as those Klein highlights in the Occupy protests and fossil fuel blockades) which offers both ‘certain crucial tools for blocking the malignant advance of neoliberalism’ – pronouncing ‘a discordant “no!”’ in ways that are ‘dramatic, outrageous, disruptive, and confrontational’ – and also ‘crucial opportunities to dramatically prefigure alternatives ... [to] the hegemonic common sense of our times’ – ‘open[ing], prefigur[ing], perform[ing], and extend[ing] possibilities for receptive relationships and outrageous powers’, ‘transfigur[ing] senses and tastes, and engender[ing] energetic aspirations for possibilities far beyond the limits of the dominant order’. In short, such ‘outrageously performative events unleash bursts of natality’ (Arendt’s term for ‘miraculous unexpected forms of new political speech and action’): a ‘rich and diverse affective ecology of “civic emotions ... including indignation, determination, irony, outrage, ... joy,” and humor’.

Here again, Coles shows a way beyond the stalemate identified by Luke Bretherton in Ward’s work, where the ‘powerful and prophetic’ work of describing the Christian ‘theological imaginary’ remained unable to engage with ‘constructive forms of ... political action’. Coles is not resistant to Ward’s question of Levinas: from where come our resources for our ‘movements out’ towards our ‘others’? The politics of ‘difficult receptivity’ risks, Coles acknowledges, being ‘insufficiently capable of mustering up prophetic energy, sensibility, voice, refusal and transformative passion and

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157 Coles 2016:165 (my emphasis)
158 Coles 2016:163-4, 167-8. Whereas Arendt’s account of natality ‘accents the performance of speech and deed that discloses a unique being and new possibilities in the world, as a person begins “to take initiative, to begin ... to set something in motion”’, Coles’ re-working of the term ‘very much includes these dimensions but accents receptivity’. Rather than understanding human beings as ‘most primordially responding to the fact of our own birth as a beginning’, as Arendt suggests, ‘we would do better’, Coles argues, ‘to understand our uniqueness initially as our singular responsiveness or receptivity to the world and others, which is stimulated and nurtured by and entangled with the responsiveness of others in their actions with us. Our initiatory capacities are born in these responsive relationships, and throughout our life our natality is cultivated in this interplay of receptivity and initiative’ (Coles 2016:171). Coles’ conception of ‘countershock’ here is very similar to Bretherton’s understanding of Saul Alinsky’s radical democratic approach as neither ‘oppositional’ nor aiming ‘to establish some kind of contrast or dissident society’, but rather ‘as a means by which to formulate and embody a contradiction to any given instance of injustice. ... Political actions for Alinsky are simultaneously to declare the unjust way to be untrue and to present a possible alternative through which all may flourish. Alinsky’s insistence on having a constructive alternative means that the declaration of a “No” to something is always premised on the prior celebration and upholding of a “Yes” to another way, a way in which both oppressor and oppressed are invited to participate’ (Bretherton 2010:79).
159 (section 4.4.v, above)
160 (section 3.3.v, above)
action’ if it is divorced from what Coles describes as ‘gatherings that enact a Dionysian conjuring of utopic possibility’: gatherings, that is, which bring together participants with diverse ‘teleologies’ in a ‘dizzying’ togetherness, but which are ‘concerned to actively engage not so much the differences of those on the other side of myriad barriers’ as the ‘radical democratic possibility’ of what Martin Luther King called ‘the beloved community’.161 These moments which ‘instil in the flesh a sense that another world is possible’ – moments which often include ‘tremendous speakers, ecstatic call and response, frenzied evocations of the infinite power of love and justice’162 – have more than a ring of Christian worship about them,163 and underline Coles’ appreciation for the embodied practices so central to the likes of Hauerwas, Wells and Ward. Coles’ worry for ‘Dionysian utopic being-together’ when ‘severed from practices of attentive receptivity’, however, is that it ‘risks obliterating many significant differences’, both between and beyond those present: the ‘retreat from the challenge of the other’, with which we have charged Ward. Coles proposes, characteristically, a deliberate pluralising, ‘a tensional ecology of practices’, that ‘work on extant limits in markedly different ways’.164 Between ‘quotidian’ politics and the ‘evanescent’ politics of ‘countershock’, then, there must be an ‘interweaving’, an ‘oscillation’, an ‘alternating current’ such that, on the one hand, the former prevents the latter from becoming ‘diminished, stale, colonized, and compromised’, ‘complacent about limits that seem implacable’ and ‘dulled in its sense of creative possibilities’, and on the other hand, the latter prevents the former from becoming ‘narrowly sectarian’, and ‘fall[ing] in love with itself in ways that can quickly leave it clueless about how to organize to generate more transformative waves, broader and more durable assemblages, and radical effects’.165

5.4.iii Reconfiguring hope for a ‘storm-shocked’ world

A third way in which Coles’ Visionary Pragmatism pushes necessarily beyond his previous work (and Ward’s political theology) is in broadening the focus from the inter-human concerns of ‘democracy’ to a planetary concern for ‘ecological resilience’ – in the context of the (human) experience of a ‘storm-shocked Eaarth’ [sic],166 a planet increasingly ‘radically out of control’ and prone to a ‘disruptive chaos’ of a frequency and intensity as yet rarely known.167 In the overarching task of reconfiguring ‘hope’ for such a ‘storm-shocked’ world, however, Coles and Ward find themselves in surprisingly intimate company with one another. ‘[M]odern narratives and imaginaries of hope’ as

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162 Coles 2005a:xxx (Coles’ emphasis).
163 Coles, in his notes of one such ‘frenzied event’, observes how ‘Rev. Battle’, ‘delivering the “closing talk”’, moves from ‘carefully deliberative’ to ‘shouting about how “God works with our hands. God walks with our feet.”’ Then he throws the room into a guttural “love jam” incantation with Corinthians: “LOVE ... LOVE ... LOVE ...” The call and response pulsations start from a part of the room where several members of his church are seated. These are entwined with exuberant echoes of every phrase by a Hispanic organizer translating into a small microphone as electronic pulses carry the evocations through headphones to the ears of newly arrived Mexicanos. Even white folks and atheists are starting to join ecstatically in response to this counterpointal motif of preacher, church members, translator, Mexicanos. ... Battle growls into the ecstatic room: “With LOVE we will find the possible in this impossible!” The contours of the world are beginning to blur, shift, melt away. Many of us have moved through listening to this cicada we are, to being in its insides. With each pulse we are growing a cicada confidence...’ (Coles 2005b:81-2).
165 Coles 2016:163-4
166 The phrase is ecologist Bill McKibben’s, intended to signify the ‘unfathomable changes’ coming about due to global warming (see Coles 2016:178-80).
167 Coles 2016:180
'progress' are becoming ‘evidently untenable’, Coles argues, with their associated ‘spatiotemporal geographies’ – ‘broad visions of hope as a line, or [at its most complex] a spiral, moving on the whole toward a horizon’, where ‘the new is anticipated with excitement as a coming abode of abundance’ (analogous, not accidentally, to ‘white people’s movement into the West’). In contrast, Coles is committed (with MacIntyre, Hauerwas and Ward among others) to cultivating ‘communities of hopeful practice’, but within ‘a diasporic and more tenaciously tragic geography’ than any we have historically encountered. We need to ‘negotiate new powers and configurations’ for such ‘communities’ characterised by ‘receptive generosity and graceful vulnerability’, he argues, ‘amid conditions that – and people who – arrive unexpectedly and pose great challenges, or among hordes of people arriving, or with those forced to move on, or with buried and unburied corpses’. Indispensable to that task of negotiation, he suggests, are ‘political imaginaries’ which ‘foreground temporal discontinuities and spatial dislocations’: these he evokes through the motifs of ‘wormhole hope’ and a ‘hospitality to weightless seeds’.

Fig. 5.1
‘Wormholes’ in space-time, as conceived in theoretical physics
(Detlev van Ravenswaay / SPL)

By ‘wormhole hope’, Coles has in mind the possibility of ‘shortcuts’ and ‘bridges’ across ‘impossibly abyssal stretches of regular space and time’ (akin to those ‘wormholes’ proposed by theoretical physicists), which ‘engender linkages and intensities of creative political engagement that seem impossible according to the normal coordinates we often take to exclusively define the real’. This kind of hope requires, he admits (drawing on the work of Rebecca Solnit), ‘a sensibility closer to faith’: ‘it “endures when there’s no way to imagine winning in the foreseeable future ... that you might live to see or benefit from”’. As an image, however, it ‘names, solicits, and engenders the recurrence of miraculous connections’ between apparently disparate ‘periods of intensive aspiration and struggle’. It invites us to remember past ‘intensities’ (Walter Benjamin is also significant for Coles here), but in so doing, to find ‘cultivate[d] in us a more profoundly receptive attention to the natality of other times now and to come’. Are these the kind of ‘bridges’ that Castells had in mind – between physical places and the ‘space of flows’ – that might address the ‘schizophrenization’

168 In language which brings together the ‘convocative’ role we identified in both public and liberation theology, and the ecclesial political theologians’ assertion of the ‘church as polis’, Coles highlights the importance and power of the task of ‘cocreating new publics’: ‘[t]he new resonances, flows, and dynamics of such publics promise to generate their own capacities for judgment, action, and cocreative public work far beyond the incapacitating effects of hierarchical technocratic resonance machines’ (Coles 2016:157).

169 Coles 2016:180-1
170 Coles 2016:180-7 (my emphasis)
(Ward’s ‘atomism’) of our globalized world? Certainly there is more than incidental resonance with Ward’s eucharistic (both remembering and anticipation), ‘analogical worldview’, in which bodies ‘miraculously’ participate in each other, across distances of time and space. For Ward, it is ‘the body of Christ’ that provides the ‘new political community’ – an ‘ontologically founded community’ – that democracy has been searching for. Coles is more tentative, more pluralist and far less ‘appropriative’ in his naming of such ‘communities of hopeful practice’ (his ‘ricocheting trajectory’ of hope-full history includes the Hebrew prophets and the ‘radical democrats of ancient Athens’, Jesus and St Francis, Thoreau and the abolitionists, Tolstoy and woman suffragists, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, among others) – but he is also, as we have seen, much more profoundly committed than Ward to combining a speculative ontology (his repeated use of the word ‘likely’ in Visionary Pragmatism is noticeable) with concrete practices and ‘careful action research’.

Coles’ second image links the ‘wild time’ of ‘wormhole hope’ with the ‘dislocation’ of the ‘domesticated contiguities and segregations of territorialized space’. Again, Coles comes close to Ward’s project of overcoming geographical ‘segregation’ with the assertion of analogical participation, but the former is demanding a concretely practised receptivity alongside a change of ‘worldview’. Again, Coles insists on the intertwining of rooting (‘developing deep relationships, attachments, and practices of care for the world in a specific place... especially in the context of struggles to resist and cultivate alternatives to pervasive neoliberal dynamics of displacement and uprooting’) with ‘responsive routing’, which ‘call[s] us beyond territorializing impulses, practices, and institutions, as we deepen our awareness of the extent to which the goods of every place are and will in unexpected ways become indebted to initiatives and struggles of people in other places’. This ‘deepened awareness’, Coles suggests, thus contributes to ‘an ethos of receptive generosity and enhanced hospitality toward those coming unexpectedly into the places we are trying to make home’; such awareness ‘better disposes and enables us to anticipate abundance in relation to those who move beyond borders’, ‘to that which and those who greatly exceed our horizons of vision’. This disposition Coles calls a ‘hospitality for weightless seeds’, a ‘strenuously cultivated’ receptivity to the ‘dynamic ecological commingling among nearby and vastly separated places’ that ecologists now understand to be ‘absolutely indispensable to the distinctive fertility of each and every place’.

In Bakhtin’s terms, the ‘boundaries pass everywhere’: Coles summons us to an awareness of, and receptivity to, the fecundity of the ‘ecotones’ that not only run between adjacent places, but which ‘bridge’ places, spaces and flows sharply segregated in our conventional imaginations. With these evocations of a ‘wormhole hope’ rooted in practices of ‘remembering’, and a practised receptivity to the gifts of ‘other places’, we return now to Coles’ specifically ecclesiological reflections, where these two themes resonate together in a distinctly Christian key.

5.5 Coles’ ‘ecclesial turn’: a ‘christecentric’, dialogical, ‘radically insufficient’ church

In Coles’ work, then, we have found not only a careful and generous argument for ‘dwelling in the tension’ between ‘teleological confidence’ and ‘ateleological openness’, but also a rich source of both imagery and practices of ‘radical receptivity’ which seek to resist, co-opt and transform the ‘flows’ of a world ‘storm-shocked’ by neoliberal capitalism. In this section, I return now to Coles’

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171 See section 3.3.ii, above
172 See e.g. Coles 2016:48-53 discussing the dynamics of resonance.
173 Coles 2016:148
174 Coles 2016:187-191
more explicit engagements with Christian traditions, and the ‘pregnant possibilities’ he sees in a ‘vulnerable[...] and imaginative engage[ment]’ in the borderlands ‘between radical ecclesia and radical democracy’175 – particularly through his reception of the work of (Mennonite) John Howard Yoder, (Anglican) Rowan Williams and (Roman Catholic) Jean Vanier, all of whom ground their ecclesiological proposals in specifically christological reflections.

5.5.i John Howard Yoder: the vulnerable receptivity of the church’s ‘body practices’ 176

Although it is Augustine that Coles engages right at the beginning of Self / Power / Other (his first book), Coles most significantly appreciative moves in a theological direction begin with John Howard Yoder, who exemplifies for him the holding of the tension between teleological and ateleological modes which, as we have seen, is central to Coles’ project: ‘I find in Yoder’s writings a vision of dialogical communities that brings forth very particular and powerful practices of generous solidarity precisely through creative uses of conflict and a vulnerable receptivity to the “least of these” within the church and to those outside it.’ Here Coles finds ‘a theology of traditioning that addresses in a most profound manner many of the problems [he] identified in MacIntyre.’ Most interesting, for Coles, ‘are the ways [Yoder] combines bearing evangelical witness to his confessedly provincial tradition with vulnerable and receptive dialogical practices with others. Indeed,’ he notes, ‘these latter practices are integral to the witness itself. Witness simply and literally makes no sense at all apart from receiving others with a radical vulnerability.’177

Defending Yoder against allegations of ‘sectarianism’, Coles reads him not only as ‘deeply engaged with the world’ (“for the nations” in multiple ways), and as engaging with (internal) ‘complexity, heterogeneity, discordance’ (‘the “worldliness” of the world’, or at very least the ‘worldliness’ of the church) rather than retreating into ‘sectarian purity, homogeneity, and imposed harmony’, but most significantly – and in marked contrast to Augustine and Milbank178 – understanding that ‘vulnerable relations with outsiders are integral to the otherness of the church,’ and, indeed, to making central

175 Hauerwas & Coles 2010:358-9
176 It would be impossible to read Yoder directly without engaging with what is now known about his serial perpetration of sexual violence against women (see e.g. Goosen 2015). It is an entirely legitimate and necessary question to ask to what extent he deployed his theology to seek to justify his actions, but it is also important to recognise that there are many places in which his written theology and his actions seem to be in utter contradiction. Here I am interested in what Coles does with particular aspects of Yoder’s theology, in particular the latter’s emphases on dialogical discernment within church, and a radical receptivity to those in and beyond the church’s margins. Arguably, both of these emphases run contradictory to Yoder’s abusive actions. Coles’ identification of Yoder’s limitations, particularly the latter’s temptation to ecclesial ‘hubris’, is also significant here. So also is Coles’ urging of the church, beyond Yoder, towards a ‘tragic sensibility’ toward and alongside those who have been ‘violated by powers in which we are implicated’, and ‘indebted affirmations’ of the critical perspectives and power analysis that come from disciplines such as liberation theology, and feminist, postcolonial and critical race theory (see below). Yoder’s story is a cautionary one for any theologian, and particularly for those of us who seek to grapple theologically with the power of erotic desire. Within the broader context of this thesis, it is critical to remind ourselves that the urging towards radical receptivity takes flesh very differently when addressed to ‘the strong’, to those who find themselves in ‘centres of power’ (my argument throughout this thesis), than when imposed on ‘the weak’, or those who find themselves ‘at the edges’ (where it risks simply reinforcing already-abusive dynamics). I am grateful to Sally Nash for prompting me on this point.
177 Coles 2005a: 110-1. See also 2005a:115: ‘There would be no church worth its name without both teleological (directional) and ateleological (concerning the unanticipatable) virtues and practices’.
178 Here, Coles notes his argument with them both in ‘Storied Others’ (Coles 2005a:112 & 273 n.1; cf Coles 1992b).
‘the lordship of Christ’. So often heard – so often intended – as the legitimation of a sovereign imperialism, this proclamation, ‘Jesus is Lord’ is, for Yoder (as Coles reads him), ‘the solicitation to a “perennially unfinished process of critiquing the developed tradition from the perspective of its own roots”’ – an ongoing ‘radical’ reformation. The ‘wisdom of the cross’ (Jesus is the crucified Lord) that teaches “semper reformanda” calls communities to open to the future by way of a never completed movement of dispossession. The church does not possess the origin – Jesus Christ... Rather, the normativeness of Jesus works primarily to “deny absolute authority to any later epoch, especially to the present.”

Central to Yoder’s account here is the relationship ‘between “reaching back” to Scripture and practices of vulnerable welcoming.’ In the ‘reaching back’ into Scripture to seek the authority of Christ, Christians find not an unambiguous, monological word, but rather a record of communal, dialogical discernment: Scripture describes the processes and practices, as well as the fruit, of “the early communities’ defining and interpreting [Jesus’] words in the ongoing process of defining the meaning of obedience” in their time.’ Church is a dialogical community ‘all the way down’, then: its epistemology is to be one ‘of disciplined vulnerability and cultivated “expectation of newness,” a process of dialogue shaped by and enabled precisely “through [the practice of] the content of [Jesus’] message: the love of the enemy, the dignity of the lowly, repentance, servanthood, the renunciation of coercion.”’ Coles finds in Yoder, then, a ‘hermeneutics of peoplehood’, which understands church meetings as “an open process,” “where the working of the spirit in the congregation is validated by the liberty with which the various gifts [of all the different members of the church] are exercised, especially by the due process with which every prophetic voice is heard and every witness evaluated.” The community moves and changes through time in ‘dialogic practices of giving and receiving,’ ‘binding and loosening,’ ‘disciplin[ing] and releas[ing] ... the expectation and ushering forth of “Spirit-given newness” in ways that illuminate previously unperceived problems and possible responses.’ Every member of the body ‘has a distinctive place in this process,’ and should be offered ‘the utmost receptive and critical powers,’ as the church seeks ‘to cultivate both the expectation of unanticipatable and often initially inchoate newness and the discerning capacities to renew the orientation, direction, and order of the Gospel tradition that faces and works with it.’

In contrast to Milbank (as Coles reads him) and Ward (as I have read him in this thesis), however, Yoder does not, in Coles’ judgment, succumb to the charge of privileging ‘exemplary relations ... within the church’ at the expense of ‘a radical deafness to nonbelievers and a confinement of prophesy’ to within the ecclesial body, ‘so that the dialogical conditions of agape within give way to monological practices toward others outside’. From Yoder’s perspective, Coles argues, ‘Jesus and the early communities gathered around his memory teach us that to be possible at all, practices of caritas must be inflected toward vulnerable engagements with those emerging in margins within the church body and with those beyond it.’ The ‘body practices’ of the Christian community are, through a Yoderian lens, fundamentally inflected with an openness to ‘the other’. So ‘Eucharist ... [becomes] “a paradigm for every other mode of inviting the outsider and the underdog to the table”; nonviolence’ includes ‘striving to extend the processes of reconciliatory dialogue beyond the church

179 Coles 2005a:111-2
180 Coles 2005a:115
181 Coles 2005a:116-9 (my emphasis)
even in the most agonistic relations, where “the commitment [is] to hear not only the neighbour but even the adversary”; and '[e]fforts to discern charisma (gift) must reach beyond the church body to scrutinize incarnations of God’s “providence” in manifestations of foreignness.'

Furthermore, argues Coles, Yoder is not suggesting (as in Hauerwas’ & Wells’ liturgical ethics) ‘that the ethical nature of the relationship of Christians towards outsiders is known by the body of believers entirely prior to the encounter with the others.’ Rather, ‘the looping back of discerning ethical practice [in Scripture] cannot itself happen in the absence of a vulnerable and expectant looping through engagements with those of other dispositions, faiths, and reasons.’ It is not simply that ‘new questions and challenges arise from outside the church body,’ often in the form of ‘new developments and events ... that might solicit ... hitherto unrecognized dimensions and implications of Scripture’; it is often ‘precisely through receptive engagements with outsiders who contest hegemonic practices (in the church, in the wider world, or in the relations between the two) that the church is enabled to “loop back” in ways that enable new light to break forth.’ Yoder cites as examples ‘the loner Tolstoy’ and ‘the outsider[s]’ Gandhi and Marx, and argues at length that even ‘modern pluralism’ itself might be ‘a providential occasion’ to ‘enable us to see something about the Gospel that was not visible before.’ Yoder’s word for this, Coles notes, is ‘grace’: ‘because what ought to be given has already arrived, “at once original and true-type, at once unpredictable and recognizable.”’

Making explicit the difference between Yoder’s ecclesiology here and Ward’s then – and using Coles’ reading of MacIntyre’s ‘vulnerability’ as a helpful lens – we might say that while Ward seeks to allow for ‘the possibility’ of ‘disruptive grace’ coming from the church’s ‘others’, Yoder makes such ‘disruptive grace’ not just a ‘likelihood’ but a necessity for the church, and re-describes its ‘core’ practices precisely in terms of (Bakhtinian) ‘boundary engagements’. Yoder is not without his ambivalence for Coles, however, and this lies primarily in the tension in the former’s work between on the one hand the centrality of ‘patience’ – as ‘the gift of time ... for vulnerable witnessing and discerning and participating in the unanticipatable breaking forth; patience as suspension of the socially and existentially engendered pressures upon time to summarize judgment and engage others in summary fashion’ – and on the other hand a ‘not infrequent’ tendency towards the language of finality – Coles highlights Yoder’s references to Christ’s ‘ultimate victory’ and ‘hidden control’ – which, Coles fears, risks ‘engender[ing] an overwhelming hubris in believers, a hubris that could radically vitiate the very receptivity he otherwise cultivates.’ The kind of ‘confidence’ which concerns Coles in MacIntyre’s account (and which concerns me in Ward’s) seems to rear its head again here in Yoder’s. Coles recognizes, however, that these tropes are meant ‘to powerfully inspire and orient the church to resist “the principalities and powers” ... that would subjugate creation to idolatries of “power, mammon, fame, efficacy.” They call believers to resist as mythical these closures of history and to begin (again and again) to practice an alternative body politics, confident that the future belongs to caritas.’ In a reading of Jeremiah, Yoder distinguishes between, on the one hand, a clear, insistent ‘nonnegotiability’ towards “the powers”, which the ‘church must maintain ...
and invite others [in]to'; and on the other hand, a radical ‘indeterminacy’, a radical patience, ‘in relation to “other subject peoples,”’ to ““other victims of imperial displacement.”’

Yoder’s distinction here is akin to Ward’s ‘tactical’ and differential positioning of the ‘concrete’ church in relation to its ‘eschatological significance’, at least partly depending on the particular contexts, and particular kind of ‘others’, with which he is engaging. But just as we saw in Ward’s work a christologically-inflected ‘opening’ towards receptivity, which Ward himself then seeks prematurely to close again, so Coles finds a similar dynamic at work in Yoder. The latter locates Jesus’ ‘style of discipleship’ in ‘an ethic of excess’: ‘What do ye more than others?’, Jesus would ask his followers; ‘[h]ow in this situation will the life-giving power of the Spirit reach beyond available models and options to do a new thing whose every newness will be a witness to divine presence?’

What the early church did not grasp sufficiently, Yoder tentatively suggests, is that Jesus himself is less ‘a static “model”’ and more ‘the pregnant incarnation of Good News, which has to be received and given as pregnant to remain or become good. Jesus, as the questioning solicitation of this ethic of excess, knew that to be received, he had to be received excessively.’ Precisely in Yoder’s ‘jealous’ guarding of a ‘pre-Constantinian’ christology, however, Coles discerns the possibility of ‘a certain gravitational pull against the future – against newness as such – in a manner that infuses the church’s caritas toward time and the other with a certain stinginess’ which might ‘weaken’ Yoder’s otherwise profound work of attending to the edges of the Christian body, and his ‘love for the untamed entangled growings of heralding, listening, waiting’ which Coles calls a ‘wild patience’.

Again, Coles calls us back to the central task of cultivating a ‘tragic sensibility’ in dialogue with our ‘others’. ‘Every extant movement of generosity has limits,’ he reminds us, ‘and these limits both enable and disable the power of giving and receiving. Every movement of the gift must attend to these limits, working them ceaselessly and patiently in ways that address and move beyond the stinginess that remains and often emerges anew in every extant form. The call of receptive generosity is to work at these limits receptively with others – to become more capable of this working-with, especially (but not only) with those others who have been on the underside of power, especially those who claim to have been violated by powers in which we are implicated.’ For Yoderian Christians, Coles suggests, this might include ‘engender[ing] different, possibly more perceptive, capacities for discerning strengths and weaknesses of … other modes of faith and being, as well as other loci of critical and constructive practice,’ among them ‘some forms of polytheism, atheism, and postsecular modes of enchantment,’ as well as ‘a lot of critical work being done by liberation theologians, critical race theorists, feminists, students of postcoloniality, and ecologists,’ among others. Among the virtues that Christians might witness in these ‘others’, ‘precisely at the points where Christians discover certain vices within themselves that seem hard to separate from the cross they bear,’ might be those ‘tendencies to allow and even seek more-receptive and more-generous blurrings of the insistent inside/outside framework’ that so often governs Christian reflection. ‘Perhaps discerning these relative strengths,’ suggests Coles, ‘would call [Christians] more often to elaborate, as a community, indebted affirmations – which is not to say embraces – of other communities’ stories and sources; practices of recounting with a certain awe the stories and deeds

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188 (see section 3.6, above)

189 Coles 2005a:133-6
of other communities in order to cultivate a more capacious joy in otherness and readiness to listen. Perhaps,’ Coles finishes, tentatively.  

5.5.ii Rowan Williams: ‘Christ on Trial’ and the ‘penumbral’ edges of the ecclesial body

In the work of Rowan Williams, Coles finds rich resources for deepening and extending the trajectory on which Yoder has started him, and for addressing some of the concerns he has with Yoder’s work. In Williams’ Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles our Judgment, in particular, Coles finds:

one of the most profound, probing, and undeniably unsettling accounts of what it might mean to cultivate traditions of association that repeatedly strive toward a vulnerable and generous edge, eschewing interior territory as a locus of transcendent monological control over time and space. Williams renders each of the Gospels in a way that brings to life how Christ’s trial, or experimentum crucis, undoes or erodes our confidence in, sense of, and most especially our yearning for an inside (of self, of church, of tradition, of group) that would transcend edge-dwelling; an inside where things are assured, unquestionable, pure, where the distinctions between one’s “own” and the others are unequivocal, where there is assurance of being right, true, good – in contrast to them.

Coles finds in Williams, then, a theologian of ‘edges’ par excellence – and if Coles is beginning to emerge as a ‘theologian’ himself, of however uncommon an ‘edge-dwelling’ kind, then Williams seems to be crucial to Coles’ theological development. It is in his engagement with the work of Williams that Coles is most lucidly able to bring together his Bakhtinian metaphor of the ‘ecotone’, his appreciation of Merleau-Ponty’s rendering of ‘intercorporeality’, and the explicitly ecclesiological and christological reflections he began in conversation with Yoder. It is Williams – like Bakhtin, deeply indebted to Russian Orthodox Christianity – who enables Coles ‘to deepen ... significantly’ the metaphor of the ‘ecotone’, ‘such that it might evoke not simply an edge between different ecological or social communities or topographies, but the very transformation of our understanding of topography as such’. It is also through his engagement with Williams that Coles is able to push further Yoder’s insight that the ‘body practices’ of the church are inherently receptive to ‘others’, that the church’s ‘interior volume’ – if that is at all meaningful – is not simply a place of prior ‘preparation’ for engaging the world at the church’s borders (as in Hauerwas & Wells’ volume of ‘liturgical ethics’), but ‘is itself partly constituted by the borders themselves.’ Most significantly for this thesis, it is in the contrasts between Coles’ reading (of Williams’ reading) of Christ’s trial, and Ward’s reading of the same events, that we see most clearly emerging the possibility of an ecclesial political theology, radically receptive in ways that go beyond the limits we identified in Ward’s work. In what follows, therefore, I will read Ward and Coles together to bring these contrasts into sharp focus.

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190 Coles 2005a:135-7
191 Coles 2008b:177
192 Coles acknowledges Bakhtin’s debt to ‘an idiosyncratic quilting of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Marxism ... as well as Russian literature, Buber, Kierkegaard, and others’ (Coles 2008b:176).
193 Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:14 (original emphasis)
194 Coles 2008c:212 (see above)
Ward’s Johannine trial: a contestation of authority

Central to Ward’s project, we noted in Chapter 3, is an understanding of the ‘political discipleship’ of the church, expressed through ‘service’, or ‘leitourgia’.195 Discipleship is ‘political in two related senses’, Ward explains: first, ‘it is implicated in a field of relations’; and second, ‘it is explicitly engaged in ushering in a kingdom’. Acknowledging his debts to both Oliver O’Donovan and Carl Schmitt,196 Ward argues that ‘Christian discipleship is political because it demands to know in what relation to Christ stands any sovereignty’.197 Nowhere is this clearer for Ward than in Jesus’s confrontation with Pilate, as narrated in John’s gospel:198 ‘[t]wo kingdoms confront each other like the forces arraigned on either side of a chessboard’, and ‘[w]hat is astonishing about this scene is that they speak to each other as equals’. The ‘heart of the matter’, for Ward, lies this exchange between the two of them:199

“My kingdom [basileia] is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king [basileus]?” Jesus answered, “You say I am a king. For [eis] this I was born, and for [eis] this I came into [eis] the world, to testify to the truth.” (18:36-37)

Ward makes a number of observations on the basis of this passage. First, that there are ‘two types of kingdom and two types of king – those of this world and those “not from [ek] this world”’. Jesus’ kingdom ‘can be located only negatively with respect to the “world”, it ‘operate[s] in the world but draw[s] its citizens out of the world’, and ‘is more like Augustine’s conception of the civitas Dei’, which can neither be circumscribed nor controlled by the church: ‘God will act where God wishes to act. The work of Christ is not restricted to the church and in all likelihood is not always done in and through that church’.200 Second, ‘Jesus will speak about a kingdom (basileia) but appears reluctant to designate himself king (basileus)’: ‘sovereignty is exercised’ in this kingdom, ‘but in a way that does not map easily on to terms for such a sovereign (“king”) in this world or to terms related to governance as we know it (“nation”, “state”).’ Indeed, Ward notes, throughout John’s Farewell Discourses, ‘exemplified most clearly in his act of washing the disciples’ feet, sovereignty (and teaching) in the kingdom is a sovereignty (and pedagogy) of service (13:12-17).’201 Third, as the narrative expands to include reference to the term “Son of God” (used by the emperor, allegedly claimed by Jesus, 19:8) and to the power of Caesar (on loan to Pilate “from above”, 19:11), a loyalty repeated by the crowd (“We have no king but the emperor”, 19:15), Ward observes ‘shifts in power’, with Jesus ‘deliberate[ly] drawing out ... the political powers of the world’: ‘[w]hat begins as a story of micropolitics ends on the macropolitical stage’, ‘[m]aking manifest the powers that operate in this

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195 (see section 3.4, above)
197 Ward 2009:284
198 John, for Ward, ‘provides the most elaborate account of the kingdom ... through the story of Jesus’ confrontation with Pilate regarding the nature of sovereignty’. Ward dismisses Luke’s version, particularly, because, ‘despite [his] political theme, his Gospel has no discussion about kingship’ (Ward 2009:286 n.27).
199 Ward 2009:287
200 Ward 2009:287-9
201 Ward 2009:289
world and their limitations allows judgment to be passed upon them, a judgment that history enacts.\textsuperscript{202} Ward’s reflections on sovereignty are not over, however. Noting that of the two common Greek words for power, \textit{dunamis} (‘ability, capacity, strength, might’) is used in the synoptic gospels for what are often called ‘miracles’, but only \textit{exousia} (‘authority, government, right’) is used in John (who ‘castigates faith that relies on miraculous power’), Ward wonders if, as ‘the same word ... is used by both Pilate and Christ’, perhaps, ‘eschatologically, there is only one authority, one power, and that the rule and power of this authority orchestrate all things providentially’.\textsuperscript{203}

\textit{Williams’ Markan trial: kenosis of territoriality, kenosis of language}

Where Ward chooses to focus on John’s trial scene (a recurring preference in Ward’s work, as we have already noted\textsuperscript{204}), Coles chooses Mark, whose Jesus ‘has nothing to say to Pilate (in stark contrast to the Jesus of John’s Gospel, with his oracular challenges to the governor)’.\textsuperscript{205} His choice might well follow the priority Williams himself gives Mark’s account (which, Coles observes, ‘begins and frames [Williams’] discussion’), but also has much to do with Coles’ own quest ‘toward a vulnerable and generous edge’. While for Ward the language of ‘kingdom’ and ‘sovereignty’ is central, it is the ‘anti-territorial’ insistence in Williams’ Markan reading that Coles is drawn to, picking up on Williams’ suggestion that ‘Jesus did not come here to be “a competitor for space in this world”. He does seek a kingdom, \textit{but not one that would be recognizable in terms of human territoriality, or even human territory}. Rather, in his life “the human map is being redrawn, the world turned upside down”’.\textsuperscript{206} The contrast between Ward and Coles here is perhaps less absolute than one of emphasis: while Ward stresses here (like Williams) that the \textit{kingdom} ‘can be located only negatively with respect to the “world”’, we have nevertheless seen in the former’s work a consistent affirmation of the expansive, ‘boundary-transcending’ ‘space’ of the \textit{church}, even if that ‘space’ is understood as being ‘excessive’ to any particular ‘place’, and those ‘boundaries’ are rendered complex. For Coles, however, there is a deliberate \textit{renunciation} (we might say \textit{kenosis}\textsuperscript{207}) going on in the Markan trial scene: we see in Jesus ‘the sheer absence of territorial power’; the ‘untruth’ that he renounces is the ‘striving for mastery over space – territorial hegemony in which fortresses are established to defend the illusion of “internal territories” where we would dwell secure, remote from and unaccountable to others at the vulnerable edges that surround us and [as Bakhtin put it] “pass everywhere, through [our] every aspect.”’ Turning self-critically to his own radical democratic traditions, Coles warns that ‘even our best-intentioned proclamations that “another world is possible”’ are too often twisted ‘in ways that reinscribe the morass we are trying to transform. ... It

\textsuperscript{202} Ward 2009:289-291
\textsuperscript{203} Ward 2009:292-3. Despite references to Yoder and Hauerwas in these pages, Ward seems here to have most in common with O’Donovan, who (as we noted in Chapter 2) stridently rejects what he calls a ‘political Jesuology’ derived ‘narrowly from Jesus’ life and teachings’ (‘let us model ourselves on Jesus, ignoring Caiaphas and Pilate’) in favour of a political theology centred on notions of ‘rule’ and ‘authority’.
\textsuperscript{204} (see section 4.4, above)
\textsuperscript{205} Williams 2000b:8
\textsuperscript{206} Hauerwas & Coles 2008a:14 (cf Williams 2000b:6, 52, my emphasis).
\textsuperscript{207} As Sarah Coakley argues in some depth, \textit{kenosis} is a term that has been evoked in ‘complex and confusing’ ways which ‘fail to mesh or concur at crucial points’ (and even use the term in straightforwardly contradictory ways)’ (Coakley 1996:83). My use of kenosis here in connection with \textit{renouncing} the powers of territoriality and language is in contrast to Ward’s use of the term as an emptying out (of some prior fullness) \textit{towards} an ‘other’.
is not merely that with such language we build fortresses to master and defend space; it is that we constitute the illusory spatiality of “world” as fortressed space.\(^{208}\)

Coles identifies a second, but just as fundamental, renunciation in Williams’ work, then: that of the spoken word itself. Silence is a key theme in Mark’s gospel, Coles notes, primarily because of Jesus’ own reticence to be talked about: ‘[w]hat will be said of him is bound to be untrue,’ observes Williams; how, in the world Mark depicts as ‘full of demons and suffering and abused power’, ‘could there be a language in which it could truly be said who Jesus is? Whatever is said will take on the colouring of the world’s insanity; it will be another bid for the world’s power, another identification with the unaccountable tyrannies that decide how things shall be. Jesus, described in the words of this world, would be a competitor for space in it, part of its untruth’.\(^{209}\) With Williams’ help, then, Coles draws a contrast between our ‘tenacious’ tendencies ‘to assimilate God’s “transcendence” to some notion of “what we mean by greatness”’ – some notion of omnipotence governing, or even saturating, history and topography from a throne on high that would be the condition of this history and space,\(^ {210}\) and an understanding of ““God’s ‘I am’” which can only be heard for what it really is when it has no trace of human power left to it,’ that is, heard particularly in the context of Mark’s trial scene, “when it is spoken by a captive under sentence of death.”\(^ {211}\) Jesus before the High Priest, as Williams puts it, ‘is definitively outside the system of the world’s power and the language of power’; and it is ‘at this moment and this moment only’ that he can ‘break his silence’, when there is finally ‘little or no danger that we shall now mistake what he means, that we shall confidently describe him in words that reflect our own aspirations.’\(^ {212}\) This ‘pregnant reticence’ (which Coles discerns not just in Mark’s Jesus but also in Williams’ own work) resists, Coles suggests, the kind of ‘finality’ that he sees creeping into Yoder’s work ‘with words like “Lordship,” “Victory,” “Kingdom,” “only,” and so forth’\(^ {213}\) – and is thus also resistant to Ward’s suggestion that ‘eschatologically, there is only one authority, one power, and that the rule and power of this authority orchestrate all things providentially’. Where Ward traces the (Johannine) trial narrative from the detail of ‘micropolitics’ to a final, ‘macropolitical stage’ (and concentrates on Johannine ‘exousia’ rather than synoptic ‘dunamis’ – in stark contrast with his earlier reading of a Markan, ‘schizoid Christ’), Coles redirects our attention to the micropolitical importance of what Williams calls ‘mak[ing] an art of ordinary living’,\(^ {214}\) and to Williams’ suggestion that, with the earliest recipients of Mark’s gospel, we are invited to look for ‘the coming of the Human One in glory’ as somehow ‘made visible’ both ‘in Jesus crucified and in the struggling and failing community of the church: in “lives and narratives ... that show something of the “obstinate uselessness” of witness to God’s truth.”’\(^ {215}\) To Ward’s recurring insistence on the need ‘confidently’ to speak, then, Coles

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208 Coles 2008c:179
210 Cf the colonising implications of Carl Schmitt’s linking of ‘nomos’ and ‘territory’ (section 2.5.ii, above), and the problems with Ward’s fascination with the ‘oikonomia’ (i.e. the ‘nomos’ of the ‘oikos’) identified in section 4.4.i, above.
211 Coles 2008b:179
212 Williams 2000b:6-7, 8
213 Coles 2008b:178
215 Williams 2000b:19. Noting Jesus’ utter silence in Mark’s narrative, between his response to the High Priest at his trial, and his cry of god-forsakenness at his crucifixion (15:34), Williams refuses to interpret the former ‘as if it were saying, “Soon you’ll see that I was right, soon the tables will be turned.”’ Somehow, he says, ‘the coming of the Human One in judgement is inseparable from the historical moment of Jesus’ death’, such that
counterpoises an attention to silence, reticence, and a necessarily humble inarticulacy, suggesting (with Williams), the need for all our efforts at speaking to undergo an ‘unending flow back and forth between speech and silence’. 216

Such silence is necessary, moreover, not just to qualify and clarify our speaking, Coles argues, but also to create spaces for radical receptivity, to develop ‘arts of expressive silence in which other possibilities – which are always and everywhere under way in our places and words – might be acknowledged, nurtured, given expression.’ 217 ‘In the image of the victim without worldly power’, Coles suggests (again following Williams), ‘we can see most clearly the shape and possibilities of “creative action”’, an alternative ‘quality of power characterized by “a willingness to receive from those we have imagined have nothing to give”’. 218 From Williams’ analysis of Luke’s trial narrative Coles glean a ‘pivotal insight’ into what we might call ‘unwonted’ solidarities: “God is in the connections we cannot make,” says Williams, connections “between improbable things and persons”. 219 That is to say, God is encountered in the claim on me, beyond the limits of my current understanding and even ability to act, of ‘[t]he person who is “left over”, whose place I cannot guarantee, whose welfare I cannot secure, who does not fit’. When Jesus responds to the Sanhedrin’s questioning with, “If I tell you ... you will not believe me, and if I question you, you will not answer.” (Luke 22:67), he ‘places himself with those whose language cannot be heard.’ 220 Such ‘strangers’ need not be ‘terrifyingly alien’, Williams asserts, but ‘represent the fact that I have growing to do, not necessarily into anything like an identity with them, but at least into a world where there may be more of a sense of its being a world we share. Recognizing the other as other without the immediate impulse to make them the same involves recognizing the incompleteness of the world I think I can manage and moving into the world which I may not be able to manage so well, but which has more depth of reality. And that must be to move closer to God.’ 221 Here Ward’s Johannine ‘sovereignty (and pedagogy) of service’, exemplified in washing the feet of the ‘other’, meets Coles’ (and Williams’) pedagogy of receptivity, where such ‘others’ are first and foremost our teachers. There is an abundance of such ‘strange’ teachers, Coles reminds us, and in helping us recognize them ‘Wisdom “interrupts and reorganizes [our] landscape in ways that are not predictable”’. Beyond our ‘reified’ senses of order, we are invited to ‘participate in fragile yet rich order-as-becoming, through receptivity and generosity that is the very substance and movement of

‘[i]t may be that, in the light of Mark, we see and hear God most clearly in such moments of obstinate detachment from results and successes’ (Williams 2000b:9-10). Further on, Williams will describe this ‘obstinate’ witness as ‘the decision to do what is truthful, in spite of the absence of any “useful” outcome’ (2000:54). Coles emphasises Williams’ point here: “[a]t this moment [in Mark’s trial scene], God is not and cannot be what guarantees success or provides a convincing explanation of the strange behaviour of those who refuse the world’s ways ... there can be no simple assurance of final victory.” (Coles 2008b:179-80, quoting Williams 2000b:12-13, Coles’ emphasis). Although Ward too places the meaning and effect of ‘the Christian act’ within the horizon of ‘the eschatological remainder’ (Ward 2009:196-8), he does also argue, we have noted, that ‘[o]ne can only judge a practice by the kind of transformation it produces’ (Ward 2005a:172). Coles is much more explicit than Ward about the need to ‘relax consequentialist metrics and aspirations’ and ‘decrease the stifling pressures of action imperatives’ (Coles 2016:168-9).

217 Coles 2008b:179
219 Coles 2008b:183, quoting Williams 2000b:56, 41
220 Williams 2000b:54, 56
221 Williams 2000b:62
the triune God." Beyond Ward’s confident descriptions of a ‘Christian economy’, we might say, Williams’ God (through Coles’ non-Christian eyes) is forever awaiting our recognition at the ‘edges’, among the ‘outsiders’, alongside the ‘silent’ – inviting us to open ourselves to the gifts and challenges of the ‘other’.

*Williams’ ‘christocentric’ ecclesiology*

Through Williams’ reading of Christ’s trial (narrated largely through Mark’s gospel), Coles finds specifically ‘christocentric’ resources for re-shaping our imaginations, resisting our tendencies towards the self-assertions of ‘territoriality’, macropolitical power and speech, and opening us up to receive from the ‘unlikely’ and the ‘unheard’. Coles goes further, with and beyond Williams, however, to refigure ecclesiology in what Coles will call ‘christocentric’ terms. Coles’ first step is to reaffirm the possibility of tension as inherently creative, and to wonder if the (Milbankian) ‘will to imagine a final peace entirely beyond dissonance’ is not in fact a form of ‘territoriality’ in the present: ‘a projection by competitors for space in this world who yearn for freedom from tension’. In contrast, Coles reads Williams as suggesting the ‘possibility’, at least, ‘that a more thoroughly Godlike peace might involve generative conflict and tension’ – but conflict and tension forged in generous receptivity among differences whose difficult divergences are part of their ongoing and evolving yet never-resolving gift to one another and to the world.223 If this were true, Coles continues (developing further a trajectory which began with MacIntyre and then Yoder), then ‘[c]hurch would thus be the practice of becoming a people equipped for generous involvement not only by becoming vulnerable but moreover hospitable to conflict. It would be a more genuinely “public” space, in which differences would be neither obliterated nor avoided but rather engaged as a tensional and generative source for learning how to live better together.’ While Coles acknowledges the ‘supreme difficulty’ of discerning this distinction ‘between generous tension and competitive territorial tension’ (and ‘honing our judgment toward this edge’), it is important work for the church, he argues, and work that is potentially rather ‘more fruitful’ than the labour of attending to ‘the likely more reductive and dangerous distinction between dissonance and harmony’.224

In his discussion of Milbank, Coles has already shown himself wary of an affirmation of internal difference, when it goes hand in hand with tightened boundaries and a negation of all that is ‘outside’. He turns, therefore, to Williams’ figuring of this ‘external’ edge – and in so doing, offers a specifically ecclesial development of his own fecund metaphor of the ‘ecotone’. Rather than asserting the ‘territoriality’ of a church ‘cohere[s] ... through ... the immutability of law’, then, Coles

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222 Coles 2008b:184, quoting Williams 2000b:40-1
223 Coles 2008b:187-8 (my emphasis)
224 Coles 2008b:187-8. Coles here notes a parallel with Williams’ reflections elsewhere on the Trinity in relation to engaging with other religious traditions: the possibility of Christians ‘“work[ing] on the basis of a ‘christic’ vision for the human good, engaging with adherents of other traditions without anxiety, defensiveness of proselytism” (Williams 2000a:170)’ – an engagement involving ‘cooperation, analogical perception, mutual nurture, and other harmonious tropes’, but also ‘“mutual challenge” (174) and mutual “critical responsibility”. This critical responsibility often takes the form of penitent “negations” ... yet the critical eye toward “waste, cruelty or disorder” is mobile and challenges non-Christian others as well... Christians must, Williams maintains, “find God in the present tension between tradition and unforeseen possibilities ... this endlessly self-corrective movement” (179). All this leads to a radical suspension of eschatological imaging... “What it will finally be is not something theory will tell us, but something only discoverable in the expanding circles of encounter with what is not the Church” (180)’ (Coles 2008b:189 n.13).
finds in Williams “‘a way of saying “yes” to the world by refusing the world’s own skewed and destructive account of itself,’” and instead seeking ‘to participate in [recognizing and] engendering histories and places that cohere as gift through the ligatures of undulating receptive relationships.’ If ‘the world’ can be characterised as ‘private’ – in Augustine’s sense of ‘isolated existence’, haunted by fear of ‘the cost of decision and involvement’, and ‘shrink[ing] from tension’ – then the church might be understood as at least in the process of ‘becoming’ [some kind of] a polis, ‘a more genuinely “public” space,’ to the extent that it engages in “‘an endless responsiveness to new encounters with [Jesus] in a world of unredeemed relationships,”’ encounters through which Jesus “‘interrupts and reorganizes the landscape in ways that are not predictable.’” Beyond Williams’ image of a monastery gate (which has at some point been reversed so that the word ‘Private’ names what is on the monastery’s outside), Coles suggests we imagine ‘the “exterior” edges of the church’ as ‘further undulate[d]’ with ‘something like a turnstile that somewhat unpredictably spins people out and pulls people in, in ways that make possible cooperation, pluralized hopes, and unwonted relations’. “[T]he church is always renewed from the edges rather than from the centre,” proclaims Williams – the sense of which Coles deepens as the ‘call ... to realize that there is no “center” of tension-free church space but rather “border at the core,”’ in Bakhtin’s sense.

Coles then moves from the metaphor of the ‘turnstile’ to language much more richly embodied and theologically-inflected. Where Ward’s tracing of the ‘displacement’ of ‘the body of Christ’ ends up with a space – a ‘territory’, even – within which the church ‘expands’, Coles too traces a ‘displacement’, but one which both ‘repeatedly confounds our most fundamental senses of temporality’ and summons us to pay receptive attention to the ongoing ‘disordering’ at this body’s ‘edges’. As a ‘resurrected body’, Jesus ‘appears when least expected, first to the least; his body has disruptive holes in it into which he calls those who doubt; he gives himself to be eaten; he exits closed tombs and enters rooms with closed doors’. This flesh which ‘shows up unexpectedly, according to nonlinear times’ might be said to be incarnating Coles’ ‘wormhole hope’, just as Coles’ reminder to ‘those who struggle to remain with Jesus’ – that Jesus ‘is an exile and refugee from their communities and efforts, as well as from those communities from whom they themselves

226 Coles 2008b:181-2
228 Coles 2008b:190, 187. This sense of ‘becoming’ stretches out a helpful temporal (and ultimately eschatological) tension which, as we have seen, is often collapsed in the narratives of both public and ecclesial political theologies (cf sections 2.3.iii, 3.5, above).
230 Coles 2008b:190. With a Derridean ‘and yet’, Coles goes on to note that the ‘turnstiles’ – ‘these easy gates spinning people in and out’ – ‘can [also] be an excuse to avoid tension as easily as they can be places where tastes and powers for living tension generously might be cultivated.’ They can be places ‘where it is entirely too easy to exit whatever is damaging; too easy to exit whatever becomes difficult, and this ease includes even the difficult liturgical practices in which we might better learn to dwell in action or in stillness with difficulty’ (Coles 2008b:192). Similar issues, he acknowledges, ‘could be raised with respect to porosity, penumbra, and numerous other metaphors I have tossed into the mix’ (Coles 2008b:192 n.22).
232 Coles 2008b:180-1
233 Coles 2008b:191-2
have suffered\textsuperscript{234} – is a christologically-inflected reiteration of his call to a ‘hospitality to weightless seeds’.

Drawing deeply on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of ‘intercorporeality’,\textsuperscript{235} Coles invites us to imagine ‘[a] nourished body of Christ’ which, ‘like Christ, requires an extremely thick yet flexible, modulating, vulnerable, filamented, and porous (maybe even gelatinous?) membrane as the flesh that at once joins with and distinguishes it from the world. It is a reflectively practiced incarnation of flesh as pregnant depth’.\textsuperscript{236} In more pragmatic terms, Coles is drawn to Williams’ call ‘for church experimentation that aims to “develop what have been clumsily dubbed ‘para-liturgies’ – corporate symbolic actions which do not so deeply presuppose the kind of symbolic identification involved in the Eucharist, yet still open up some of the resources of Christian imagination to the uncommitted.”’ Although in Williams’ words here the directionality seems primarily ‘outward’ (‘to the uncommitted’), Coles suggests that through such ‘para-liturgies’ the church would not ‘dilute the life of the resurrection gospel’, but rather ‘show itself more deeply to be “the Church of Jesus”: that at these ‘more “penumbral” edges with outsiders ... the flesh of Jesus extends beyond the committed and is realized rather than corrupted in so doing’.\textsuperscript{237} Rather than being ‘rare episodic event[s]’, Coles argues, these ‘christocentric’ (rather than ‘christocentric’) practices of intercorporeal illumination between the church “proper” and nonbelievers might constitute a ‘penumbral flesh’ which ‘would be elemental and constitutive of the body of Christ’.\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{234} Coles 2008b:186
\textsuperscript{235} Coles engages in depth with Merleau-Ponty in Coles 1992a. In short, Coles draws from Merleau-Ponty the insights that ‘[o]ur perception of things ‘is neither our creation nor a quality of things in themselves, but rather what emerges through the intercourse between the flesh of my body and that of the world. This intercourse [Merleau-Ponty’s ‘intercorporeality’] brings forth aspects of being that were only latent possibilities beforehand’ (Coles 1992a:122-3). Our experience of ‘depth’ (the ‘sense of the richness and wildness of the world’), then, ‘emerges most profoundly not when two or more persons realize that they see the same world in the same way, but in the tension that arises as they recognize that they see the same world differently’ (Coles 1992a:133). This Coles contrasts with the ‘normalizing gaze’ which attempts to ‘flatten’ the world and the things in it ‘to my view of them insofar as I deny entirely the perspectival and carnal character of my vision. ... Rather than the “truth” that it claims to possess, ... this thinking actually inaugurates an “imperialism” because it flatly denies both “other” aspects of the thing and all perceptions others may have of the thing which are not its own’ (Coles 1992a:136-7). It is to deny ‘the possibility of a background [a world of ‘depth’] that might be surprising, disruptive, desirable’ (Coles 1992a:140).
\textsuperscript{237} Coles 2008b:190 (cf Williams 1982:68-9). Coles reads Williams as holding such ‘para-liturgies’ in tension with the acknowledgment that ‘there must be liturgies for believers that deepen the possibility of the church’s becoming a polis’.
\textsuperscript{238} Coles 2008b:191-2 (my emphasis). It might be better, Coles suggests, ‘to speak of the “Christocentric” more than the Christocentric’, the ‘Christological’ more than the Christological... Or so it would seem to one who knows little of such things...’ He is provocative here, but reticent to explain his suggestion. He gestures towards a Jesus encountered, embodied, at the ‘edges’: might he also have in mind the feminist theological search for a (female-gendered) ‘Christa’ figure (see e.g. Slee 2011)? In my own previous work, I have experimented with the term ‘Christ(-)logy’ for three reasons: (1) to create an intentional equivocation in the gendering of the term; (2) to draw attention to the christic ‘space between’ opened up both in gospel encounters (such as those I have explored in Chapter 4) and in the thinking of Irigaray and Ward, among others; and (3) to insert a deliberate ‘interruption’ in our saying of the term (see Barrett 2010). Feedback from readers of that exploration (among them friends steeped in feminist theology) suggested that ‘Christ(-)logical’ was both awkward and somewhat pretentious. I am still to find a way of expressing some of these qualifications of our inherited christological understandings that is without awkwardness. For this thesis, I
5.5.iii Charles Taylor, Sam Wells, and a radically ‘insufficient’, ‘thirsting’ church

In practices of ‘intercorporeal illumination’, Coles suggests in his engagements with Williams, there might ‘actually [be] a supplemental enhancement of the light breaking forth from the church of Jesus’. Repeatedly elsewhere, however, he emphasises more strongly the church’s need of its non-ecclesial ‘others’. The relative strengths of emphasis here are significant, just as Coles has previously sought to shift MacIntyre’s affirmation (which we have seen echoed by Ward) of the mere ‘possibility’, towards ‘the likelihood’, ‘that we will learn crucial things from ... others who see the world so differently’. We have already noted, with Ronald Kuipers, parallels between Graham Ward’s theological project and that of Charles Taylor, particularly in the latter’s description of ‘a network of ever different relations of agape’ which Ward identifies with the ‘expansive’, ‘erotic’, ecclesial community. Coles (here writing with Hauerwas) takes Taylor to task precisely on this movement. Taylor, reading Jesus’ parable of ‘the Good Samaritan’ along a trajectory suggested by Ivan Illich (of the “incarnation extending outward” toward [and through] the Good Samaritan’), identifies the parable’s ‘vital core’ as ‘the movement, the response called for by the other, that moves the self in “friendship/love/charity” beyond the bounds of the “we” that had defined and circumscribed the right, the good, the holy.’ This ‘moving healing’, Hauerwas and Coles acknowledge, resists ‘protective demonizing stances’ and ‘animates a creative and charitable relation to plurality’ (just as does Ward’s ‘erotic ecclesiology’, at its best). In Taylor’s words, it “creates links across boundaries, on the basis of a mutual fittingness which is not based on kinship but on the kind of love which God has for us, which we call agape”. But for Coles and Hauerwas, ‘[w]hen the legal scholar asks Jesus “and who is my neighbour?” Jesus isn’t just responding: “the outsider, too.” Rather he teaches [precisely in his telling of the parable to the scholar] that Jews and Christians might well often learn the very meaning of the word and practice of neighbourliness from the outsider. ... Thus, the movement of love is not just a giving but a receiving in which love discovers what it is “to become” from the other – it always becomes at the vulnerable border’.

Coles and Hauerwas offer a metaphor for this kind of receptivity, discerned in the cry of the crucified Jesus: “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). ‘Thirst’, they argue, is ‘not simply private’ but ‘a constitutive expression’ of ‘our most radical liturg[i]es’: constitutive, that is, ‘of our capacity to engage in the liturgical work through which we might learn to receive and give friendship and love’. In contrast to the ‘pleromatic’ emphasis of Ward’s eucharistic ecclesiology, with its tendencies towards an over-realised eschatology, Coles and Hauerwas describe thirst as ‘seek[ing] communion in the radically specific situations of our lives that exceed even our most penetrating [sic] anticipations’. Beyond the polarising of ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ which both Taylor and Radical Orthodox theologians seem often to fall prey to, Coles and Hauerwas seek to attend precisely to those ‘relations where “immanence” and “transcendence” become intertwined and confused’ – to ‘the daily practices and rituals that are the lifeblood of incarnating caritas and agape’, ‘the dense and difficult practices of learning to tend to the radical complexities of the ordinary’ and which ‘open in vulnerable ways to...'

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239 Coles 2008b:192 (my emphasis)
240 (see section 5.3.ii, above)
241 (see sections 3.4.iv & 4.4.v, above)
243 Hauerwas & Coles 2010:357-8 (my emphasis)
the unwonted lessons we need to learn in order to love our neighbours’ – and suggest ‘that the Holy is so incarnate, so immanent, that it is only in becoming – only as incarnating, thirsting. This is God’s love.’

Coles and Hauerwas do not consider them here, but the words of ‘the king’ in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25 – ‘I was hungry… I was thirsty…’ – also point to a movement of divine desire issuing from thirst, rather than fullness, in contrast to the emphasis of both Taylor and Ward – even a ‘sovereignty (and pedagogy) of thirst’, we might say, a ‘flow’ running directly counter to the latter’s emphasis on (‘kenotic’) ‘service’.

Similarly, in contrast to Sam Wells’ assertion that God gives the church (primarily through the church’s worship) ‘all it needs to continue to be [Christ’s] body in the world’, and insistence on the church’s ‘improvisational’ vocation always to ‘overaccept’, rather than ‘block’ the actions of others – that is, to ‘accept without losing the initiative’ by choosing actively to ‘receive’ all ‘offers’ ‘in the light of a larger story’ – Coles suggests that ‘we need’, in fact, ‘to cultivate a more radical notion of insufficiency’. Rather than the ‘hasty temporal aura … of witty dramatic improvisation’, ‘the theatrical/dramatic imperative to “keep the story going”’, Coles calls us to the radically receptive ethical ‘effort’ required ‘to step away from initiative, let others take it from us, let them radically call us into question, let them call us to pause indefinitely’. Beyond Wells’ dominant ‘block v. overaccept’ motif, Coles points towards ‘a host of other crucial capacities and ethical strategies’ which involve ‘arts of pregnant waiting’ and ‘radical patience’, ‘slacken[jing] the insistence to outnarrate’, ‘[n]ot knowing what to say and knowing one does not know – perhaps for a very long period of time – and dramatizing the fact that one is confronted with something for which one knows that one does not yet have the words’. ‘We allow ourselves,’ suggests Coles, ‘to sense that we don’t know where this is going, that ethical action calls for uncertain discernment’ – inhabiting and seeking Derrida’s ‘community of the question’.

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244 Hauerwas & Coles 2010:356-7
245 (see section 3.4.iv, above)
246 Wells 2004:54; 2006 (see section 2.5.iv, above). Coles allows ‘blocking’ in particular much more positive potential than Wells, who reads it one-dimensionally, along with a wider politics of ‘declared refusal’, as ‘violence’, ‘a symbolic declaration of war’ (2004:108, 111-12). [F]or the church to block,’ Wells argues, ‘is not desirable, necessary, or possible’ (112). Wells’ insistence here elides symbolic acts of ‘blocking’ with ‘violence’ (in a way similar to Milbank; cf Coles’ reading of Derrida et al, above). His argument is also entangled in a reading of the third slave in the ‘parable of the talents’ (Mt. 25:14-30) as showing ‘a lack of faith’ (105, 112). He seems unaware of readings of that parable (e.g. Herzog 1994:150ff.) in which the third slave emerges as ‘hero’, ‘whistle-blower’ against the oppressive aristocratic master. Coles’ rehabilitation of ‘blocking’ has much in common with Rachel Muers’ conception of ‘Quaker testimonies of [silence], denial or refusal’ as ‘not just the same as giving up on the world’, but ‘breaking away from patterns of thought or behaviour that prevent people from seeing, experiencing or responding to the truth’, and embodying ‘the trust that [a] “way will open”, that new possibilities for worship, speech or action will emerge’ (Muers 2015:79).
247 Wells 2004:131, 133 (my emphasis).
248 Coles 2008a:40-43 (cf section 5.3.iv, above). There is again a significant parallel here with Quaker practices here, highlighted this time by Ched Myers, who draws a contrast between ‘traditional dogmatic discourse’ and Quakers’ ‘interrogatory, practice-centered approach to theology’, grounded in ‘Testimonies, Advices and Queries’, and the last of these in particular. ‘Queries’, Myers explains, are ‘sharply focused question[s]’, intended ‘to facilitate an examination of the community’s conscience’; they are ‘questions to our life, not accusations, yet they are hard questions, not merely rhetorical ones’. Myers is alert to the dangers of this tradition: firstly, that it ‘like any other [tradition], can and has degenerated into a formalized discourse that inspires the memorialisation of discipleship rather than the reproduction of it’; and secondly, ‘the tendency of contemporary liberal Quakers to disconnect their discursive tradition from its biblical moorings’. A non-Quaker himself, he is nevertheless appreciative of the potential in this tradition of Queries: ‘First, it puts the concrete
5.5.iv Jean Vanier’s ‘footwashed politics’, a ‘receptive’ Jesus, and a mysterious ‘whirling’

While Ward’s ecclesiology explicitly retreats from attention to the materiality of Jesus, into the ‘postmateriality’ of the (eucharistic and ecclesial) ‘body of Christ’, Coles refuses to put distance between the two, and nowhere is this clearer than in the latter’s engagements with the work of Jean Vanier. Here Ward’s focus on a ‘sovereignty (and pedagogy) of service’, and the ‘concentric imaginary’ of liturgical ethics, are directly countered in Coles’ attention to ‘a mode of service’ which ‘can only become in departure from’ what Coles labels ‘the heroic’. In addition to the Christian ‘body practices’ Coles has already explored via Yoder, here Coles seeks to render ‘openness, receptivity, and vulnerability to non-Christian others not in abstract terms, but at the core of Christian liturgical practice itself.’

It is easy, Coles observes, to ‘too quickly subsume[e] a footwashed politics within the frame of a footwashing politics’; but we should slow down, and attend to the distinction. Jesus, Coles notes, ‘like Vanier ... who follow[s] him, does not pass quickly to the commanded act,’ but in fact ‘dwells upon and indeed commands this difficult undergoing’. In ‘undergoing having [their] feet washed,’ the disciples are, Vanier notes (in language which echoes both Merleau-Ponty’s and Derrida’s), ‘thrown radically “out of joint”’. Lest we mistake this as a ‘retreat from the engagement of praxis’ comparable with Ward’s, however, the ‘radical disruption of temporal flow’ Coles discerns here is precisely the opposite of Ward’s tendency to want to have his ‘theological and metaphysical ducks lined up in a row’. This ‘being foot-washed’, Coles insists, ‘will not be something you author or even co-author with Jesus, even in the minimal sense of understanding the act you must undergo... One goes under and endures the opacity of being foot-washed in the hope of a promised future understanding.’ This itself is a pedagogy: even if Jesus’ disciples (after this first ‘last supper’) somehow manage to escape the ‘hierarchical imaginary’ which deploys ‘ceremonial humility’ to legitimate ‘the self-claimed superiority of the “humble,”’ they still risk living lives ‘that evade generous receptivity toward others by clutching tightly to an intelligible order that first and foremost provides them security by conforming continuously to their expectations.’ ‘Perhaps at the deepest level,’ in the act of footwashing, Coles wonders, ‘Jesus wants to teach Peter [and us] that at the heart of his [and our] discipleship is learning the capacity to enter relationships that one can only understand later, after before the theoretical; like liberation theology, it seeks unity in orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Second, it puts the communal before the private. Indeed it depends upon the vitality of corporate discernment... Third, this discourse relies on the reflective rather than the declarative and is thus open to constant rearticulation’. With a christological focus close to that being developed here, he concludes: ‘[w]e who would be radical Christians should center our discourse above all around queries, because we all stand under the questioning – at once prophetic and pastoral – of Jesus the Interlocutor’ (Myers 1994:35-8).

Coles 2008c:212, 215

Coles observes a similar dynamic at work in Wells’ God’s Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics, where the section on footwashing is entitled with ‘the more active verbal structure’, ‘Washing Feet’ – and ‘avoids discussion of undergoing’ (Coles 2008c:217 n.26).

(see section 4.4.v, above)

Coles observes how each of the ‘very familiar and absolutely important motifs’ that can be drawn from the gospel narrative here – ‘the Lord as servant assuming the position of the least; service beyond being served as the highest end; humility; radical hospitality; cleansing; discipleship; forgiveness; reconciliation’ – ‘which are so “upside down” in relation to the dominant values of most political orders,’ nevertheless ‘has a strange and persistent tendency to turn itself “right side up” ... to reconform to the patterns of the “principalities and powers,” especially when rendered in ways that accent the intentional and active dimensions’ (Coles 2008c:220).
one has leaned into them with vulnerable receptivity – patiently and perhaps only after a long time. ... Perhaps this enduring is the very becoming of agape, caritas?"\textsuperscript{253}

If Coles’ attention to Jesus’ ‘footwashed politics’ enjoins followers of Jesus to an ‘outward-looking’ receptivity still nevertheless learned at the church’s table (the place where ‘being foot-washed’ is practised liturgically), his second engagement with Vanier returns him to the radical democratic practices of ‘world-travelling’ and ‘tabling beyond the familiar, now translated theologically. While Coles finds an ‘obvious Christian analogue’ in Williams’ depiction of a “shared table” where people gather as material extensions of Jesus’s “embodied grace” – ‘a radically inclusive table where “relinquishing what is ours is crucial in the Eucharistic process”’; where “men and women turn to their victims and receive back their lost hearts”\textsuperscript{254} – he wonders if Williams’ image ‘must be juxtaposed with and supplemented by an image and practice of another sort of tabling’, which might help ‘keep whirling the world upside down’. This image and practice Coles finds, with Vanier’s help, in Luke 22:25-27: ‘Jesus here seems to be cultivating a disposition to seek the greatest – the ones to whom we ought most strenuously bend our ears and most enduringly offer our vulnerable yet seeking feet and gentle hands – among those who are not at the table.’\textsuperscript{255} While one form that such ‘solidarity [with ‘the least of these’] can and must take is inviting them to the table’, another form, equally crucial, is concerned less with ‘whom to invite’ and more with ‘where one ought to sit’. Coles reads Jesus in Luke 14:7-11 ‘to be speaking not only about where one ought to seek to sit at the table, but also about what tables one ought most to seek in the first place. He is saying, become one whom those who are the lowest in – or most excluded from – the hierarchies of power that emerge at any table would invite to the place where they eat and discern. Then, when invited, take the lowest place at these places, and sit there.’\textsuperscript{256}

Coles identifies here something ‘Jesus is saying ... about the “Eucharistic process” that is profound and often overlooked’ – something which adds christological specificity to Williams’ advocacy for ‘para-liturgies’ already discussed:

For if Jesus is remote from the seats at the table and “among us as one who serves” (and how could he possibly put this more graphically than by leaving the table, insisting on this radically displaced and stooped location, removing his outer garments, and washing the feet of those at the table?), then to join Jesus, and I mean literally – to become an extension of his “embodied grace” in “circumstances remote in time and space” – must mean somehow to partake in communion with others at “tables” and “places” that are at a distance from those of greater stature, at greater distance from those where one feels belonging, security and (at least in these senses) power. And since Jesus is a stranger, this must mean sitting receptively and generously at the tables of those of other traditions when invited, as well as calling them to join the body of Christ. And seeking to become worthy of being thus invited.\textsuperscript{257}

\textsuperscript{253} Coles 2008c:218-20
\textsuperscript{254} Coles 2008c:225 (cf Williams 1982:111)
\textsuperscript{255} Coles 2008c:226
\textsuperscript{256} Coles 2008c:226
\textsuperscript{257} Coles 2008c:227
Here Coles’ christology – owing much to both Williams and Vanier – departs furthest from Ward’s. Rather than ‘performing Christ’, the church must recognise Jesus as ‘stranger’ – and not one simply to ‘welcome’ to our table (in ‘heroic service mode’), but one who invites us to tables at which we are not ‘at home’. At the same time, Coles invites us to a certain kind of identification with, or imitation of, Jesus, who is himself radically receptive to his ‘others’. ‘How did Jesus himself acquire this sense of agape?’, Coles asks. ‘From the others from whom he received it,’ he reads Vanier as responding: “Jesus had already had his own feet washed by a woman’s tears (Luke 7:36) and by the precious nard or perfumed ointment of Mary of Bethany (John 12). He must have felt in his own heart all the love contained in this gesture and been moved by this expression of love and the relationship it established. He wanted to express his love for his disciples in the same way.” Vanier’s Jesus, like Rowan Williams’s Jesus, is born and dies not as a self-reliant hero but as a being whose “new life” is found in ongoing and entangled dependencies through which he opens (and calls us to open) to others. It is these entanglements all the way down that keep turning the world “upside down,” that help resist our persistent tendencies to try to put it “right side up” and “back in joint.”


5.6 Summary: from Ward’s christological domestication to Coles’ christological equivocation

Ward, we recall, through his readings of Irigaray and the Markan narrative of the woman with the haemorrhage, ‘open[ed] up a space’ (as Irigaray put it) not just ‘between Jesus Christ and the Christian Church’s appropriation, interpretation and policing of this figure’, but also for christology itself to be found ‘between’ Jesus of Nazareth and his human ‘others’, where a divine ‘dunamis’ is seen in action in ‘touching’ encounters (in which it is by no means always Jesus who takes the initiative) which ‘interrupt’, ‘disturb’, ‘bridge’ and ‘redistribute’ the ‘flows’ within which the participants have been situated. We have also observed at length how Ward repeatedly forecloses this promising christological ‘opening’, with his tendencies towards a ‘domesticated’ (Johannine) ecclesial economy which either neutralises or appropriates the challenge of the ‘other’, which retreats from the materiality of Jesus into the discourse of christology and then into an ecclesiology which overlooks the ‘unincorporated’, and which is paralysed into inaction while it attempts to ‘get its theory, its ontology, right’. We have also seen how Ward’s ecclesiology equivocates between a

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258 ‘The stranger’, Coles quotes Vanier as saying, ‘is a person who is different, from another culture or another faith: the stranger disturbs because he or she cannot enter into our patterns of thought or our ways of doing things... It is always a risk to welcome anyone and particularly the stranger. It is always disturbing. But didn’t Jesus come precisely to disturb our routines, comforts, and apathy?’ (quoted in Coles 2008c:221).


260 (see section 4.3.i, above)

261 (see section 4.4.iii, above)

262 (see section 4.3.i & ii, above)

263 (see section 4.4, above)
humble, ‘vulnerable’, eschatologically ‘provisional’ church, and one which identifies itself much more confidently as the already-realised ‘body of Christ’.\(^{264}\)

In Coles’ work, by contrast, we have seen outlined a much more explicitly tensional ecclesiology: a church, that is, that seeks perpetually to ‘reanimate’ the tension between ‘teleological directness’ and ‘ateleological openness’; that is alert to the tragic consequences of even its best intended movements ‘outward’; and that places a radical receptivity to its ‘others’ (in and beyond the church’s ‘margins’) at the core of its ‘perennially unfinished’ identity and witness. Central to Coles’ ecclesiology is Jesus: Yoder’s Jesus, who embodied receptivity himself and whom the church must always ‘receive excessively’; Williams’ Jesus, who renounces the entangled powers of speech and ‘territoriality’ and ‘places himself with those whose language cannot be heard’; Vanier’s Jesus, who insists on his disciples ‘undergoing’ (and learning through) the washing of their feet, and who is encountered as a ‘stranger’, ‘remote from the seats at [our familiar] table(s]’, and whose sense of agape is ‘found in [his own] ongoing and entangled dependencies’ which go ‘all the way down’. Coles’ Jesus is incarnated precisely in his ‘thirsting’ for communion with others; and while Coles calls the church to a similar ‘thirsting’, he also reminds the church that Jesus is also always ‘an exile and refugee’ from Christian ‘communities and efforts’, as much as from those communities from whom Christians are themselves exiled.

If Ward forecloses his tentative christological ‘opening’, and equivocates in his positioning of the concrete church with respect to its eschatological ‘end’, then Coles is both much clearer about the ‘peculiarity’ of the concrete church, but also noticeably – but not explicitly – equivocal in his positioning of Jesus in relation to the church. On the one hand, Coles’ church is to identify with Jesus: we are to see in Jesus ‘the vulnerable way of radical hope’ (but not, for Coles, ‘the object of our hope’, not ‘an ordered and secure topography’),\(^{265}\) and to renounce, with him, the powers of speech and territoriality for a ‘thirsting’ receptivity to others. On the other hand, Jesus is a foot-washing teacher who is not to be too swiftly imitated, a ‘stranger’ to be ‘received excessively’, an ‘exile and refugee’ from the Christian community itself. Coles’ central tension – he is clear it is not a contradiction – between teleologically-informed practices and an ateleological openness to being ‘thrown’ by the ‘other’, we see here being played out in christological terms: it is not that Coles calls us unambiguously to reject Ward’s language of ‘performing Christ’; more paradoxically, it is by learning to ‘perform’ a ‘receptive Christ’ that we find ourselves opened to receiving ‘Christ the stranger’. It is in this ‘equivocation of the christological’, I am suggesting, that we Christians might find the ‘cooling down’ (as Marcella Althaus-Reid puts it) of the patriarchal, imperialist ‘erection’ of the theological ‘logos spermatikos’ to which Ward, as I have argued, remains captive.\(^{266}\) How we might more intentionally practise such christological equivocation is the question to which we turn in our final chapter.

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\(^{264}\) (see section 3.5, above)

\(^{265}\) Coles 2008b:180-1

\(^{266}\) (see section 4.2, above)
Chapter 6

Trajectories
6.1 Re-cap

In Chapter 1 of this thesis I outlined three ‘entangled dramas’, played out very visibly on the Firs and Bromford estate in east Birmingham. First, I examined dramas of ‘exclusion’ (both the macro-forces which exclude people from the dominant social, political, financial and cultural ‘economies’, and the political and academic discourses which both theorise and reproduce them). Second, I highlighted some theoretical discourses which retrieve a sense of the ‘agency’ of local people, even in the midst of multiple ‘exclusions’. Third, I identified some of the ‘dramatic questions’ confronting the church (both the local church in Hodge Hill, and the wider Church of England), as it relates both to the ‘margins’ of the contemporary city, and to the ‘public squares’ of an increasingly ‘post-Christian’ society. Out of this initial ‘rootedness’ emerged the central question for this thesis: ‘how can we develop and embody an ecclesiology, in contexts of urban marginality, that is radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of the agency of our non-Christian neighbours?’

In Chapter 2, I sought to map the terrain of contemporary political theology, understood as the analysis of, and critical reflection on, ‘the ongoing actions and interactions through which forms of common life, and divisions between people, are both shaped and contested’ (including specifically Christian involvement in such actions and interactions), from the perspective of God’s ways with the world. Developing a ‘map’ suggested by Gillian Rose, I surveyed the ‘Athens’ of ‘public theology’, the ‘New Jerusalem’ of ‘ecclesial political theology’, and the ‘Auschwitz’ of ‘liberation theology’, from the perspective of the ‘margins’ of the contemporary British city in which I live and work. I highlighted in public theology a ‘convocative’ quest to ‘envision’ and ‘cultivate’ a common space where different voices are able to engage in dialogue together, which nevertheless risks producing its own exclusions. In liberation theology I identified a preferential attention to those people on the ‘margins’ of power, along with a commitment to action for change, alongside those people and in solidarity with them. And in ecclesial political theology I underlined a three-fold re-assertion: of the political nature of the church’s own embodied life and witness, of theology’s own capacity to describe and critique the world, and of the ultimate authority of God, in Christ. Within all three strands, there also emerged a call for, and embryonic resources to enable, the theologian to undertake some form of ‘self-dislocation’, in order to develop a receptivity to the gifts and challenges of her/his ‘others’.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I engaged in depth with the work of ecclesial political theologian and co-founder of ‘Radical Orthodoxy’, Graham Ward. In Ward’s analysis of the postmodern city, I highlighted his particular concerns for its economic and geographical ‘segmentation’ and ‘ghettoisation’, the ‘social atomism’ and ‘disembodiment’ embedded in its cultural dynamics, and the ‘depoliticization’ (the exclusion of the vast majority of people from meaningful engagement with ‘the political’) which he argues, is a direct result. Reversing such ‘depoliticization’ would require, we noted: releasing politics from its captivity to economics; shifting our attention from politics as a spectacle to be consumed by people, to politics as something which people ‘produce’; rediscovering the political agency of those currently marginalized; and creating and sustaining spaces for ‘dialogue’ and ‘contestation’ across the multiple differences which often separate people from one another. Because the roots of ‘depoliticization’ are to be found in our cultural ‘disembodiment’, however, ecclesial political theology’s primary task, for Ward, is the development of an ‘analogical worldview’ in which bodies become ‘heavy with meaning’, through their ultimate (that is, both definitive and eschatologically-realised) participation in the (eucharistic) body of Christ. From a perspective rooted deeply in
Augustine, we observed Ward drawing a fundamental distinction between the endlessly unfulfilled consumption of ‘postmodern desire’, and ‘Christian desire’ which moves beyond itself towards the other, driven by the ‘infinite plenitude’ of God’s generosity. Out of this divine ‘pleroma’, the church is able to ‘materialise’ as the ‘erotic community’, ‘performing Christ’ in its performances of the eucharist, in its engagements in ‘cultural politics’, in prayer and in service of those ‘in need’. In Ward’s description of the church’s life, however, I identified a crucial equivocation: a spectrum of ecclesiological ‘stances’ between a church as a humble, concrete ‘corpus permixtum’, on the one hand, and a triumphant, oppositional church as over-realised ‘heavenly city’ on the other.

In Ward’s more ‘confident’ theological articulations, I observed in Chapter 4, not only does the ‘flow’ of loving action become more and more clearly ‘one-way’ (from God, through the church, into the world) and less and less receptive to the gifts and challenges of the church’s ‘others’, it also becomes more and more entangled in a masculine sexual logic of ‘penetration’ with patriarchal, imperialist and inherently violent overtones, the tragic consequences of which Ward barely acknowledges. While in Ward’s explicitly christological reflections we catch glimpses of an ‘opening’ to the initiatives of (Jesus’ and the church’s) ‘others’, and the possibility of locating Christ in the ‘between’ of inter-human encounters, I also observed Ward’s repeated tendencies to ‘foreclose’ such ‘openings’, through the ‘domestications’ within his language of ‘economy’, and his multiple retreats from the challenge of the other, from the materiality of Christ, from the particularity of christology, and from the engagement of praxis. Ward’s efforts to evade the difficult negotiations of what Gillian Rose has called ‘the broken middle’ need resisting, I argued, by seeking to ‘return him to his senses’, and to reverse his ‘retreats’.

Through engaging with the work of Romand Coles, in Chapter 5, I find resources to pursue precisely these trajectories within and beyond Ward. Combining appreciative critiques of both MacIntyrean ‘traditionalism’ (and its theological development by ‘Augustinian’ ecclesial political theologians) and Derridean deconstruction, I identified Coles’ central proposal as the art of ‘perpetually reanimating’ the tension between, on the one hand, a ‘teleological directness’ which strives towards ‘the highest values of [the] community’, and on the other hand, an ‘ateleological openness’ which both recognizes the often-tragic consequences of even our best-intended actions, but is also positively receptive to the fecundity that is to be found in the ‘borderlands’ between ‘self and other’. Through this central and creative tension, we observed Coles firstly outlining a way of reconnecting theory and practice in a ‘visionary pragmatism’, then exploring three vital, radical democratic practices of receptivity (‘listening’, ‘world-travelling’ and ‘tabling’), and finally developing ‘game-changing’ movements which might enable radical democratic ‘Davids’ to win improbably victories over the ecocidal capitalist ‘resonance machine’ Coles names ‘Goliath’. These movements – including an investment in material, ‘polyface’ flows which run counter to the ‘mega-flows of circulatory power’, and an ‘evanescent’, ‘outrageously performative’ politics of ‘countershock’ – combine to ‘turn up our receiving volume’ to both our fellow creatures and to the ‘not yet’ of alternative futures.

Coles’ specifically ecclesiological and christological reflections, then, represent not simply a ‘translation’ of radical democratic practices into Christian language, but a mutually receptive encounter between the two traditions, highlighting ecclesial ‘body practices’ of receptive engagement with those on the church’s margins (Yoder), reading Christ’s trial as a kenosis (understood as renunciation) of both ‘territoriality’ and speech (Williams), and fostering in the church a ‘more radical notion of insufficiency’ which ‘thirsts’ for communion with its ‘others’ (contra
Taylor, Wells) and which dares to ‘endure’ relationships of vulnerable receptivity ‘that one [might] only understand later’ (Vanier). In my evaluation of Coles’ work, I identify a *christological* parallel with his central ‘a/teleological tension’: an equivocation between an imitation of a ‘receptive Christ’ and a receptivity to ‘Christ the stranger’.

6.1.i Developing a ‘radically receptive political theology’

In this final chapter, then, I will draw on the discussion of the preceding chapters to make some proposals, however tentative, to take forward the work of these emerging tasks, under the broad heading of developing a ‘radically receptive political theology’. Holding fast to the concern of both Ward and Coles for articulations that are both ‘visionary’ (for Ward, ultimately *ontological*) and ‘pragmatic’ I will offer suggestions for changing both the way we *think* (or *imagine*, or *believe*), and the way we *act*, which acknowledge not only the entanglement of the two, but also the ‘nearly insurmountable challenges, failures, and turmoil’ (Coles’ phrase) which, often confronting us, allow for no easy or quick movements back and forth between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.¹

In seeking to develop trajectories for a ‘radically receptive political theology’ here, I am also attempting to incorporate the best instincts, the most virtuous leanings, of all three strands of political theology surveyed in Chapter 2 – while resisting some of the more vicious dangers of each. In this sense, my work here has something of a similar ethos to Elaine Graham’s project of re-framing ‘public theology’ through receptive engagements with both the liberationist and ecclesial political theology traditions, although I look to go a little further beyond the limitations of any one of those strands. Two of Graham’s characteristics of public theology as an ‘apologetics of presence’ are pertinent here, while another two are, I suggest, more problematic. Firstly, then, ‘seeking the welfare of the city’, through faithful ‘Christian performance’ pre-eminently, remains for me (as for Forrester, Bretherton and others across the theological spectrum) a primary vocation of the church. Secondly (in common with Ward and Bretherton² as well as Graham), I too want to ‘bring to the forefront’ the vital ‘secular’ (that is, *worldly*) ‘vocation ... of the [church’s] laity’ which understands ‘the praxis of discipleship [as] its own apologetic’. Thirdly, however, the engagements of this thesis have demonstrated, I hope, that ‘nurtur[ing] a [single] pluralist, deliberative space of civil discourse’ is, in our fragmented world, both an unrealistic expectation, and a dangerously exclusionary illusion. And lastly, something similar might be said of theologians ‘speaking truth to power’ on behalf of ‘those who have been marginalized and disempowered by global economic and political forces’: the temptation to ‘speak for’ others not only risks imagining an all-too-easy ‘solidarity’ which fails to be radically receptive to those others precisely ‘as other’, but also suggests that the ‘speaking to power’ is the most politically important action.³ Engaging with both Ward and Coles has highlighted the vital importance, both politically and theologically, of tending and attending to our practices of receptive engagement with our neighbours, especially when such engagements are made more difficult by the multiple differences and divisions between us. It is with developing some of the (‘pragmatic’) ‘tactics’, and the theological (‘visionary’) significance, of such receptive engagements, therefore, that the majority of this final chapter is concerned.

¹ (see section 5.3.ii, above)
³ Graham 2013:212-3. I note here Sam Wells’ scathing critique of Christians who ‘style themselves according to the fashionable phrase “speaking truth to power”’ and who ‘invariably assume they have the truth and someone else has the power. Too often one or both of these assumptions proves incorrect’ (Wells 2015:276).
6.2 Tactical theological stances

First, then, I want to develop some suggestions for certain ‘tools’ – or ‘stances’, as JK Gibson-Graham might name them – that the theologian might deploy in the practice of a ‘receptive political theology’. Some might themselves come close to being ‘practices’ in the technical sense used by MacIntyre and others, but I use the term ‘tactics’ here deliberately, following (at least in part) the distinction made by Michel de Certeau (and taken up by Hauerwas and Wells, among other ecclesial political theologians). A ‘tactic’, as opposed to a ‘strategy’, ‘makes no attempt to control a situation or claim a social space as its own, nor does it attempt to define the rules of engagement’. Instead, it is ‘an ad hoc circumstantial engagement that makes use of what is there’. From our engagements with Coles, it should be clear by now that it is the ‘tactical’ approach which is more fitting for life ‘at the edges’ – at the ‘borders’ which we find even at the ‘core’, as we renounce, with the crucified-and-risen Christ, temptations towards ‘territoriality’. There is a further reason why I opt for the ‘tactical’ over the ‘strategic’ here, however, and that comes out of the critical work I have done in this thesis – first in relation to Ward’s project and then beyond it with the help of Coles – to interrupt the imperialist tendencies of theologies and churches profoundly shaped by the hegemonic experience and mindset of white, middle-class (largely heterosexual, and usually ordained) males. The present enthusiasm in the Church of England for ‘mission strategies’ (from the national to the local) is perhaps just a small indicator of the captivity of my own denomination to that hegemonic, but particular, mindset. The description of particular ‘tactics’ here, then, themselves represent a challenge to opt for ‘the tactical’ as such.

6.2.i Locating the theologian

The first of these tactics is found in the liberationist commitment to ‘locating’ the theologian. When deployed from a position on the margins of power, we have seen how such a tactic might be criticised (and not just by more powerful observers) as either the assertion of a competitive ‘identity politics’ (‘I’m more marginal than you’), or raising the ‘universal suspicion’ of the ‘cui bono?’ question (‘your power is inherently against me’). We have also seen, however, how ‘[s]peaking with the dialects, inflections and rhythms of our own unmistakeable voices’ (as Nicola Slee puts it) might in fact be ‘the only [‘honest’ and ‘concrete’] way we have of speaking to each other’, while requiring also ‘an ever-increasing willingness ... to learn to listen and to speak many languages which are not our own’. ‘From where are you listening?’, then, might well be just as important a question for the theologian as ‘from where are you speaking?’. And for theologians like Graham Ward and myself,
located within many relationships in which we are multiply privileged, to practise the tactic of identifying our own ‘location’ is less to engage in a move of ‘universal suspicion’, than to take the first step towards renouncing our (often hidden) universalizing temptations – and thus towards becoming both a trustworthy speaker, and a trustworthy listener. Such ‘locating’, as we saw with Ward, will be attentive to multiple aspects of our embodied habitus: our ‘roots’, our current social location, and the journeys (literal and metaphorical) of our life in between (Coles’ ‘routes’); our socio-political and theological commitments, our ‘tastes’ (our visceral and emotional reactions, for example, to the places we inhabit and the people we encounter), our desires and our anxieties; and our particular habits of participation in, or resistance to, the flows and circulations (of food and finance, energy and waste, and so on) in our world. All these factors and more shape our theological ‘location’ (and thus both the inflections of our voice and our capacities for receptivity to particular ‘others’) however unacknowledged many of them may be. Our identification and naming of these factors is a first step, then, towards practising a more receptive political theology.

6.2.ii Dis-locating the theologian

A second step, for theologians in locations of privilege (and we must acknowledge that we can often be ‘privileged’ in some aspects of our ‘location’, and ‘marginal’ in others), is to learn to practise a tactical ‘dis-location’. Again, we first encountered such a tactic in our exploration of liberation theology, itself identified by Marcella Althaus-Reid as a series of ‘theological dislocations’, including the dislocation of the theologian from being an apparently (although never, in reality, actually) ‘objective neutral observer’ to being ‘someone who takes sides’, who deliberately locates themselves ‘at the margins’. When hierarchies of power are multiple and intersecting, however, what might such ‘taking sides’ look like – especially for a theologian who is multiply privileged? In liberation theologies we observed a variety of tactics, from seeking to forge a new ‘class solidarity’ of the 99% (Rieger), to engaging in ‘liberative dialogue’ across differences (Shannahan). Crucial to either of these tactics, however, was what I called the deliberate ‘self-dislocation’ of the theologian: in the awareness that the quest both for solidarity with, and receptivity to, the ‘marginalized’ and ‘oppressed’ requires not only a self-aware naming of power, status and privilege, but also a self-critical renouncing, ‘dispossessing’, of the same. We have also repeatedly observed a specifically christological case for (and dimension of) such ‘dispossession’, first in the work of Rowan Williams, then in the promising ‘opening’ and disappointing ‘retreats’ of Ward, and finally in Coles’ fruitful equivocation between a ‘receptive Christ’ and ‘Christ the stranger’. Tactical self-dislocation will surely be differently inflected, depending on the particular hierarchical power relationship in focus, whether that be gender difference, class difference, difference seen through the lens of ‘race’, or the ecclesiastical hierarchy of ordained clergy and ‘lay people’. Little seems to be written, with an explicit emphasis on self-dislocation, through any of these lenses, let alone considering them together. Liberation theology’s concentration on class is perhaps the most

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11 (see e.g. sections 4.6, 5.1, above – and my own efforts at ‘location’ in Chapter 1)  
12 (section 2.4.i, above)  
13 (section 2.5.iv, above)  
14 (sections 4.3 & 4.4, above)  
15 (section 5.6, above)  
16 One exception is Mary Hobgood’s *Dismantling Privilege* (2009), which addresses hierarchies of socioeconomic power, ‘race’, gender and sexuality. It is notable, however, that while Hobgood writes self-
obvious, but christologically, its emphasis on ‘action-in-solidarity’ primarily invites the non-poor Christian to identify with ‘Jesus the liberator’, rather than to a receptivity towards a ‘poor Jesus’ in his otherness and agency.\(^\text{17}\) Similarly for male theologians seeking to dismantle gender hierarchies, christology again seems to tend towards identification rather than receptivity: Jesus is commonly presented as a model man, the man – even if that man ‘subverts the power of patriarchy’ and ‘inaugurates’ a multi-gendered ‘community of partnership and mutuality which is free from domination’.\(^\text{18}\) Where Althaus-Reid asks (of theologians like Ward) ‘how can we cool down this erection of the logos spermatikos in theology?’,\(^\text{19}\) ‘masculine theologians’ such as James Nelson and Mark Pryce suggest that in Jesus men might find a “compelling picture of male sexual wholeness”, through whom the ‘two modes of men’s genital experience – the erect phallus and the flaccid penis’ – can be understood as complementary ‘modes of revelation’.\(^\text{20}\) For feminist ‘indecent theologian’ Althaus-Reid and her rebellious, underwear-less, urban Argentine sisters, it is the inescapable maleness of Jesus which makes him ‘other’, which causes her to ask him – in an open-ended, critical dialogue – “Who do you think we are?”.\(^\text{21}\) For men seeking to unsettle gender hierarchies, however, such ‘christological otherness’ seems to be ruled out.

Perhaps the clearest parallel with Coles’ christological equivocation, then – a self-consciously political theology in which Christ appears both as ‘receptive’ and as ‘other’ – is to be found in critical ‘white theology’, a nascent field beginning to emerge particularly in the USA. While Chris Shannahan, as we noted in Chapter 2, made the beginnings of a ‘self-dislocatory’ move through the lens of ‘race’, and in engagement with both British Black theology and (secular) ‘critical whiteness studies’,\(^\text{22}\) American ‘white theologians’ Jennifer Harvey and Jim Perkinson are striking in the way in which both develop, in parallel, tactics for dismantling white privilege and tactical christologies which reflect the two christological poles deployed by Coles. Their closeness to Coles’ christological reflections suggests a promising resource here not just for addressing the issue of white privilege within theology, but for negotiating Coles’ christological equivocation more generally in our (the church’s) interactions with our ‘others’.

\begin{enumerate}
\item ‘Dislocation’, ‘exorcism’, and a Christ receptive to ‘initiation’ by others
\end{enumerate}

For Perkinson, ‘a radical redoing of white identity and expectations cannot even be imagined apart from a shaking of white “being” to the core – a shaking that cannot be accomplished simply by remaining in one’s (white) room and “thinking thoughts.” Ultimately, it can only be accomplished as a “grace from without”’. This is a move to make an ‘ateleological openness’ to what Ward called

\begin{itemize}
\item consciously as ‘white’ and socio-economically privileged, she is still addressing gender privilege from the subaltern perspective of a woman.
\item Shannahan’s ‘signposts’ towards a ‘cross-cultural urban Christology’ include the suggestion of ‘Jesus the insurgent’, but it is not an image he develops beyond that title (Shannahan 2010:243). Cf Myers’ argument for ‘Jesus the Interlocutor’ (Myers 1994:37-8 & passim).
\item Pryce 1996:106, 108.
\item (section 4.2, above)
\item Pryce 1996:103, quoting Nelson 1992:108. ‘In the power and hardn
ess of their erect penis men may find the physical embodiment of strength, assertiveness, determination, the spirituality of the via positiva. Yet in the softness and vulnerability of the flaccid penis men find their gentleness and passivity, a capacity for nurture, an undemanding and relaxed way of being, a stillness, darkness and waiting, the spirituality of the via negativa’ (Pryce 1996:103).
\item Althaus-Reid 2004:47 (section 2.4.iii, above).
\item (section 2.4.iii, above)
\end{itemize}
‘disruptive grace’ fundamental to our (white Christians’) ongoing identity-development. For Perkinson, this must be understood, and ‘undertaken’, ‘as a process of initiation (“baptism”) – economically, politically, socially, culturally, spiritually – back into communion with the other whose economic exploitation and social rejection constituted the consolidation of white identity in the first place’.

As in baptism traditionally understood, that process of initiation – as a process of ‘learning from people of color’ (and also, Perkinson adds, from ‘women and other sexual orientations’) – demands both a physical ‘dislocation’, from ‘the centers of institutional power’ to ‘peripheral’ places in which ‘other bodies have worked out other postures and potencies not beholden to the white male norm’, and also an ‘exorcism’ – of the ‘political inscription in the body that has engrained social superiority and cultural normativity as an unthought birthright’.

While Perkinson does not explicitly link his critical white theology to christology, clear parallels can be seen with his (earlier) christological reflections on the (Markan) encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman. Perhaps more radically than most other readings of this passage (but with the grain of Ward’s ‘schizoid’ reading of the similar encounter between Jesus and the woman with the haemorrhage), Perkinson notes, firstly, the placing of the pericope ‘near the epicenter of change in the narrative’ and the geographical placing of the encounter ‘as a kind of “point farthest out” from the political ‘centre’ of Jerusalem.

Here, the geographical ‘border’ is close to the narrative ‘core’. Secondly, the woman is, observes Perkinson, ‘perhaps more than almost any other character in Mark, Jesus’ “other” – not only geographically, but sexually, racially and religiously, “on the outside” – a disruptive figure, figured in the text itself as a disruption’. Thirdly, just as Jesus has apparently sought to ‘retreat’ into silence (go ‘underground’, even) in the ‘anonymity’ of this marginal northern district, ‘a unique reversal takes place’, in which it is the ‘saying’ (the ‘logos’) of the woman, and not Jesus, that has apparently ‘wrought deliverance’.

To Jesus’ initial refusal, which seeks to confine a ‘messianic “now”’ to ‘the children’ of Israel, the woman responds with verbal ‘judo’, tactically ‘accepting’ the terms of his refusal but renegotiating them to forge a new ‘solidarity in littleness’ (‘linking “puppies” with “crumbs” and “little kids”’) which ‘opens up room for her own daughter’ within Jesus’ own ‘politics of the least’.

She practises what Sam Wells has (more recently) called ‘overaccepting’.

23 Perkinson 2004:214-5

24 Perkinson 2004:239, 232, 215. The effects of that ‘political inscription’ are described powerfully by Robin DiAngelo as ‘white fragility’: ‘a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves’ (DiAngelo 2011:54). It is precisely this fragile defensiveness I am seeking to address here through a (paradoxically, more resilient) vulnerable receptivity. Marisa Egerstrom identifies a similar dynamic at work across divides of economic power (in the context of the Occupy Wall Street protests) and the ‘fantasy of clerical authority that is in reality long gone’: ‘ultimately, the distinctions between charity-giver and charity-recipient reinforce an ontological illusion that drives the Church’s identification with power, leading to self-defensive measures when challenged... Dis-identifying with power, identifying instead with vulnerability through Christ’s being given over, makes prophetic speech and action possible again’ (Egerstrom 2012:204-5).

25 Perkinson 1996:65-6

26 Perkinson 1996:68-9. Perkinson notes, with Gerd Theissen, that while the woman is figured as ‘marginal’ in the text itself, as a ‘Greek citizen of a city regularly oppressing the local Jewish populace’ she is not without her own connections with power and ‘privilege’ (Perkinson 1996:67-8, cf Theissen 1991:72-7).


28 Perkinson 1996:72, 74, 76

29 (section 2.5.iv, above)
might, Perkinson suggests, be read ‘as a moment of initiation’, or even ‘mentoring’, for Jesus, in which the challenge of the woman moves him ‘through a crisis of ministry, if not of identity, and – upon coming out the other side – revers[es] his direction and center of reference geographically and tactically’: ‘[s]he has taken the “no” he has thrown up and split it into a simultaneity of “yes” and “no”, refusing its refusal by using its negative power to secure her own positive purposes’ – a tactic he himself will be seen to deploy in his confrontations with the Jerusalem authorities. While it is tempting, Perkinson acknowledges, to read the woman here as speaking ‘a “christic” word’ (‘which is also to say Christ speaks through and for her’), this ‘introduction of a saving word “from without” cannot simply be “colonized” or appropriated as a form of anonymous Christianity’, but rather read as both ‘speak[ing] “for Christ’ and – ‘in interruption of his word – from a subject-position not his’.

(2) Dis-Identifying with Jesus

In Jennifer Harvey’s work (more recent than Perkinson’s), critical attention to whiteness and to christology are more explicitly intertwined, but rather than inviting the ‘dear white Christians’ she addresses to identify with a receptive Christ, she argues strongly for the opposite. Linking the oft-repeated mantra of ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ (‘WWJD?’) to the rise in popularity (among evangelical young people in particular) of a ‘social justice Jesus’ with a prophetic, political significance beyond individual, spiritual salvation, Harvey highlights a fundamental problem with white Christians identifying themselves with such a Jesus:

It just so happens that identifying with or as the central agent in the narratives we embody is one of the broken ways of being toward which white people are prone. It just so happens that being inclined to do “for” in postures that are paternalistic is another damaged side-effect of white racialization. And it just so happens that these tendencies are valorized in the social justice Jesus who is the central power-agent in his saga. Social justice Jesus is like a superhero standing up to evil forces around him and attempting to inveigh on behalf of suffering others. And, thus, while it is laudable that he stands with or works on behalf of the marginalized, it, therefore, just so happens that the broken ways of being toward which white people are already inclined are likely to be triggered, maybe even amplified, by identifying with such a figure. ... Simply put, identifying with the divine is about the last thing that a white person whose life is embedded in white-supremacist structures should be doing.

An alternative move, to identify instead with the ‘Black Christ’ of Black theology, ‘raises a different but equally problematic set of issues’ for Harvey. While on the one hand such an identification ‘offers the important possibility of de-centering white racial identity’ (even when that centrality has been largely ‘unmarked’), on the other hand it presents the ‘seductive’ possibility of ‘proclaim[ing] oneself opposed to evil social structures ... and as standing with the marginalized’ while at the same time ‘ignoring or denying one’s actual location’, avoiding ‘a serious coming to terms with the ways in

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30 Perkinson 1996:77-8
31 Perkinson 1996:81-2
32 The title of Harvey’s (2014) book, which focuses on the need for white Christians to shift from a ‘reconciliation’ paradigm (which emphasizes shared humanity and shared responsibility) to one which focuses on making ‘reparation’ (with a more ‘particularist ethic’, which attends to ‘living histories’ of racism and ‘repairing’ oppressive social structures) (e.g. Harvey 2014:154-6).
33 Harvey 2012:86-9, 94-5.
which one’s life is itself invested with, embedded in and even given material and political meaning by the very powers one is seeking to denounce’. For white people, Harvey argues, our location christologically is ‘at the other end of the finger as the Black Christ points and denounces’. Instead of asking ‘WWJD?’ we white Christians need to disidentify with Jesus and ask ‘What Would Zacchaeus Do?’: finding ourselves summoned to ‘figure out ways to become race- and power-cognizant race traitors’, choosing the path of ‘radical conversion’, embodied in ‘humility’, ‘repentance’ and ‘reparation’.35

6.2.iii ‘Flipping the axis’: negotiating the equivocation of the christological

This brief excursus into critical white theology is not simply to offer an example of Coles’ christological equivocation in practice. As we saw when I sought to ‘locate’ Ward at the end of Chapter 4, his inability to face the potentially tragic consequences of his theology’s unilateral, centrifugal, imperialist trajectories may well not be unrelated to his unacknowledged whiteness (a connection for which Paul Gilroy argues persuasively).36 The alternative trajectory pursued by both Perkinson and Harvey is, by contrast, one of deliberate receptivity, on the part of white Christians, to the initiative, the challenge, the ‘initiation’ offered us (I include myself among them) by our ‘non-white’ ‘others’.37 In our survey of ecclesial political theology we observed a divergence between a ‘Barthian’ trajectory (seen in the work of Hauerwas, O’Donovan and Williams, for example) which emphasised the church’s submission to the judgment of Christ,38 and an ‘incarnationalist’ trajectory (more visible among the theologians of Radical Orthodoxy) which placed the emphasis on the church ‘performing Christ’. In Ward’s work more specifically, I have highlighted the predominantly active, initiative-driven, ‘outward flow’ of the church, which primarily ‘performs Christ’ through its ‘service’ to a needy world (even if Christ might sometimes be figured as being ‘in’ that world, in the person of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger). By contrast, we might imagine critical white theologians ‘flipping’ this christological axis, (re)describing faithfulness for white Christians as predominantly receptive to the initiatives of their ‘others’, either understood primarily as ‘performing’ a ‘receptive Christ’, or as a receptivity to the gifts and challenges of Christ as ‘other’ (see diagram, below).

34 Harvey 2012:95-6
35 Harvey 2012:98-9
36 (section 4.6, above)
37 I use the term ‘non-white’ cautiously and critically, working with the assumption (shared by Harvey) that racialized language is produced and reproduced primarily by placing ‘white’ as its (unacknowledged) ‘centre’, and consigning everything deemed ‘non-white’ to the status of ‘other’ (see Harvey 2012:86ff.).
38 (sections 2.5.i, 2.5.iii & 2.5.iv, above)
In such a tactical ‘flipping’ of the christological ‘axis’, I am at least partly affirming Rieger’s (again ‘tactical’) rehabilitation of ‘binaries’ (over a more fluid ‘hybridity’), which hold in clear view ‘some of the most outrageous power differentials of our time and their impact on us’. A similar tactical approach I take to be at work in Shannahan’s championing of ‘liberative reversals’ of power and status. It is far from clear where the divine ‘bias to the oppressed’ lies in an encounter between, say, ‘a black woman minister within a majority white suburban church’ and an ‘unemployed [white] young man’ on the Firs and Bromford estate (to use two of Shannahan’s own examples). If Irigaray can be understood as practising a ‘strategic essentialism’ in her poetic development of a ‘feminine imaginary’ beyond a dominant ‘phallocentrism’, then from the ‘privileged side’ here I am proposing a ‘tactical essentialism’, grounded in a careful, relationship-specific, context-specific analysis of the multiple (and not all one-sided) power imbalances within any particular encounter between people. ‘Tactical essentialism’ simply asks, ‘which of the many identity markers, or power imbalances, in this encounter, do we attend to first?’ While wanting to resist making any

Fig. 6.1 – ‘Flipping’ the christological axis

‘Active’ axis:
- A = ‘What would Jesus do?’ / ‘Christ has no body but ours...’ (Teresa of Avila)
- B = ‘I was hungry and you fed me, a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Mt 25)

‘Receptive’ axis:
- C = Jesus & the Syro-Phoenician woman (identifying with a ‘challenged’ Jesus)
- D = ‘What would Zacchaeus do?’ (dis-identifying with Jesus)

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39 (section 2.4.iii, above)
40 Shannahan 2010:240-2
41 Shannahan 2013:20-21
42 (section 4.3, above)
43 Cf Gudmarsdottir 2012:170
universalising prescriptions (even of the value of receptivity), I hope I have made the case in this thesis for the particular importance of introducing a radically receptive inflection into the kinds of theological discourse that are dominated by the experience of white, middle-class males.\(^\text{44}\) While Perkinson and Harvey opt for opposite ‘poles’ of the ‘receptive (christological) axis’, their goals are very similar: the de-centering, and ultimately renouncing, of ‘white racial (and racist) identity’, and the opening to a transformative pedagogy at the hands of those we have racialized as ‘other’. While identifying with a receptive Jesus offers white Christians a *via positiva*, dis-identifying with Jesus presents a *via negativa*: the lesson from Coles is that there is almost certainly value in a tactical ‘oscillation’, an ‘alternating current’, between the two.

How the specific insights of critical white theology might translate in relation to other markers of identity and power differentials is, I suggest, one promising trajectory to pursue, largely beyond the limits of this thesis. It seems quite possible, for example, to re-write Harvey’s challenge to those white Christians who identify with the ‘social justice Jesus’,\(^\text{45}\) replacing ‘white people’ and ‘white racialization’ (and ‘white supremacist structures’) with ‘men’ and ‘patriarchy’, or with ‘middle-class Christians’ and ‘unjust economic structures’.\(^\text{46}\) CWT has offered us, however, pointers towards a number of practices which have promising resonances with the projects of Ward and Coles as I have outlined them. We will explore these practices further, shortly — but first I want to identify three further tactical aspects of a receptive political theological stance.

6.2.iv *Expecting abundance: shifting from the ‘centre’ to the ‘edge’*

Alongside a ‘flipping’ of the christological axis from ‘initiative’ towards ‘receptivity’, a parallel ‘dislocation’ can be found in shifting our expectations of where we encounter ‘abundance’, from the ‘centre’ to the ‘edge’. In describing his ideal (local) church, Ward, we recall, emphasised the importance of ‘centralised resources’ in each parish (namely a centrally-located church building and locally-rooted clergy), and expressed his frustration that the Church of England does not invest more in such resources. Such a stance is understandable within a theological project that places the church’s worship (and *eucharistic* worship, in particular) as the primary way in which, as Sam Wells asserted, God gives the church ‘all it needs to continue to be Christ’s body in the world’. By contrast, we saw in Coles’ work an urging of the church towards a ‘thirsting insufficiency’ which, while not dismissive of the ‘utopic possibility’ that can be ‘conjured’ in worship-like gatherings,\(^\text{47}\) nevertheless redirects our attention to the fecundity of the edges: of the fertile ‘ecotone’, the luminous ‘penumbral flesh’, and the divine presence in the ‘myriad forms of life and interconnections that “are not of one’s own making”’. In Coles’ encouragement to practise a ‘hospitality for weightless seeds’ — a ‘deepened awareness’ of our ‘indebtedness’ to the ‘initiatives’ and ‘struggles’ of people (and non-human life) in (and coming from) ‘other places’ — he suggests we might be ‘better dispose[d] and enable[d] ... to anticipate abundance in relation to those who move beyond borders’, ‘to that which and those who greatly exceed our horizons of vision’.\(^\text{48}\) There is a

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\(^{44}\) I would want to read Valerie Saiving’s foundational text for early feminist theology (Saiving 1960), which outlines ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ conceptions of ‘sin’, as much as a ‘tactical’ resistance to a universalising of the masculine conception, as a ‘strategic’ development of an essentialised ‘feminine’ conception.  
\(^{45}\) (n. 33, above)  
\(^{46}\) See e.g. Hall 2016 for a feminist perspective on the link between patriarchy and ‘heroism’; Wells 2015 for a self-consciously middle-class critique of ‘doing for’.  
\(^{47}\) (section 5.4.ii, above)  
\(^{48}\) (sections 5.3.i, 5.5.ii, 5.4.iii, above)
vital resource here for addressing the ‘depoliticization’ with which Ward is so deeply concerned. Ward (following Crouch) lamented the shift in popular engagement with politics from ‘production’ to ‘consumption’, the political marginalization of those who have also been economically, geographically, socially and culturally marginalized, and the captivity of ‘the political’ to neoliberal ‘economics’. Here, through our engagements with Coles, we are challenged to look to the ‘edges’ to see where politics is being ‘produced’, where the political agency of the ‘marginalized’ is, in fact, happening. Here we catch glimpses of the ‘postcapitalist politics’ articulated by J.K. Gibson-Graham, who propose ‘a new language’ of the ‘community economy’, beyond the dominant ‘capitalocentric’ narrative, which might ‘widen the field of economic possibility, the self-cultivation of subjects ... who can desire and enact other economies, and the collaborative pursuit of economic experimentation’. Such work of ‘repoliticizing’ the world surely involves a renewed attentiveness to ‘unheard’ voices, and to forms of actually-existing agency which, contra Ward, are far from ‘disembodied’ but, as both Skeggs and Althaus-Reid have already hinted, takes a profoundly embodied, even ‘sexual’, form.

6.2.v Letting the ghosts speak: re-awakening our senses to our repressed ‘others’

Repeatedly in Ward’s work, we saw him ‘haunted’: by the homeless, face-less ‘body on the street of Manchester’; by the desperate plights of some of those he identifies as his ‘cultural others’; by the disruptive, accusative, ‘exterior’ ‘other’ of Emmanuel Levinas. Where Ward showed an uneasy tendency to ‘pass by’ those who haunt him, Coles attends to them carefully: to the ‘unmastered voices’ of ‘edgeless’ imperialism; to those Native Americans rendered physically and culturally extinct by ‘the European sword and cross’ (even by those missionaries of more “charitable” persuasions’); and, less ‘tragically’, to Christian theologians such as John Howard Yoder. What Joerg Rieger first highlighted for us (with the help of Jacques Lacan), however, was the connection between what ‘haunts’ us, and our collective processes of repression and exclusion: a focus on the ecclesial formation of ‘uninitiated’ subjects can all too easily go hand in hand, Rieger argued, with ‘the continual tendency of ... the church not-to-see things’. Rieger urged us to attend to the ‘fissures and cracks’ in ‘faith’s reading of reality’, opened up for us through our most profoundly receptive encounters with our ‘others’ – especially our most ‘marginal’ ‘others’, those ‘we’ have most comprehensively repressed from our consciousness. Practising a certain ‘theological decontrol’, Rieger suggested, involves placing marginalized ‘others’ in ‘position[s] of leadership and agency’ in relation to ‘us’, while attending also ‘to the question of who put the [marginalized] other in [their] place [of marginalization]’. For a white, middle-class, straight, male Christian theologian, the summons to attention is manifold: a summons to attention to black words (both theological and non-theological) and bodies, to working-class words and bodies, to queer words and bodies, to female words and bodies, to Muslim words and bodies, and so on – and an attention to the structures (both ecclesial and non-ecclesial) which have defined these as ‘marginal’.

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49 Gibson-Graham 2006:xxiii. By ‘capitalocentrism’ Gibson-Graham mean ‘the dominant representation of all economic activities in terms of their relationship to capitalism – as the same as, the opposite to, a complement of, or contained within capitalism’ – inviting parallels with Petrella’s ‘gigantism’ (section 2.4.ii, above).

50 (sections 3.2, 3.4.ii, 4.4.ii (3), above)

51 (sections 5.2, 5.2.ii, 5.5.i, above; BGP xxiv, 137-8 cf Hauerwas, CDRO 17ff)

52 (section 4.4.ii (4), above)
Perhaps most profoundly, and certainly most viscerally, the ‘indecent theology’ of Marcella Althaus-Reid both performs and invites just such an attentiveness. As Mayra Rivera observes, many of the human characters in Althaus-Reid’s work appear as ‘ghostly apparitions, that is, material bodies rendered barely perceptible by economic forces’, ‘poor, displaced people who haunt the living cities only in the shadows of the night’. Althaus-Reid shares with Ward a deeply politicized concern about ‘disembodiment’ – but the ‘indecent’ woman is consistently more sensual, materialist, than the ‘radical orthodox’ man. Interrupting ‘the orders of idealistic theologies’ (the kind which understand bodies as ‘speaking’ only when they have been given their ‘heaviness’ by the theologian’s ‘meaning’), Althaus-Reid presents a ‘fetishist’ theological methodology, an ‘aesthetics of the fragment’, which ‘foregrounds concrete experiences and material struggles’, and directs our attention to ‘unruly bodies and body parts’, to ‘bodies that refuse their places within the ordering structure of the socio-economic system’ – and often within dominant theological systems too.\(^{53}\) In inviting us to smell the scent of underwear-less lemon-sellers, to let our feet be kissed by the practitioners of the *massagem linguopedal*, to read the ‘tactless’ graffiti on the walls of Buenos Aires Cathedral, Althaus-Reid not only insists that ‘God can only be touched in the revelation of the untouchables’,\(^{54}\) but ‘seeks to perform and teach new ways of seeing’, ‘challenging the assumed boundaries between corporeal, spiritual and socio-political forces’, and ‘teaching “the reader how to see that the everyday life is saturated with the palpable” presence of the holy’.\(^{55}\) This, we remember, was one of the goals of Ward’s ‘radical orthodoxy’ (which Lucy Gardner highlighted): to ‘re-sensitise’ our ‘spiritual senses’ so that we rediscover our sense of participation both ‘in the world’ and ‘in God’.\(^{56}\) The pedagogy offered to us by Rieger and Gardner, Coles and Althaus-Reid, however, suggests an embodied attentiveness to ‘the spiritually concrete and the materially spiritual’\(^{57}\) that goes beyond Ward’s own ‘fetishising’ of the eucharistic performance.

### 6.2.vi The Full Monty and a ‘constitutive outside’

To conclude this section on the ‘tactical stances’ of the receptive political theologian, I return to the film *The Full Monty*. We encountered Ward’s reading of the film in Chapter 4, but here I want to re-read it, with the help of JK Gibson-Graham, partly as an illustration of the tactics described above, and partly to develop one possible metaphor for a ‘radically receptive church’. For Ward, we recall, the film starkly depicted the nihilist and profoundly gendered desires of post-industrial Britain, combining male ‘anxieties of castration (or impotence)’ with a female desire ‘governed entirely by the phallus’ and thus ‘erased’.\(^{58}\) Ward’s reading is echoed by Slavoj Zizek who also, Gibson-Graham note, finds a ‘despairing message’ in the film, about ‘the impossibility of undermining “the global capitalist system”’, and the ‘catastrophic loss[es]’ of deindustrialization – ‘of male identity, employment and livelihood, the grounds of community, the working-class tradition and modernist political project of social transformation, the struggle itself.’\(^{59}\) Through a hopeful, ‘postcapitalist’ lens, however, Gibson-Graham interpret the film quite differently, perceiving in its narrative the ultimate *failure* of capitalism’s subjection of human bodies. Those bodies themselves emerge ‘as an

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\(^{53}\) Rivera 2010:87, 80-81.  
\(^{54}\) Althaus-Reid 2005:403  
\(^{55}\) Rivera 2010:84-5  
\(^{56}\) (section 4.4.iii, above)  
\(^{57}\) Rivera 2010:80  
\(^{58}\) (section 4.1, above)  
\(^{59}\) Gibson-Graham 2006:10
active, and potentially disruptive, force,’⁶⁰ Gibson-Graham argue, ‘swerving’ away from ‘familiar forms of subjection and toward alternative ways of being’,⁶¹ revealing ‘a willingness to become communal subjects, to accept their incompleteness, interdependence, and connection across differences of age, race, sexuality, body type, financial need, and social status.’⁶²

This is not simply a challenge to Ward and Zizek’s pessimism, however. Crucially, Gibson-Graham identify signs, in the lead-up to the men’s climactic performance, of what they call a ‘constitutive outside’, ‘a becoming community [sic] with desires that call forth resolve and energetic enactment from the neophyte performers’. The men’s ‘new performances of masculinity’ are ‘call[ed] forth’ (differently) by those they encounter on the street (who are ‘brazen’ and ‘taunting’), and those who gather to watch the rehearsal (with ‘shy delight’), and these ‘reflection[s] of pleasure’ give the men themselves ‘a glimmer of the potential (including for their own enjoyment) of the performance’:

The demand for a performance, the desire and anticipation of pleasure, the acceptance of the men physically, just as they are, by the potential audience, all enact a performativity of the constitutive outside. New masculinities are elicited by the community, not simply by male agents of self-transformation. And masculinity is only one of the things being produced here – what’s also being constituted ... is a communal class relation, and one that would not have come into being without the community to encourage and foster it.⁶³

Although located within a predominantly (although not entirely) heterosexual framework, The Full Monty in Gibson-Graham’s reading gives us a glimpse of the new forms of ‘class solidarities’, across differences, advocated by Rieger and other contemporary liberation theologians.⁶⁴ In their concept of the ‘constitutive outside’, Gibson-Graham also dramatically illustrate the ‘active and powerfully provocative aspect’ which Coles identified specifically in ‘listening’,⁶⁵ but which pervades Coles’ work much more widely in his attention to embodied practices of receptivity, and frequent use of words such as ‘soliciting’, ‘engendering’ and ‘calling forth’. Furthermore, I suggest, they also offer here a provocative metaphor which might be tactically, playfully and productively deployed,⁶⁶ in conjunction with the christological ‘axes’ outlined above, to both explore and enliven the relationships between a particular local church and its specific ‘others’ – in the urban margins most especially.

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⁶⁰ Gibson-Graham 2006:13-14, citing Jane Bennett
⁶¹ ‘In the scene where Gaz and Dave dash to the car, they swerve away from wage labor; in the next scene, Lomper and Guy swerve away from heterosexual masculinity and toward homosexual desire; and in the third and fourth scenes [the dance in the queue at the unemployment office, and Gerald’s decision to join the performance] there are swerves toward what might be called “embodied communality”’ (Gibson-Graham 2006:15-16).
⁶² Gibson-Graham 2006:16-17
⁶³ Gibson-Graham 2006:17-18 (my emphasis)
⁶⁴ (section 2.4.iii, above) In the men’s performance itself, Gibson-Graham add, ‘in the glances and flows of energy between performers and audience,’ we see ‘the enchanted solidarity of those who exist in recognition of their interdependency’ (Gibson-Graham 2006:20).
⁶⁵ (section 5.3.iii (1), above)
⁶⁶ ‘We need to foster a “love of the world,” as Arendt says... To do this, perhaps we need to draw on the pleasures of friendliness, trust, conviviality, and companionable connection. Our repertory of tactics might include seducing, cajoling, enrolling, enticing, inviting. There could be a greater role in our thinking for invention and playfulness, enchantment and exuberance. And we could start to develop an interest in unpredictability, contingency, experimentation, or even an attachment to the limits of understanding and the possibilities of escape’ (Gibson-Graham 2006:6-7).
On the one hand, then, might we imagine the local church as a ‘constitutive outside’ in relation to its neighbours? Could we be those who, like the Syro-Phoenician woman with Jesus, ‘call forth’ new ‘performances’ from our neighbours through an attentive (maybe at times challenging) receptivity to them, perhaps in a manner sometimes ‘brazen’, sometimes ‘gentle, with delight’? On the other hand, dare we image the local church as a rag-tag group of unemployed men discovering a talent for stripping? ‘Swerving’ away from the violence of Ward’s ‘penetrative’ missiology, might we understand our ‘performance’ of Christ as the vulnerable ‘exposure’ of our collective ‘body’, responding receptively to the desires, the passions, the solicitations of our neighbours, recognising and exposing the ‘enchanted solidarity’ of our interdependence? Here we might note resonances, not entirely coincidental, with Coles’ ‘ethos’ of ‘receptive “polyface” flows’, ‘akin to a responsive dance with ever-shifting boundaries and practices drawn forth through profoundly receptive engagements with myriad forms of life and interconnections that “are not of one’s own making”’. To ‘flesh out’ those resonances further, we turn to consider some of the ‘ontological’ implications of our investigation.

6.3 Tactical ontologies

Central to Ward’s ‘radical orthodox’ project, as we have seen, is the development of an ‘analogical worldview’, a ‘participatory ontology’: not simply a framework of meaning within which we understand things differently, but a description of the reality in which we (‘really’) participate, a ‘cosmic order’ which provides the secure foundations for the ‘new political community’ that is the body of Christ. Ward’s critique of Althus-Reid’s work is precisely that the latter emphasises epistemology (an attention to our ‘discursive knowledges’) but ‘detached ... from questions concerning ontology’. A similar question might be asked of Coles’ description of ‘gatherings that enact a Dionysian conjuring of utopic possibility’: are such gatherings, ultimately, merely craftily-staged performances, enlivened by the unpredictable interaction of human differences? We return to re-consider ontological questions here, but ‘tactically’ – not to paralyse embodied interaction (as we saw happen with Ward), but to enliven it – returning (with a specifically receptive focus) to the issues of participation, flows, and embodiment. Here, in effect, I am seeking to re-conceive (in reverse order) Ward’s christological triad of ‘touch’, ‘flows’ and ‘relation’: to hold on to the vital – and enlivening – sense of meaning, desire, participation and embodiment offered by his eucharistic worldview, but to move it closer to its edges, and in a more radically receptive direction.

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67 (section 5.4.ii, above).
68 (section 3.3.ii, above)
69 Ward 2010:173. ‘[S]omething does have to be appealed to as revelatory,’ Ward argues, ‘if, as queer theologians, we are to refer to God at all – and not just talk about discursive constructions of “God”’ (2010:177). Ward recalls us to ‘the Bible as a source and not simply a resource for ... queer theology’ (179) – but has demonstrated something of a Scriptural ‘selectiveness’ of his own. I note, in passing, that Ward’s suggestion that Althus-Reid’s work is ‘open to the challenge of what Feuerbach would call “projection”’ (i.e. ‘mov[ing] from the human experience of intimate love to intratrinitarian relations’) is exactly what Tonstad charges Ward with, when he grounds his trinitarian theology in the (human) experience of ‘distance’ (Tonstad 2015:61, 83).
70 (section 5.4.ii, above)
72 (sections 3.3.ii, 3.4.i, above)
6.3.i Participating in divine receptivity: ‘hearing with God’s ears’

Central to Ward’s project, we have seen, is the ‘extension outwards’ of ‘the work and words of the living community’ of Christians, ‘tracing and performing ... “the march of God in the world”’. For Coles, in stark contrast, the Christian church is not only a community of ‘dialogical discernment’, but a community which seeks to imitate the ‘pregnant reticence’ of Jesus himself, renouncing the power and the dangerous ‘untruths’ of the spoken word.\(^{74}\) In the ‘active and powerfully provocative aspect’ of ‘listening’ and other practices of receptivity and ‘pregnant waiting’ drawn out by Coles, echoed in Gibson-Graham’s concept of the ‘constitutive outside’, we might already have noticed echoes also of Nelle Morton’s oft-repeated formulation, central to much feminist thought, of ‘hearing one another to speech’, a ‘hearing that is,’ as Morton puts it, ‘a direct transitive verb – that evokes speech – new speech that has never been spoken before’.\(^{75}\) Quaker feminist theologian Rachel Muers places Morton’s reflections in the context of Gemma Corradi Fiumara’s analysis of Western culture: ‘the logos we inhabit is “halved”’, Corradi argues; ‘we know how to speak but have forgotten to listen’.\(^{76}\) Furthermore, this ‘non-listening culture’ has ‘divide[d] itself into separate discourses, which are free from the desire or obligation to listen to others’. On the contrary, characteristic of a ‘powerful’ and ‘productive’ discourse is that it ‘seeks to expand its territory through the silencing of others and the ever-closer determination and definition of objects of knowledge’. In response, one response by ‘those who recognize the power of the prevailing culture to “make them hear”’ is ‘benumbment’: a deliberate dulling of one’s receptive capacities; the ‘refusal to listen or be listened to, as a means of defending one’s own discursive space against the predatory invasion of other discourses’.\(^{77}\)

In such a world, as both Nicola Slee and Luke Bretherton have already highlighted, listening to and across profound differences is a profoundly political act, ‘convocative’ in the sense we outlined in discussing the distinctive charism of public theology, seeking and proleptically inhabiting a ‘common place to stand that cannot be fully verbalized or articulated’.\(^{78}\) It is also, Muers argues, an eschatological act: ‘the temporal structure of a listening silence [is] that of “awaiting future speech”’, which itself ‘requires the prior recognition of the future speaker’, and thus ‘intends the other as a participant in the making and discernment of meaning in [a] shared world’.\(^{79}\) Even more significant for my proposals here, Muers underlines Morton’s (less-remembered) theological assertion that it is ultimately God who ‘hears us to speech’ and, in turn, makes us hearers of others.\(^{80}\) ‘Could it be, Morton asks, ‘that Logos deified reduces communication to a one-way relationship – that of speaking – and bypasses the far more radical divine aspect of hearing?’\(^{81}\) Our participat[ion] in God’s act of hearing’ (fundamentally, for Muers, in God’s resurrection of Jesus)\(^{82}\) suggests, therefore, the possibility of a ‘counter-flow’ within, and beyond, Ward’s ‘participatory ontology’. Whereas in Ward’s eucharistic formation we receive from God (bread, word, love) so that we can give to others,

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\(^{73}\) (section 3.5.iii, above)  
^{74}\) (sections 5.5.i, 5.5.ii, above)  
^{76}\) Fiumara 1990:2, quoted in Muers 2004:53.  
^{77}\) Muers 2004:54-6  
^{78}\) Muers 2004:153 (see section 2.3.iii, above). For Muers a ‘standpoint’ is first and foremost ‘a place from which we hear’, rather than (as for Ward) the place from which we speak (Muers 2004:141, cf Ward 2005a).  
^{79}\) Muers 2004:65-7  
^{80}\) Muers 2004:51  
^{81}\) Morton 1986:54. See also Graham 2009:231.  
^{82}\) Muers 2004:99
for Muers and Morton the receptivity of our formation (learning to ‘hear with God’s ears’) is precisely a formation for receptivity (hearing others to speech). In our listening, we participate (‘analogically’, in Ward’s terms) in a fundamental ‘activity’ of God, but this ‘receptive flow’ is inevitably ‘polyface’, multi-sited, multi-directional: contra Ward, we learn our listening as much through practising it concretely in the world as we do in church (or in prayer) – unless our understanding of ‘prayer’ itself exceeds its usual meanings – a question to which we will return towards the end of this final chapter.

6.3.i Returning to the flow(s): christological openings to capitalism’s ‘outside’

Secondly, then, we are in a position to reconsider the ontology of ‘flows’. For Ward, following Castells, in the postmodern city the ‘territorial particularity’ of place is ‘overcome’, or ‘absorbed’, into the space of flows: of ‘capital’, of ‘information’, of ‘technology’, of ‘organisational interaction’, of ‘images, sounds, and symbols’. The ‘ailments’ of consumption and segregation, atomism and disembodiment, dematerialization and depoliticization, all come to expression in, and are in large part generated by, these ‘postmaterial flows’, which ‘promote’ and ‘patrol’ ‘certain forms of desire’, including our ‘desire to be ignorant’ of the costs of our consumption.83 Reversing these ailments requires the re-creation of shared spaces (what Castells calls ‘cultural and physical bridges’ between ‘places’ and the ‘space of flows’), and for Ward such re-creation is only possible, only conceivable, through the expansion, the ‘spilling out’, of the boundary-transgressing, ‘erotic community’ of the body of Christ.84 The pleromatic-kenotic flow of divine love, channelled through the church, on the one hand makes ‘sociality’ possible, but on the other hand exhibits what I have called a ‘penetrative’ dynamic (Althaus-Reid links it explicitly with ‘spermatic flow’) that risks being complicit in a patriarchal, imperialist violence, that forecloses a receptivity to its ‘others’.85 Coles took Ward’s socio-political analysis further, highlighting not just the often ‘torrential’ flows and ‘mega-circulations’ generated and ‘invested in’ by the ‘evangelical-capitalist resonance machine’, but the profoundly material nature of many of those flows: circulations not just of ‘capital’ and ‘information’, but of ‘grains, food, goods, finance, fertilizer, waste, people, military, energy, water, pharmaceuticals’ and more. These ‘mega-circulations’ profoundly impact, and feed off, ‘our (in)capacities for attention, excitement, perception, distraction, desire, comprehension, and incomprehension’, and the resonance machine’s ‘investments’ in these flows (that ‘investment’ itself an ‘insinuating’, outward-moving ‘force’) ‘reconstructs’, ‘redesigns’ and ‘co-opts’ ‘the world and human beings’ where it can ‘incorporate’ them, and ‘eliminates’ what it deems ‘impertinent’. Rather than advocating the powerful ‘monological flow’ of divine caritas as the necessary ‘therapy’ to ‘redirect’ these almost-as-powerful ‘mega-circulations’, however, Coles developed an ‘ethos’ of receptive “polyface” flows: ‘receptive’ to ‘myriad forms of life and interconnections that “are not of one’s own making”’, and ‘polyface’ (or ‘decentralized’) because they invite us to ‘be drawn into the orbits’ of our fellow creatures, ‘into eccentric – rather than egocentric – ethical-corporeal movements’, that are not concerned with self-maximization but with an ‘intensification’ of relationships of mutual transformation. Such movements can be seen to be proliferating in our world – if we look for them – and are profoundly materialist, as much as ‘postmaterialist’, in their relationships. They engage both in ‘hermeneutical’ practices of resistant ‘disbelief’, ‘detachment’

83 (sections 3.1.ii, 3.3.iv, above)
84 (section 3.4.i, above)
85 (sections 3.3.v, 4.2, above)
from the mega-circulations of the ‘machine’, and initiate and cultivate alternative flows of ‘goods, people, food, energy’ and so on. The interwoven radical democratic practices of ‘listening’, ‘world-travelling’ and ‘tabling’, developed through a deepened ecological awareness, invite us to ‘attentively [to] immerse ourselves in ecosystems at numerous scales’, ‘participating with the movements of other beings and things’, ‘letting them circulate around us’, ‘attuning ourselves to [and imitating] their flows’ – and, ‘[w]ith some of this resonant energy’, ‘seek[ing] to draw others into similar mimetic movements’. 86

Theologically, Coles ventures to suggest that at the heart of ‘incarnating’ there is a ‘thirsting for communio’ (a ‘counter-flow’ to the ‘pleromatic-kenotic’ flow of agape), and that in the receptive undergoing of acts like foot-washing, Christians are opening themselves to the ‘radical disruption of temporal flow’, to ‘enduring’ something that we do not ‘author or even co-author’, ‘even in the minimal sense of understanding’ what it is we are undergoing.87 With these suggestions, Coles returns us to the small but significant ‘opening’ we found in Ward’s christology, in his description of a divine ‘dunamis’ – a ‘power’ not always under Jesus’ control or flowing at only his initiative – which can ‘interrupt’ ‘disturb’, ‘bridge’ and ‘redistribute’ the ‘flows’ within which the participants had previously been situated.88 Understanding christology (with Ward) as a ‘relational praxis’ of ‘touch’ and ‘flow’, we began to see, in Mark’s gospel (and in encounters between women and Jesus in particular), the possibility that touch in such encounters can both ‘interrupt’ given flows and ‘call forth’ a new flow, which ‘reaches beyond’ present boundaries of ‘alienation and anonymity’ towards ‘a place not yet given’, and invite both parties into a new relationship of ‘kinship’.89 While with the haemorrhaging woman it seems that the flow of power ‘goes out of’ Jesus at her touching initiative, in the later narrative of the anointing both ‘touch’ and ‘flow’ happen in the space between the woman and Jesus: the woman enters and disrupts the oikos (‘penetrates’, we might say, the ‘oikonomia’ from the outside), but the ointment itself flows from her jar onto and over Jesus’ skin. In the ‘wiping’ narrated in John’s version of the story, intimate touch and the flow of oil inhabit the same space. In both Mark’s and John’s versions, the two-fold effects of the combined touch-and-flow of this anointing are, firstly, to ‘call forth’ a new ‘performance’ in Jesus (his messianic role, embodied in John as washing the feet of his disciples, having first had his feet ‘washed’ here), and secondly (seen with most clarity in Mark), to ‘mark’ Jesus with an enduring presence that is to last to his ‘burial’ (embodied in the women who remain with Jesus at the cross, and who take his body to the tomb) – and perhaps beyond.90 Mark’s anointing woman embodies not just the kind of ‘constitutive outside’ that emerged in our consideration of The Full Monty, but a ‘flow of becoming’ (Coles) which desires ‘not to consume the other, but to let the other be in the perfection they are

86 (sections 5.3.iii, 5.4.i, above; Coles 2016:98)
87 (sections 5.5.iii, 5.5.iv, above)
88 Here, as in a number of other places in this thesis, pneumatology emerges as an obvious theme for further exploration. See section 6.3.iv, below, for some initial pointers in that direction.
89 (section 4.3.ii, above)
90 Here we should note the resonances with both Gordon Lathrop’s argument that a ‘liturgical cosmology’ must always be a ‘torn sphere’ (Lathrop 2003:195; reflecting the ‘hole in the heavens’ in Mark’s cosmology – 2003:30ff.), and also Coles’ tentative wondering whether the ‘radically external relationality’ within Milbank’s Trinity (identified with the Spirit) might at least ‘partially exceed the Church’, and include also the ‘criticisms and insights’ of ‘multiplicitous realities with no such Christian self-consciousness’ (Coles 1992b:350, 351 n.12; cf Milbank 1990:268)
91 (section 4.4, above)
called to grow into’ (Ward).\textsuperscript{92} Jesus’ receptivity to, and then imitation of, her action (and its enduring effects) might be seen as a paradigmatic example of Coles’ ethos of ‘receptive “polyface” flows’; his injunction to ‘do this in remembrance of her’, here, an invitation to participate in the ‘wormhole hope’ that links this ‘between space’ with the ‘between spaces’ of our own contexts.\textsuperscript{93}

6.3.iii From ‘penetrating bodies’ to ‘touching flesh’

Beyond participating in divine ‘hearing’, and in receptive, polyface flows, a third area in which our Christian political ontology might be re-figured is to be found in a deeply significant, and potentially fertile, metaphorical and theological shift between the work of Ward and Coles: from ‘the body of Christ’ to ‘the flesh of Jesus’.

For Ward, we recall, the body as ‘mere flesh’ was ‘a radically depoliticized body’: bodies ‘only speak if and when they are made heavy with meaning’. In Ward’s analogical worldview, ‘physical’, ‘social’, ‘political’ and ‘ecclesial’ bodies all find their ultimate ‘significance’, then, through their situation and participation in the eucharistic ‘body of Christ’, and it is through that participation that the ecclesial ‘body of Christ’ (we have noted Ward’s slippage between the two) provides the ‘new political community’ (the ‘ontologically founded community’) that modern liberal democracy has been searching for. The ecclesial body, the ‘erotic community’, is ‘constituted’ through its ‘activity’, its ‘social, political, and ethical interventions in the fabric of the world’, and in so doing offers ‘spaces of resistance’ to ‘the depoliticizations, the dematerializations, the dehumanizations, the commodifications, the atomisms, ghettos, gated communities, and cosmopolises produced by our current democracies, neoliberal economics, and spurious spiritualities’\textsuperscript{94}. Ward’s attentiveness to the connections between ‘distance’, ‘separation’, and even ‘ghettoisation’, on the one hand, and ‘difference’ and ‘desire’ on the other, has offered us valuable resources for diagnosing – and resisting – some of the most serious ailments of the postmodern city, but it also comes with serious pitfalls. First, there is the question of the extent to which Ward’s description corresponds with lived reality: in the postmodern ‘global city’ in which I live, for example, differences can often be present in intimate proximity, and deep solidarities might also often be forged and sustained across vast distances. Second, and perhaps more fatally, we have repeatedly seen Ward’s genuine attempts at

\textsuperscript{92} (sections 5.2.iii, 3.3.iv, above)

\textsuperscript{93} I am conscious, in this section especially, of the overlap between my work here and the christologies of ‘erotic power’ developed by Rita Nakashima Brock (1988), Carter Heyward (1989) and Lisa Isherwood (2002) in particular. While Brock especially has undoubtedly been a (largely implicit) influence on the development of my thinking in this thesis, I would concur with Anna Mercedes (in a critique that has parallels with our criticisms of ‘public theology’ in this thesis) that Brock’s (and Heyward’s) setting up of ‘mutuality’ as ‘the pure other – the antithesis – to violence, patriarchy, and heterosexism’ risks ‘diffusing strategies for change that might arise and function within patriarchy, under heterosexism, amidst violence’ – that is, mutuality becomes a condition of relationality, and not just the goal. ‘Power with, in order to function without its own overpowering omnipotence, masking difference and disparity, would need the capability to strategize under – or dare I say with – power over. This might mean sometimes engaging the dynamics of power over in order to sway, modify, or pervert them. For power with is finally not mutuality if the other with whom you seek to generate power must be controlled or at least legislated by your predetermined ideals of togetherness’ (Mercedes 2011:143). For Mercedes (echoing terms Coles has offered us here), Brock’s and Heyward’s idea of eros is simply not ‘tragic’ enough: ‘acknowledging the tragic dimension of eros implies that renunciation must be part of the play of erotic praxis’. ‘No means No. This is not just a slogan we teach adolescent boys. Renunciation – bearing the no of the beloved – is not antisensual asceticism: it is one of the positive disciplines of love’ (2011:145 n.66, quoting K. Roberts Skerrett).

\textsuperscript{94} (see Chapter 3, above)
stirring an ecclesial receptivity to the ‘disruptive grace’ of ‘others’, largely squashed by a more dominant theme: the ‘penetrative’ or ‘spermatic’ ‘one-way flow’, from what Coles has called an ‘interior volume’ or ‘territory’, ‘outwards’ – either ‘making space’, or ‘taking’ it.95

This is not, however, the only way embodied relations and desires can be imaged, as Linn Marie Tonstad has recently suggested. Teasing out the difference between ‘phallic’ and ‘clitoral pleasure’, Tonstad highlights the relational possibilities of ‘surface touch’ and ‘copresence’, as opposed to ‘penetration’: where there is ‘surface’, there is no need to ‘make space’; [t]he skin’s surface that reveals and hides need neither be broken nor invaded for the enjoyment of relation – a phenomenology of touch without violence. There need be no coming-from [or, we might add, coming-into] ... in this imaginary.”96 It is precisely such ‘surface touch’ and ‘copresence’ that we have just witnessed in Mark’s anointing story: not a ‘penetrative’ flow ‘from’ one ‘into’ the other, but a ‘touch’ and ‘flow’ in the ‘space between’.

Ward has occasional moments of attentiveness to such nonpenetrative ‘surface touch’: in his engagement with Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Louis Chrétien he suggests that it is through touch that human beings ‘become flesh’, that “‘the flesh listens’” and through listening ‘respond[s]’ (Chrétien), and that (contra Merleau-Ponty) through touch “‘my body does perceive and is built around that perception’”.97 But it is in Coles’ engagements with Merleau-Ponty, and more recently with Rowan Williams, that the metaphorical potential of ‘touching flesh’ emerges clearly. As we saw in Chapter 5, Coles draws on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of ‘intercorporeality’ to highlight the essentially ‘perspectival and carnal character’ of our perception of the world, as the ‘intercourse [sic] between the flesh of my body and that of the world ... brings forth aspects of being that were only latent possibilities beforehand’. Despite the possibly penetrative connotations of ‘intercourse’, for Coles’ Merleau-Ponty ‘depth’ has less to do with ‘penetration’ than with the ‘sense of the richness and wildness of the world’ that emerges as ‘two or more [differently-located] persons realize that they see the same world differently’. When Coles calls the church to ‘a reflectively practiced incarnation of flesh as pregnant depth’, then, he is inviting us to a dialogical sharing of our diversely-situated (and diversely-embodied) perceptions, finding common ground in our ‘edge-dwelling’. In richly suggestive language, he calls us consciously to inhabit ‘an extremely thick yet flexible, modulating, vulnerable, filamented, and porous (maybe even gelatinous?) membrane as the flesh that at once joins [us] with and distinguishes [us] from the world’ – a thick ‘surface’ which we share intimately with those not-so committed to the Christian faith. Understanding this ‘penumbral flesh’ as ‘elemental and constitutive of the body of Christ’, we would find there ‘intercorporeal illumination’, he suggests.98 Ontologically, Coles points us towards a thoroughly incarnational understanding of transcendence, not (to follow Mayra Rivera’s argument) as ‘vertical distance’ or ‘linear progress’, but ‘in touch’: a God who is not ‘boundary-less’, but who ‘transcends’ creation by touching creation everywhere (Coles’ ‘border at the core’), ‘envelop[ing] its dwelling places in a nonconfining

95 (see Chapters 4 and 5, above)
96 Tonstad 2015:106, 136 (see also p.48). Cf. Ward, for example: ‘If desire can only be desire through an economy of distance, then the economy of response is intertwined with an unfolding of distances, differences, exteriorities that pass in and out of interiorities. This movement in and out, separation and penetration, is not only the heartbeat of the economy of response; it is an exchange, a giving and reception, and a communication. One recalls that the word “intimate” in its verbal form comes from the Late Latin verb intimo – to flow into...’ (Ward 2005b:72).
98 (section 5.5.ii, above)
embraces, where ‘[o]ne is wrapped around the other while sharing space’; God not ‘above all’ but ‘over all’, ‘a divine envelope’, a ‘“confirmation of a limit without imposing upon the other any form”’.  

There are undoubtedly times, places, relationships in which our ‘distance’ (literal or relational) from each other will be a significant factor. The divisions of race, class and gender often produce and reproduce such distancing, through polarising binaries, and often in such relationships ‘flipping the christological axis’ may offer a helpful tactic to shift the privileged partner towards a greater receptivity – especially in early stages of engagement across such divides. Holding on to such binaries, however, risks ‘fixing’ ‘the other’ in a relationship of static, distanced difference (a relationship often also trapped in an implicitly or explicitly heterosexual framework), and it is here that the theological significance of ‘surface touch’ and ‘copresence’ to which first Coles, and now Tonstad, have drawn us, offers us possibilities for further development. Receptivity remains, but now in intimate contact, in shared flesh. In our reaction against the colonialism of ‘outreach’ we will not shy away from seeking relationship. Beyond missiologies of ‘growth’ and ‘expansion’, we discover here the beginnings of a renewed and deepened missiology of ‘presence’ – as an active relationship and not simply a passive ‘being there’, charged with a desire for intimacy but neither penetrative nor consuming. At times such being ‘in touch’ may have the uncomfortable, unsettling character of ‘productive friction’; at other times it will reveal ‘the fecundity of the caress’ (Irigaray), the possibility that profoundly attentive ‘reading hands’ can bring even the most hidden

99 Rivera 2007:127, 135-6 (quoting Irigaray 2002:171). ‘To embrace, enfold,’ Rivera notes following Karmen MacKendrick, ‘is “never quite to grasp securely...; to wrap around still somehow... respects those edges, those surface limits”’ (Rivera 2007:135, quoting MacKendrick 2004:92). Rivera, following Irigaray, is drawn to the metaphor of ‘air’ – no ‘void’, but rather that element in which ‘we dwell and which dwells in us’ – but she also suggests that we might think of this ‘intimate and yet insurmountable space between our differences’ as like ‘sor or placenta’, ‘a living and dynamic, fluid envelope’ that ‘flows in and between us and nurtures us all’ (2007:137). Even closer to the terrain we have travelled here, Mercedes writes of Christ ‘becoming’ ‘between us and the ones to whom we are prodigally drawn, forgetting ourselves as we pour out our anointing oil, and perhaps also realizing ourselves in the exchange, our own skin wet with chrism. We are the body of Christ only as... we realize Christ in the extended chrism between us... The “anointed one” rolls down like waters through the cracks of time and place, tumbling in ever-flowing streams through the interstices of our messy and sometimes painful relating, a living chrism, which is our delight’ (2011:148).

100 This danger is picked up particularly in the work of Tim Noble (2013) (concerned with the risk in liberation theology of turning ‘the poor’ into an ‘idol’), and of Mayra Rivera (who engages critically with both Enrique Dussel and Emmanuel Levinas to remind us that we can neither simply adopt the perspective of ‘the excluded other’, escaping our own implication in the systems of exclusion, nor separate the other’s ‘otherness’ from their particular and complex history (see e.g. Rivera 2007:80, Muers 2009:45-6).

101 As Joerg Rieger argues, ‘[t]hinking about mission in terms of building relationships might... prevent us from overreacting against the mission-as-outreach model and falling into the opposite extreme: too often those disappointed by outreach have claimed that instead of trying to help people we should simply get off their backs. Mission as relationship recognizes that we are all connected and must, therefore, not leave people to themselves’ (Rieger 2004:215, quoted in Grau 2011:38).

102 (cf section 1.3.i, above. There is not scope here to consider whether there are consistently ‘penetrative’ characteristics underlying the Church of England’s current growth-focused missiological pronouncements. However, where such characteristics can be discerned beyond Ward’s work, the proposals here offer some possible ways forward.)

103 ‘Friction’ is the word Marion Grau uses to describe ‘mission in the postcolony’: challenging simple polarising ‘assumptions of hegemony and subalternity’, and reminding us ‘“that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can [nevertheless] lead to new arrangements of culture and power”’ (Grau 2011:38-43).

104 Irigaray 1985:185
aspects of our embodiment to light, to expression. In yet other times and places, ‘surface touch’ and ‘copresence’ are needed simply to sustain the other’s personhood and dignity in the face of individual or structural degradation; or, most basically (and recalling Lucy Gardner’s highlighting of the ‘deposition’ of Jesus’ dead body from the cross), to ‘be alongside’ or to ‘hold’ when there is nothing else that can be said or done. As we prepare to move, in the following section, from ontological questions to concrete practices, an attentiveness to the distance, as well as the power differentials, between ‘us’ and our ‘others’ in any particular situation, remains a vital element of a genuinely receptive political theology.

6.3.iv The ‘go-between God’: a pneumatological trajectory?

Before turning to practice, I need to note, albeit briefly, a trajectory for further exploration which has been implicit, if not explicit, in much of what I have written in this thesis: pneumatology, or a theology of the presence and agency of the Holy Spirit. My focus in this work has been primarily ecclesiological, but my engagements with both Graham Ward and Romand Coles have also brought out critical christological themes. In neither author are pneumatological questions addressed more than in passing, and that is reflected in my own writing here. Nevertheless, there are abundant possibilities for further development, and I will name just a few of them here.

Firstly, in Ward’s work the Spirit appears implicitly in the divine dunamis seen in Mark’s gospel – a power, we remember, not always under Jesus’ control or flowing at only his initiative – which, in Ward’s interpretation, can ‘interrupt’ ‘disturb’, ‘bridge’ and ‘redistribute’ the ‘flows’ within which participants have previously been situated. We might discern the Spirit too in Ward’s description of the ‘disruptive grace’ of ‘God ... at work’ in the Christian’s ‘cultural others’.

In Ward’s focus, following Irigaray, on the ‘space between’ Jesus and his others we might also sense the work of the one who John V Taylor names as ‘the go-between God’.

Likewise, in Coles’ efforts to draw our attention towards the ‘ecotones’ and ‘edges’, we might well feel ourselves in the company of the Spirit who ‘leads’, and sometimes ‘drives’, Jesus into the ‘wilderness’ (e.g. Mark 1:12), and who later brings those on the ‘inside’ (Jews following the Messiah) together with Gentiles on the ‘outside’, in dis-locating, transformative, and radically receptive encounters (e.g. Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10-11). Here we see ‘the dialogical spirit’, as Amos Yong

105 ‘Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands’ (Winterson 1993:89).
106 A profound example of this can be found in Melissa Raphael’s reflections on the courageous, persistent efforts of women in the camps of Auschwitz to touch, wipe and wash the faces and bodies of their neighbours, despite the divisions of ‘disgust’ that the camp produced between them (Raphael 2003:100, 66-70, 54-5, cf Barrett 2008).
107 (section 4.4.iii, above) See also e.g. Terhi Utriainen’s research on religious (and gendered) understandings of presence by the side of the dying (Utriainen 2006).
108 I am grateful to Sam Ewell, as well as members of the thesis committee, for highlighting this lacuna in my work.
109 (see sections 4.3.i, 6.3.ii)
110 (see section 3.4.ii & passim)
111 (see section 4.3.i-ii; Taylor 1979)
112 (see section 5.3.i & passim)
names her. Is it perhaps also the Spirit who ‘groans’ within us (Romans 8:26) and who ‘overshadowed’ Mary (Luke 1:35), who is at the root of our ‘thirsting’ for communion, our ‘pregnant waiting’, as Coles suggestively puts it? Coles’ argument for the ‘perpetual reanimation’ of the tension between ‘teleological directness’ and ‘ateleological openness’ surely requires the activity of such a sustaining, unsettling Spirit.

In my own theological proposals in this chapter, these pneumatological hints accrue additional potential for development. Ward’s ‘disruptive grace’ is taken up forcefully by Jim Perkinson as a ‘grace from without’ needed by white people for our (I write as one of those white people) ‘radical redoing of white identity’, inextricable from being ‘shaken to the core’ by the initiation – ‘exorcism’, even – offered by people of colour. Might my proposal, following Marcella Althaus-Reid, to ‘let the ghosts speak’ be an invitation to listen for the whisper of the Holy Ghost? Is it the pulsing power of the Holy Spirit that enables the necessary ‘alternating current’ between identifying and dis-identifying with Jesus, ‘flipping the axis’ between active initiative to radical receptivity? And might it be the Spirit too who enables that power analysis and discernment necessary for the practice of ‘tactical essentialism’? In the preceding ontological reflections, is it the Spirit that enables us to ‘hear with God’s ears’? Is it the Spirit that is that elemental ‘air’ – the ‘sap’ or ‘placenta’ or ‘chrism’, that Anna Mercedes evokes – in which ‘we dwell and which dwells in us’, the intimate and yet insurmountable space between our differences? Surely it is the Spirit, to anticipate the practices to come, who desires in us, and prays in us (cf. Romans 8:26, above)?

One of the reasons for avoiding the multiple pneumatological trajectories that have emerged in our explorations is that a consideration of christology and pneumatology makes trinitarian reflection almost inevitable. Curiously, it is Coles who comes closest to offering a provocative beginning for a thoroughly trinitarian theology of radical receptivity. At the end of his article on Milbank and neo-Nietzschean ethics, Coles returns to Milbank’s suggestion that ‘the Triune God differentiates ... in such a manner as to “include a radically external relationality”’. If the Holy Spirit is the ‘moment of God [that] is the response to the received relation between the Father and the Son,’ Coles wonders, then ‘what if the Holy Spirit,’ that ‘indefinite spiritual response,’ at least ‘partially exceeds the Church? ... Might not the Spirit’s response lie in multiplicitous realities with no such Christian self-consciousness?’ If so, then “the Church might not only “retell the ecclesial story so as to accept some external criticisms now made into self-criticisms”, but, additionally, institute a significant dimension of historical narration that emphasized the externality (mysterious Holy Spirit) of both criticisms and insights that are crucial to its development’. Here Coles’ speculative pneumatology comes very close to the strand of missiological thinking which emphasises the work of the Spirit in the missio dei beyond the church’s boundaries – and finds deep resonances too with Gibson-Graham’s description

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113 Yong 2014a. Yong is an Asian American Pentecostal missiologist, and in those multiple identity markers emerges as someone with immense potential as a dialogue partner to pursue these pneumatological and missiological reflections further (see also Yong 2014b).
114 (see section 5.5.iii)
115 (see section 5.2.iv)
116 (see section 6.2.ii)
117 (see section 6.2.v)
118 (see section 6.2.iii)
119 (see section 6.3.i)
120 (see section 6.3.iii)
121 Coles 1992b:350, cf Milbank 1990:268 (Coles’ emphasis)
of a ‘constitutive outside’ which ‘calls forth’ new performances. While perhaps what is distinctive about the church is simply that it recognizes its dependence on receiving gifts from God, in the power of the Spirit, might the work of the Spirit in the world be a ‘constitutive outside’ for the church, perhaps, critiquing it and enriching it, if it can but open itself in radical receptivity to its others? The invitation, to again repeat Coles’ evocative words, is to ‘a responsive dance’ with ever-shifting boundaries and practices drawn forth through profoundly receptive engagements with myriad forms of life and interconnections that “are not of one’s own making”. We now turn to consider some of those practices in more detail.

6.4 Practices

In this penultimate section, I will sketch briefly the contours of some key practices, for the church and its theologians, through which we might embody a radical receptivity to the gifts and challenges of our non-Christian neighbours – especially, but not exclusively, in contexts of urban marginality – and shaped by the tactical theological stances, and ontological reflections, developed above. While there is a certain sense of ‘flow’ at work here in ordering the practices – ‘polyface’ as they are – that flow need by no means be rigidly one-way. At best, they might be understood (in Coles’ terms) as a ‘tensional ecology of practices’, intentionally pluralising, ‘work[ing] on our extant limits in markedly different ways’ – and thus in an important sense working to transform the ‘ecology of othering’ described in Chapter 1 (particularly through Susanna Snyder’s work on the relationships between ‘established communities’ and people seeking asylum).

6.4.i Re-locating the theologian: re-rooting and re-routing

Following on from the necessary ‘locating’ and tactical ‘dis-locating’ we explored earlier, a next step is to ‘re-locate’ the theologian – not in the sense of re-establishing her/his former location, but undergoing a movement, a transformation, of (in Coles’ terms) both re-rooting and re-routing. Here we hear echoes of John Vincent’s ‘journey downwards’ (however problematic that is for our spatial imaginary) and the first ‘R’ of John Perkins’ principles of faithful Christian community development, a ‘re-rooting’ that is more permanent, and with more humility, than the ‘penetration’ evoked by Ward’s urban missiology. For some of us, our practices of ‘world-travelling’ may need to change too, as we attend carefully to the flows already happening around us – embracing the arts of walking a neighbourhood as well as the privileges of international air travel. But the more fundamental difference from Ward that has opened up for us is the vital receptivity of this re-location: in Coles’ terms, it is both ‘going to places and people with whom we must relearn how to see, think, imagine, work, and act’ (re-rooting), and attuning ourselves to ‘the movements of other beings and things’ as they ‘circulate around us’, ‘interrupt’ us and ‘divert’ us (re-routing). Christologically, this is less an ecclesial performance of Christ’s incarnation (the Word which ‘became

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122 e.g. Bosch 1991:401; see section 6.2.iv.
123 (section 5.4.ii)
124 (section 5.4.ii, above)
125 (section 2.4.ii, above)
126 Perkins’ 3 ‘R’s are ‘relocation’, ‘reconciliation’ and ‘redistribution’ (Perkins 2014 [1982]). For Perkins, ‘relocation’ does not always mean moving to a completely new place: it can also, for many people, mean ‘returning’ (to a neighbourhood that you have previously left) or choosing to ‘remain’ (when you have the option to leave) (Gordon & Perkins 2013:48).
127 (section 5.4.i, above)
flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood’, oft-quoted in urban mission circles\textsuperscript{128}, and more an imitation of some of Jesus’ ‘others’: the intentional putting oneself receptively in Jesus’ way (in the path of his ‘flow’) that we see in both the haemorrhaging woman and Zacchaeus. If there is an \textit{imitatio Christi} here, it might be better imagined through not intentional but accidental encounters, in the openness to having our location, or our flow, interrupted by an other: by the Syro-Phoenician woman, in Jesus’ own borderlands; by the haemorrhaging woman, as Jesus is ‘on his way’ elsewhere; by the ‘indecent’ anointing woman, at an apparently ‘decent’ meal table. This is much about allowing ourselves to be ‘re-rooted’ and ‘re-routed’ by others, as it is about intentionally ‘re-locating ourselves’.

\textit{6.4.ii Resisting initiative: the ‘art of pregnant waiting’}

A similar instability between intentionality and accident is present in the next, and related, step. Renouncing our ‘power to speak’, where power imbalances are tipped in our favour, requires both actively practising a receptive presence-for-others (offering that ‘constitutive outside’ that might ‘hear others to speech’) and also sustaining an openness to ‘being thrown’ by the unexpected actions of others (again, an embodiment of Coles’ central a/teleological tension). It takes ethical ‘effort’, Coles reminded us, ‘to step away from initiative, let others take it from us, let them radically call us into question, let them call us to pause indefinitely’ – to resist our urges to ‘overaccept’ the offers of our neighbours ‘without losing the initiative’, as Wells put it. Yoder’s ‘wild patience’, the ‘art of pregnant waiting’, is what we need to cultivate (or to allow to be cultivated in us) here: a radical sense of ‘insufficiency’, of ‘not knowing what to say and knowing one does not know – perhaps for a very long period of time’. Beneath our re-routing – attuning ourselves, as we put it above, to the ‘movements’ of those around us – Ward’s ‘erotic’ desire needs to be at work: a hungering to ‘inhabit the hungering’ of our neighbours,\textsuperscript{129} a ‘thirsting’ to be invited to our their tables, a ‘yearning’ for God to take flesh ‘in the connections we cannot make’ (as Williams put it), a longing for others to respond to our waiting with their voices, agencies.\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{6.4.iii Practising ‘confession’ – with our ‘others’}

When we are on the favourable side of power imbalances, opening ourselves to the voices of our ‘others’ cannot be an entirely comfortable experience. Our initial ‘dis-location’ in such relationships must deepen into what liturgically we call ‘confession’. But we are on the ‘edges’ of church, in what Williams called ‘para-liturgical’ spaces, so ‘confession’ cannot be simply, as Ward suggests, the church’s (monological) acknowledgment (as \textit{corpus permixtum}) of its ongoing ‘need for ... correction, repentance, and reconciliation’.\textsuperscript{131} The ‘tragic sensibility’ that Coles proposes is two-fold: it is alert both to the ‘suffering often wrought by a community’s ideals (or constitutive failure in light

\textsuperscript{128} John 1:14, \textit{The Message} translation (Petersen 2002).
\textsuperscript{129} Coles 2016:99
\textsuperscript{130} My argument here finds resonances in activist-geographer Paul Chatterton’s invitation to ‘give up activism’ – if ‘activism’ is used as an identity marker which makes ‘others’ of those perceived as ‘members of the public’ – and to ‘learn to walk with others on uncommon ground’ (Chatterton 2006).
\textsuperscript{131} Ward 2009:203 (cf section 3.5.i, above). Ward elsewhere describes ‘liturgical acts of confession’ as revealing the confessing subject ‘as partly spoken from elsewhere’, ‘formed’ and ‘disciplined’ ‘through welcoming and following the voice of the other’ (Ward 2000a:178-9). Both William Cavanaugh (2011:141ff.) and Jennifer McBride (2012) argue that ‘confession’ is (or should be) a primary ecclesial practice through which the concrete church makes itself ‘visible’. I want to affirm that insight here, but extend it further in a necessarily receptive direction.
of them) and [to] the inextinguishable need to be transformed through receptive engagements with those a community marginalizes and subjugates.\textsuperscript{132} To use Perkinson’s baptismal language, alongside ‘exorcism’ is an ‘initiation’ – an economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual ‘catechesis’ – which can only come from those ‘others’ ‘whose economic exploitation and social rejection constituted the consolidation of [our] identity in the first place’.\textsuperscript{133} Although Perkinson focuses on ‘race’, this kind of receptively-inflected confession must surely translate also to relationships distorted by power-hierarchies of class, gender, sexuality and other more contextual dynamics. If Jesus’ encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman might be read as an argument about resources (scarce or abundant), priorities (who gets fed first?), and the management (or transgression) of limits, then the woman’s ‘ex-centric word’ might indeed, as Chris Shannahan has suggested, ‘challenge the urban church’ to ‘broaden [its] vision’ and open its ears.\textsuperscript{134} Ceding our initiative, even our imagination, to those we have deemed ‘outsiders’, we will look not just to enlarge our solidarities (the impetus of Ward’s ‘erotic community’), not just to thirst for communion with our ‘others’, but to make ourselves maximally vulnerable to both the ‘interruptions’ and the formative ‘schooling’ presented by (that is, allow ourselves to ‘be overaccepted by’) our ‘others’.\textsuperscript{135}

\textit{6.4.iv Spaces of contestation, negotiation and ‘contagious receptivity’}

Receptivity to the challenges of our neighbours must not, however, ‘fix’ the ‘other’ in the place that must be held open only for God.\textsuperscript{136} In allowing ourselves to be ‘re-rooted’ and ‘re-routed’ we should not forget Coles’ warning against ‘creating new modes of exclusive territoriality (e.g., mini-sovereignties, nostalgic enclaves, xenophobic localisms, communities of depoliticized withdrawal)’: getting in touch with Hanley’s ‘wall in the head’\textsuperscript{137} does not mean colluding with the ‘walling up’ of our neighbourhoods and communities, or with divisions produced and reproduced by our neighbours. Beyond Ward’s passion to ‘penetrate’ such walls, however, there are more receptive possibilities for challenging territoriality and division. Remembering our definition of ‘the political’ and the ‘convocative’ instinct of the public theology tradition, we must seek out in our neighbourhoods – or create, if they are absent – spaces in which our ‘forms of common life, and divisions between people, [can be] both shaped and contested’.\textsuperscript{138} One of Ward’s central concerns, of course, was to pursue ‘cultural engagements’ which invited and encouraged ‘dialogue’ and ‘contestation’: our journey of ‘dis-location’ and ‘re-location’ has pointed us, beyond Ward, to both

\textsuperscript{132}(sections 5.2.iv, 5.5.i, above)
\textsuperscript{133}In this sense, at least, I would want to draw parallels between my work here and Sarah Coakley’s ‘théologie totale’, which seeks not just to ‘integrate’ the insights of other non-theological disciplines, and to bring social and political factors ‘to greater critical consciousness’, but in the process to be ‘fundamentally purgative of idolatry’ of all kinds (Coakley 2013:134, 308, 20). Shannahan’s quest to develop a liberative urban theology that does justice to the multidimensional complexities of 21\textsuperscript{st} century Britain might also find resonances here.
\textsuperscript{134}Shannahan 2013:9-10, 12
\textsuperscript{135}(see Coles in section 5.5.iii, above). The three temptations of Jesus (to the power of the ‘provider’, the ‘performer’, and the ‘possessor’), which in chapter 1 I associated with the Church of England’s present anxieties (see section 1.3.ii, above), are all in different ways temptations to the ‘heroic’, in Coles’ sense of that term. After Jesus has renounced these temptations, we should remember, ‘angels came and ministered to him’. I am grateful to Keith White for suggesting that those ‘angels’ might well be all around us: our marginalised neighbours, coming to us with their gifts, their invitations, and their (at times difficult) ‘schooling’.
\textsuperscript{136}(sections 4.4.ii & 6.3.iii n.96, above)
\textsuperscript{137}(see section 1.2, above)
\textsuperscript{138}(section 2.2, above)
the possibility and the necessity of pursuing such engagements with our neighbours in the urban margins, as well as (in Ward’s words) in ‘what remains of the public sphere’. Such local spaces for conversation, then, cannot be governed by the imposition of any supposedly ‘universal’ (Habermasian or Rawlsian) procedures, but can potentially be spaces where the ‘rules of engagement’ are (however temporarily) agreed; and where our diverse loves, passions and desires, our goals and teleologies, the limits of our generosity and the boundaries of our receptivity, can be articulated to each other and argued over. Receptive political theologians, inspired by Coles’ sense ‘that ethical action calls for uncertain discernment’, might seek to stir a desire for what we earlier called (after Derrida, but inspired too by the Quaker practice of ‘Queries’) ‘communities of the question’: spaces which (as Ched Myers noted) put ‘the concrete before the theoretical’, put ‘the communal before the private’, and are ‘open to constant rearticulation’.

These spaces of contestation and negotiation can also, potentially, be spaces where we can become aware of the differing ‘investments’ we have in flows and circulations both local and global, and both negotiate and re-imagine those ‘investments’ where we share them. On the one hand, such conversations might enable the proliferation of certain forms of resistant ‘disbelief’ (Esteva) – such as boycotting the Daily Mail, or subverting the government’s latest welfare regime. On the other hand, they may lead to the intentional cultivation, locally, of some of the deeply materialist ‘alternative circulations’ that flow ‘beneath, around, and beyond’ the ‘mega-circulations’ of the ‘machine’ – such as the diversion of corporate left-over food into a regular local ‘pay as you feel’ gourmet café, or an intentional ‘hospitality to weightless seeds’ (Coles) embodied in regular ‘Places of Welcome’ where both long-established residents and newly-arrived asylum-seekers are able to feel at home and make a positive contribution. What distinguishes such initiatives as receptive, however, is when they are undertaken not unilaterally (‘the latest church project’), but as a result of what we might call a ‘contagious receptivity’ or a ‘receptive evangelism’: a practised receptivity to neighbours which ‘catches on’ – akin to Nelle Morton’s ‘hearing to speech’ through which the one heard ‘becomes a hearing person’; or the way Joel Salatin’s receptive, mimetic, ‘polyface farming’ practices seem to ‘draw others into relationship with his farm’, and into ‘similar mimetic movements’.

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139 Ward 2009:161-2 (cf intro to Chapter 3, above)
140 Cf Charles Mathewes’ proposal for an Augustinian re-imaging of ‘agonistic democracy’ as ‘a struggle for conversion of one’s loves and the loves of one’s interlocutor’ (2001:125-6). These ‘micro-publics’ might just represent, in Gillian Rose’s terms, the return of a modest ‘Athens’ (see section 2.3, above) – the passionate negotiation and renegotiation of the boundaries of ‘law’ (understood in the broadest sense as a set of ‘individuated social norms’, however provisional and localised: ‘in those circumstances [in this place], these are the things to do’) (Lloyd 2009:5). Anna Rowlands, in considering the lessons Gillian Rose offers the discipline of practical theology, proposes an approach to our ‘engagement[s] with the concrete’ which brings ‘the gap between actual and possible ... into a process of negotiation... a theologically reflective movement of attending, imagining, exposing, negotiating and legislating... as shared, communal activity’, a ‘communal praxis which assumes a contemplative structure, an Arendtian imaginative in-between, “where God happens”’ (Rowlands 2006:161, 193, quoting Rowan Williams).
141 (section 5.5.iii, above)
142 (section 5.4.i, above)
143 See e.g. www.therealjunkfoodproject.org
144 See e.g. www.placesofwelcome.org
145 Morton 1986:210, quoted in Muers 2004:50
146 Coles 2016:100 & section 5.4.i, above.
6.4. v Tabling and ‘para-liturgy’

While the spaces of conversation, negotiation and contestation described above come close to the radical democratic practice of ‘tabling’, as Coles describes it, much more is often shared around a table than just talk. Where Ward’s theological vision proceeds ‘outwards’ from the central eucharistic table, Coles has pointed us to the possibility of ‘partak[ing] in communion’ at “‘tables” and “places” that are at a distance from those of greater stature, at greater distance from those where one feels belonging, security and (at least in these senses) power’. 147 If the Syro-Phoenician’s challenge to Jesus comes as an ‘ex-centric word’ in Jesus’ borderlands, then in the house of ‘Simon the leper’ Jesus receives from the anointing woman an extravagantly ‘ex-centric sacrament’, which both ‘overwhelms’ him (with oil and generosity) and ‘calls forth’ a new (messianic) performance from him. The language of ‘overwhelming’ offers a helpful political and theological edge here: where the power of the ‘capitalist machine’ and apocalyptic visions of ‘ecological collapse’ threaten us with ‘multiple overwhelments’, David Ford suggests we might wisely seek to live ‘amidst the overwhelments in a way that lets one of them be the overwhelming that shapes [our responses to] the others’. 148 Like Ward, Ford gestures strongly towards the worship of the Christian church to find that ‘one overwhelming’, but is not as averse as Ward to expecting to receive such an ‘ex-centric sacrament’ at other tables too. 149 Here, then, is a christological logic for our ‘para-liturgical eucharists’: imitating not Jesus’ foot-washing ‘service’ (‘overwhelming’ his disciples), but his receptivity to the anointing woman, we might open ourselves (and our ‘domesticated’ economies) to ‘being overwhelmed’ by our neighbours (some of which will come to us as decidedly ‘strange’), receptive both to their (often uncomfortable) generosity, and to what they ‘call forth’ in us.

6.4. vi Liturgical gathering, formation in receptivity and liturgies of ‘countershock’

In both ‘confession’ and ‘tabling’ as re-worked here, we have located the work of the Christian theologian far beyond ‘the church’s door’ (where Ward places her/him), and even further from the church’s altar. Ward himself goes further ‘out’ than many other theologians, in identifying the work of ‘performing Christ’ specifically as the vocation of ‘lay’ Christians, and attending to the differences of location and direction in which they might take theological exploration. The logic of his largely-unilateral flow, however, seems largely to imply a ‘concentric imaginary’ (Coles’ term) in which priests speak words, and give eucharistic bread, to the receptive laos, who then in turn take that word, and that bread, out into the world to hand on to others. The ‘flow’ of this logic is made explicit, for example, in the post-communion prayers of the Church of England’s Common Worship: ‘may we ... who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world’. 150 Ward’s attention to ‘reception’ is precisely of this kind: ‘[o]nly to the extent to which we can receive God’s unconditional love for us will we be able to pass it on, pass it forward’. 151 But what if our receptivity in worship was meant not only to ‘fill us up’, but to form us (as we suggested above) for

147 (section 5.5.iv, above)
148 Ford 1997:xxv
149 Ford makes much of ‘feasting’ (around all kinds of tables) as a participation in ‘resurrection joy’ (1997:158ff.). As so often, Ward offers glimpses of such openness, as in his suggestion that ‘[t]he real questions’ of our inter-relationship ‘only emerge in the practices of our everyday living alongside each other’, when we are able to ‘dwell together’, ‘sit around a table’ together, look each other in the eye and speak and listen to each other’s experiences (section 3.5.i, above).
150 Church of England 2000:182
151 (section 3.3.v, above)
receptivity, as the laos, in the world? What if the ‘thirst’ for God we experience and express in worship is meant to cultivate in us a ‘thirst’ for the company of our neighbours (even our ‘difficult’ neighbours) beyond the church’s door? What if our liturgical ‘sending out’ were reconfigured as more explicitly a ‘sending out to receive from others’, and if our liturgical ‘gathering’ more explicitly welcomed the gifts and challenges, learning and questions, we (the laos) have brought with us from our quotidian life and engagements? These possibilities would require a manner of eucharistic presidency more radically ‘receptive’ than is commonly practised, I would argue, but could also be small but significant ways in which our ‘polyface formation’ might be acknowledged – ways in which our engagements as Christians ‘at the border’ might be brought more explicitly into our liturgical ‘core’.

Such possibilities might also have political implications, akin, at their most dramatic, to Coles’ politics of ‘countershock’. As James K Smith has highlighted most explicitly, the ‘capitalist machine’ proliferates cultural and political ‘liturgies’ of its own. What Coles has pointed us to, however, is not simply (as Smith does) alternative liturgical locations for a ‘counter-cultural’ political formation (for Smith, the church; for Coles, the diverse radical democratic gathering), but to the possibility of staging ‘outrageously performative events’ which might ‘unleash bursts of natality’ – energising ‘a rich and diverse affective ecology of “civic emotions”’ including indignation, determination, irony, outrage, joy, humour, and more – especially when such events are intimately intertwined with the more mundane work of ‘quotidian’, receptive politics. Here the patient, local work of ‘hearing to speech’ discovers its potential to ‘plug in’ to the macro-scale workings of the ‘machine’ – and there is a role for receptive political theologians, not so much in themselves ‘speaking truth to power’, but in accompanying (and where necessary enabling) those at the margins on journeys to the ‘centres’ of power (political, cultural, financial – or indeed ecclesial) to present their own insights and challenges, with their own bodies and in their own words. Sometimes such journeys may be characterised by conventional, ‘deliberative’ politics. At other times these will be take a much more ‘performative’ shape – such as the ‘Occupy London Stock Exchange’ camp (in the square in front of St Paul’s Cathedral), or the vigil lamenting the Council’s ‘crucifixion’ of the local library

152 (section 6.3.i, above)
153 See e.g. Psalm 42-43.
154 We try to do this in Hodge Hill, for example, by beginning each eucharistic ‘gathering’ with a conversation (in 2s and 3s, and then together as a congregation) in which we share some of the thanksgivings and concerns we bring with us from our daily lives. We have also, more recently, adopted a regular space for a ‘5th Gospel’ – an opportunity for a member of the congregation, or of the wider community, to share a glimpse of their day-to-day life, with some of its joys and struggles.
155 See Barrett 2010 for further exploration of the possibility of eucharistic presidency in a ‘receptive’ mode, drawing on the liturgical theologies of Siobhan Garrigan and Gordon Lathrop, among other sources. See also the ground-breaking work of Jessica Foster, exploring the distinctive role for the (Anglican) deacon in multi-faith contexts, which has significant overlap with my proposals here. A recurring theme in Foster’s work is that of deacon as ‘boundary-dweller’, positioned (like Ward’s theologian, but in a much more receptive mode) ‘literally and metaphorically at the doorway of the church’ (Foster 2015:46; cf Ward 2005a:59, section 3.5.iv, above).
156 See e.g. Smith 2009.
157 (section 5.4.ii, above)
158 For example, presenting local findings from a series of ‘ListenUp!’ conversations to a House of Commons Select Committee (see e.g. http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/467/listen-up.pdf), or the more relational approach of Poverty Truth Commissions, first developed in Scotland (e.g. http://povertytruthcommission.blogspot.co.uk/) but now proliferating across UK cities, including Birmingham.
described by Keith Hebden in his parish of Matson. Common to them all is the possibility, unearthed in the most local of receptive engagements, of simultaneously pronouncing ‘a discordant “no!”’ and embodying, prefiguring, an eschatological ‘Yes’.

6.4.ii Prayer

‘[I]t is only in prayer that the discipline of listening is developed’, Ward claimed, somewhat hyperbolically. But perhaps now we are in a position to re-evaluate that claim, with a broadened concept of ‘prayer’. While Coles has repeatedly beckoned the theologian to step out beyond the church’s door, to dwell in the ‘borderlands’ that are all around us, and to ‘anticipate abundance’ at those edges, Ward has invited us to inhabit such places in their deepest eschatological significance, not simply attending to them as they appear to us, but being attentive in a manner resembling Bretherton’s ‘double listening’: paying attention both to what is around us and allowing it to ‘pass through us and change us’, and paying attention also to ‘the yearning in the heart of Christ’, ‘reach[ing] out toward some inchoate ... participation in’ the ‘true, just, and good order’ that is ‘waiting to be revealed’. Through engagements with both Ward and Coles, then, ‘prayer’ has begun to re-emerge as fundamentally an alert receptivity to the abundance both around and far beyond where we are presently ‘rooted’. At its core, the practice of prayer will be that ‘perpetual reanimation’ of the tension between ‘teleological directness’ and ‘ateleological openness’ (Coles). On the one hand, our prayer will be oriented by an ‘eschatologically-stretched’ (and teleologically-informed) ‘yearning’ for what is ‘not yet’ – of which we have caught at least glimpses, through Scripture and worship. At times this may lead to forms of speech and action which ‘interrupt’ or ‘block’ the flow of some of the world’s ‘secular liturgies’ (Smith): practices of ‘sustained refusal’ (Muers) or ‘disbelief’ (Esteva); pronouncing a discordant ‘No’, whilst prefiguring an alternative eschatological ‘Yes’. On the other hand, our prayer will also be grounded in the cultivation of a radical sense of ‘insufficiency’, in practices of ‘pregnant waiting’, of ‘not knowing what to say and knowing one does not know’, ‘thirsting’ for and opening to the ‘disruptive grace’ which comes from both human and non-human ‘others’: the ‘weightless seeds’ which circulate in our world. The tension at the core of such a practice of prayer must also surely, in ‘storm-shocked’ times, be undergirded by what Coles is prepared to call ‘faith’: a ‘wormhole hope’ which ‘endures’ even ‘when there’s no way to imagine winning in the foreseeable future’, which both remembers and ‘solicits’ apparently ‘miraculous connections’ across ‘the fabric of despairing space-time’ between far-flung ‘intensities’ of struggle and possibility.

Through engaging Ward and Coles in dialogue and tension, we have re-figured and supplemented Ward’s ecclesial ‘body practices’ of ‘service’, ‘cultural politics’ and ‘eucharist’ with more receptively-inflected motifs. From serving those ‘in need’, we have moved towards practices of waiting, expecting abundance, listening for the ‘ghosts’, and a footwashed politics that undergoes the difficult work of receiving. The ‘negotiations’ of Ward’s ‘cultural politics’ have remained, but his cosmopolitan sense of ‘world-travelling’ has been dis-located and grounded in Coles’ version, which actively seeks out the uncertainty, challenge and disruption that come from dwelling in unfamiliar spaces and listening to their inhabitants. Ward’s ‘reschooling’ of the ‘cultural imaginary’ and the

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159 Hebden 2011 & 2013. See also Barrett 2010 on turning liturgy ‘inside-out’, with the example of a peace protest at AWE Aldermaston.

160 (section 3.4.iii, above)

161 (section 5.4.iv, above)
redirecting of its desires ‘towards a transcendent hope’ comes very close to Coles’ materialist practices of ‘disbelief’ in the ‘mega-circulations’, practices which clear spaces in which to ‘initiate alternative flows’. Our re-figuring of ‘confession’, however, causes us to approach all negotiations and contestations with more humility than Ward seems to allow for, recognising our need of the ‘disruptive grace’ of our ‘others’, and not just the possibility of such grace. Finally, whilst not leaving behind the centrality of the eucharist in Ward’s theological worldview, we have discovered, with Coles, the possibility that we might be sent out from the church’s eucharists not simply ‘full to overflowing’, but with a renewed thirst and hunger: to receive at other tables, to be formed in other places and to perform with other neighbours ‘outrageous’ liturgies of ‘countershock’ that interrupt the workings of the ‘capitalist machine’.

We might, perhaps (with a good deal of provisionality), attempt to plot some of these practices of ‘polyface formation’ on to axes that stretch out, in one dimension, between the church’s ‘centre’ and its ‘edge’, and in the other dimension, between the kind of celebratory gatherings that Coles names ‘Dionysian conjuring of utopic possibility’162 (and the performances Ward no less simply denotes ‘eucharist’) and the more mundane, quotidian work of receptive engagements with others. In such a cartography, ‘prayer’ as we have re-conceived it would surely find itself somewhere in the middle, animating the tensions – Coles’ ‘alternating current’ – between (ecclesial) centre and edge, celebration and receptivity: making connections, making its own contribution to the hard work of negotiation and contestation, and stimulating new and renewed flows (see Fig. 6.2, below).

What Coles says of ‘visionary pragmatism’ in general, we can now claim here for a receptively-inflected practice of prayer, inspired and energised by the ‘go-between’ Spirit of God: ‘it maintains an intransigent practice of peering underneath, above, around, through, and beyond the cracks in the destructive walls and mainstream ruts of this world. It lingers in eddies, catches cross-currents,

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162 (section 5.4.ii)
and cultivates new flows that spill through these cracks and flood beyond the banks. It has an unquenchable appetite for visions that come from beyond hegemonic common sense or exceed it from within, and it devotes itself to looking for clues of these, listening to whispers near and far that articulate suggestive possibilities beyond the assumed boundaries...

'It is only in prayer that the discipline of listening is developed', Ward asserted. If we can find a way to affirming this thesis of Ward’s, within our re-figured understanding of prayer, then we might also helpfully complement it with a statement of our own thesis here: is it, perhaps, only when we begin learning to receive from our neighbours that we can begin truly to pray?

6.5 Returning

In this final section, we make a return to four of the places that have ‘haunted’ this thesis: firstly, to the Church of England and its current political, ecclesiological and missiological dilemmas, to identify some of the points of contact where a radically receptive political theology might present either gift or challenge; secondly, to Manchester’s Oxford Road, to re-visit the homeless person Graham Ward once encountered there; thirdly, to the Bromford Passion Play, to ask how much it embodied itself a receptive political theology; and lastly, to the tomb where the women laid Jesus’ mute body late on the day before the Sabbath, asking what resurrection might look like through a radically receptive lens.

6.5.1 Returning to the Church of England

The Church of England has ‘haunted’ this thesis, ever-present but not always explicitly acknowledged, both in its shaping of my own ecclesiological context (local and national), and also in its offering of many of the sources and resources for theological reflection (Graham Ward and Rowan Williams most prominently among them). As we conclude, it is worth noting some of the specifically English Anglican resonances with the themes explored here, and thereby highlighting both the limitations and opportunities to apply such insights in other ecclesial contexts.

(1) A parish church

First is the embodied theological commitment to a rootedness in place and to a sustained engagement with geographically-proximate neighbours, expressed paradigmatically – although by no means exclusively – in the Church of England parish. What Andrew Rumsey has recently called the spatial, ethical and theological ‘practice of “neighbourhood”’, and Timothy Jenkins the ‘territorial embeddedness’ of Anglicanism, is in contrast both to more traditionally

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163 (section 5.3.ii, above)
164 Even more tentatively, I might suggest the possibility of re-figuring the traditional ‘ACTS’ mnemonic for prayer (‘Adoration – Confession – Thanksgiving – Supplication’) with a radically receptive inflection. Might we begin, perhaps, with an awareness of our ‘thirst’ to encounter God in our neighbours? ‘Confession’ we now understand as inextricable from our receptive work with (and dependent upon) those we have been complicit in marginalizing. If ‘adoration’ is about an awe-struck contemplation of God, might that translate, receptively, into a reverential ‘Attentiveness’ to the ‘disruptive grace’ that come to us in our neighbours? Which leaves us with ‘Thanksgiving’ – not just for those gifts of God received in our neighbours, but also understood as discovering ways of celebrating and feasting with our neighbours.
165 Rumsey 2017:13
166 Jenkins (2003:199) identifies this ‘territorial embeddedness’ as one of two defining characteristics of Anglicanism. The other Jenkins labels Anglicanism’s ‘conversational mode’ of engagement (he focuses particularly on the relationship between parish priest and parishioners), in contrast to more ‘authoritative’ or
While our engagement with Ward has sharpened our attentiveness to the ways in which ‘the space of flows’ can dissolve and disperse the very idea of ‘distinct places’, both Ward’s analysis of ‘depoliticization’ and Coles’ attention to the growing ecological crisis have highlighted the urgent need not just for the creation of shared spaces for dialogue and contestation (Ward), but for cocreating roots in a place (Coles). As Rumsey puts it, ‘any moves towards abandoning the parochial idea would appear fatally short-sighted... if the parish no longer existed, it might need to be reinvented’.

There is an inclusivity about a genuinely ‘parochial’ ecclesiology. Those who live in the ‘urban margins’ will always find themselves within the boundaries of a parish (and often geographically central within that parish): neighbours and ‘parishioners’ rather than ‘edge-dwellers’. Such an inclusivity also has its flip-side, however. As we noted with Ward’s description of the apophatic body of Christ in action, we Christians can risk appropriating all our parishioners’ acts of love as ‘anonymously Christian’, and therefore as not truly ‘other’ to us, a ‘proprietal’ attitude towards the territory and its inhabitants that Rumsey notes as a danger of the Anglican parochial vision.

Our reading of Coles’ work also highlighted the dangers of ‘creating new modes of exclusive territoriality (e.g., mini-sovereignties, nostalgic enclaves, xenophobic localisms, communities of depoliticised withdrawal), and the vital importance of a radically receptive ‘routing’, or ‘world-travelling’, as well as ‘rooting’: ‘going to places and people with whom we must relearn how to see, think, imagine, work, and act’. Here Coles’ insistence (following Rowan Williams) on Jesus’ ‘sheer absence of territorial power’ returns to us in tandem with his pointers to Jesus as ‘stranger’, whose agency is utterly other to ours. My suggestion, in this final chapter, that we often need to ‘flip’ our ‘christological axis’ finds a particularly Anglican resonance in Rumsey’s reading of Luke’s Emmaus Road journey as an encounter between Christian disciples and the Risen Christ as paroikes: a word which might be translated both as ‘stranger’ and ‘parishioner’.

(2) A liturgical, eucharistic, ‘incarnational’ church

A second distinctively Anglican (and more specifically Anglo-Catholic) thread running through this thesis has been its grounding in, and development of, a locally-embodied ecclesiology which is liturgical, eucharistic and ‘incarnational’ – while proposing a significant shift in language from ‘the

See my discussion of Mission-Shaped Church in section 1.3.i, above, and my note there of the growing movement seeking to rediscover radically localised forms of missional community (e.g. the ‘New Parish’ movement in North America).

Rumsey 2017:187
Rumsey 2017:188
Quash 2003:38, 55. Again, this is resonant with the dialogical account of the local church’s relationship with its neighbours, developed at length in this thesis.

167 See my discussion of Mission-Shaped Church in section 1.3.i, above, and my note there of the growing movement seeking to rediscover radically localised forms of missional community (e.g. the ‘New Parish’ movement in North America).
168 (section 3.1.ii, above & passim)
169 Rumsey 2017:187
170 (section 3.5.ii, above)
171 Rumsey 2017:188
172 (section 5.4.i, above)
173 (section 5.5.ii, above)
174 (section 5.5.iv, above)
175 Rumsey 2017:3
body of Christ’ to ‘the flesh of Jesus’. The practice and theology of the eucharist can, as Richard Sudworth has recently highlighted in his work on Anglican-Muslim relations, undergird and profoundly form a hospitable ‘impulse to traditioned and open engagement with the other that can both challenge and receive, pastor and prophesy’. Such a sacramental theology, Sudworth argues, ‘gives space for finding Christ as well as proclaiming Christ’, rooted in the theological understanding that ‘no relationship is devoid of the potential for divine encounter, and thus is gift and mystery’.176

On the other hand, through my critical examination of Ward’s thoroughly eucharistic theology (and following in the wake of the self-critical Anglo-Catholicism of Rowan Williams, David Nicholls and others177), I have highlighted what Coles has called the ‘concentric imaginary’ of the church’s ‘flow’: centred on the church’s altar, within which the laos receive (in church), in order to give (in the world). What Ward has labelled ‘performing Christ’ I have suggested, at worst, risks becoming a penetrative missiology, abusing imbalances of power to perpetuate a patriarchal, imperialist violence that forecloses a receptivity to its ‘others’.178 We have also seen that it is not only explicitly eucharistic ecclesiology that suffers from such concentric, penetrative tendencies: a similar resistance to reciprocity emerged embedded in Ward’s notion of ‘service of those in need’,179 and his more Barthian description of the Word of God ‘extending out’, through ‘the work and words of the [Christian] community’, into the ‘deepest, darkest immanence’ of the world.180 A parallel dynamic has also been exposed in more evangelical, ‘social justice’-oriented traditions, in Jennifer Harvey’s critique of the ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ mantra.181

Rumsey criticises those – sociologists of religion and ‘church growth’ strategists, among others – who ‘assess the health of Christianity centripetally: that is, by concentrating on allegiance to the Church as an institution’, and argues instead for an understanding the Church of England as operat[ing] radially: directed beyond itself towards wider society, seeing the local congregation as ‘a transforming agent’.182 My argument in this thesis has been that this shift needs to go further: the church needs to practise a radical receptivity to the paroikos, a thirst for mutual transformation with those at our ‘edges’. I have also begun to suggest significant practical ways in which the ‘concentric’ eucharistic flow might be reversed, such that liturgical formation nurtures in the laos a thirsting receptivity for our worldly life, the gathering in worship becomes as important as the sending, eucharistic presidency itself becomes more radically receptive, and the role of the deacon as ‘boundary-dweller’ finds new significance.183

176 Sudworth 2017:172, 186. Sudworth examines the Christian-Muslim engagements of Kenneth Cragg and Rowan Williams, in particular.
177 (see section 2.5.iv, above)
178 (sections 3.3.v, 4.2, 6.3.ii, above)
179 (see sections 3.4.iv, 5.5.iv, above)
180 (see section 3.5.iii, above)
181 (see section 6.2.ii (2), above). For a contemporary (and relatively local) example of the concentric imaginary at work in Barthian mode, we might note that St Luke’s Gas Street (the new Anglican ‘resourcing church’ in Birmingham city centre, a multi-million pound investment by the Diocese of Birmingham and the Church Commissioners as part of the Diocese’s ‘Growing Younger’ strategy) states that its mission is “to be a church that generates light for the city of Birmingham”, a light “that we pray will pour out of this building” (https://www.gasstreet.org/our-vision-values/).
182 Rumsey 2017:14
183 (see section 6.4.vi, above)
I am not seeking to claim (in a receptive twist on Radical Orthodoxy) that a radical receptivity to the gifts and challenges of our neighbours can only be grounded in the eucharist. Quaker practices of keeping silence, and questioning, offer a very different but equally promising foundation. I hope I have demonstrated here, however, that a eucharistic ecclesiology inflected with a radical receptivity can be a potentially fruitful theological and practical resource for Christians seeking to ‘flip the christological axis’ in our spatial, ethical and theological ‘practices of neighbourhood’ (as Rumsey put it).

(3) A national church

A third obvious marker of the Church of England’s distinctive lived ecclesiology is that it is the Church of England – invested not just in the parish, but in the nation. It is part of the national ‘establishment’, its own centres of power sitting cheek by jowl with those of national government. As a virtue, we have seen Elaine Graham observe that the Church of England’s particular form of public theology, its capacity for ‘speaking truth to power’ through ‘prophetic advocacy ... with the poor and marginalized’, is dependent on its ‘combination of local presence in every neighbourhood’ and ‘the constitutional access to government granted by Establishment’. This was the great strength of Faith in the City, as it appealed to ‘the nation’ to ‘listen to the voices of our neighbours who live in the UPAs’; doing effectively what Ward describes as the theologian’s task of ‘amplify[ing] the voice[s]’ of those who might otherwise be unheard.

This apparently doubly-privileged position so easily becomes a vice rather than a virtue, however, when the Church of England imagines it has heard such voices, without itself being changed by them; its own power, privilege and tendencies to marginalize and exclude remaining intact and unexamined. We have observed this to be a danger of public theology more generally, but here we need to reiterate the Church of England’s particular complicity in both class and racial oppressions especially. Through a class-focused lens, we should recall both its enduring ‘predominantly middle class’ makeup, and the tendency for middle-class, suburban models and agenda for mission to become ‘normative’, as Andrew Davey has noted. Its historic entanglement with ‘the ruling classes’ and inseparability from the history of British imperialism have also meant, as John Wilkinson highlights, that the Church of England’s complicity both in past slavery and in ongoing institutional racism is ‘deeper, more thorough and long[er] lasting’ than for other Christian denominations. As David Isiorho has recently exposed with incisive clarity, the last few decades have seen the Church of England continue, in official publications, to conflate Anglican values with

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184 (see sections 6.3.i, 6.4.iv, above)
185 Church House (the CofE’s administrative headquarters) and Lambeth Palace (the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury) are both just a short walk from the Houses of Parliament, and 26 of the Church’s bishops sit in the House of Lords. The CofE also requires parliament to approve changes to its legislation.
186 Graham 2013:227
187 (see sections 2.3.i, 2.4.ii, above)
188 (see section 3.2, above)
189 (see section 2.3.iii, above)
190 (see section 2.4.ii, above)
191 (see section 1.3.i, above)
192 Strong 2007 argues at length that a ‘public theological discourse of empire was formed and promulgated’ by the Church of England ‘in an imperial partnership with the state’.
193 Wilkinson 1993:23
white English ethnicity.\textsuperscript{194} In my examination of Graham Ward’s theology here, I have argued that it, likewise, is more situated in a specifically middle-class, white, English male worldview than he dares to admit, and that this, at best, risks attempting to ‘fix’ (in both senses of the word) his ‘others’.\textsuperscript{195} Learning first from liberation theologies (in chapter 2), then from Coles’ resistance to colonial/imperial patterns of thinking (chapter 5), and most recently (in chapter 6) from critical white theorists Jim Perkinson and Jennifer Harvey, we have begun to develop resources to enable theologians and institutions in positions of power and privilege, such as the Church of England itself, to practise not only a tactical ‘dis-location’\textsuperscript{196} and a letting-go of the need to take the initiative,\textsuperscript{197} but also a profoundly receptive form of ‘confession’ (a working-through of the tragic consequences of our actions) and a ‘re-schooling’ that comes from our ‘others’ themselves.\textsuperscript{198} Listening attentively to black Anglican voices, white Anglican (and feminist) theologian Jenny Daggers similarly invites other white British Anglicans to acknowledge with contrition ‘our still-colonized minds’ – ‘our unacknowledged racism and our reinscription of colonial patterns’ – and to place a (‘decolonized’) commitment to evangelism within [rather than alongside] the church’s wider mission to work for the common good of contemporary English society. White British Anglicans need to receive postcolonial diversity as a gift, she argues: we need to learn ‘to be transformed, rather than to transform’\textsuperscript{199} – a radical receptivity deeply resonant with my argument in this thesis, in which I have sought to attend explicitly to differences not just of race, but also of class, gender and ecclesiastical hierarchy.

It is necessary here also to name the necessity of attending to differences and hierarchies of power and privilege based on dis/ability, sexuality and age, and the possibilities of extending the principle of radical receptivity across those differences too. One further necessary dimension of such receptivity, from an explicitly Church of England perspective, is towards explicitly non-conformist Christian traditions (we have touched on Yoder’s Mennonite minoritarianism, and Quaker traditions of questioning, as well as Esteva’s ‘secular’ practices of ‘disbelief’). Where Malcolm Brown has highlighted the Church of England’s weddedness ‘(for its own ecclesiological reasons as much as for reasons of political inertia) to a consensual polity in which conflict of all kinds was suspect’,\textsuperscript{200} my argument in this thesis invites the Church of England to hear and be changed by the voices of those who more habitually practise dissent, and to discover a more marginal, dissenting voice of its own – embracing the marginality that Ward, among others, seems to lament.\textsuperscript{201}

Finally, a national Church in intimate relationship with the national centres of power needs to sustain, and perhaps recover, a radical receptivity to the gifts and challenges which come from its own edges, its parishes on the urban margins. ‘If the national Church falters,’ Rumsey suggests, ‘it is usually when presuming a kind of strategic independence [from] the localities in which it still makes a peculiar kind of sense’.\textsuperscript{202} In my opening chapter, I suggested that the Church of England nationally

\textsuperscript{194} Isiorho 2002:46, quoted in Daggers 2016:190
\textsuperscript{195} (section 4.6, above)
\textsuperscript{196} (section 6.2.ii, above)
\textsuperscript{197} (section 6.4.ii, above)
\textsuperscript{198} (section 6.4.iii, above)
\textsuperscript{199} Daggers 2016:191-3
\textsuperscript{200} (see section 2.4.ii, above)
\textsuperscript{201} (see sections 3.3, 4.6, above)
\textsuperscript{202} Rumsey 2017:112
is currently beset by an institutional anxiety in relation to at least three different challenges: its response to economic austerity and deepening inequality, its own numerical and financial decline, and its waning political influence. I also suggested there that an anxiety-driven response to each of these challenges might closely parallel the ‘heroic’ temptations to grasp what Bishop John V Taylor called (in his reading of Matthew 4:1-11) the power of the ‘provider’, the ‘performer’ and the ‘possessor’.\textsuperscript{203} There is a further temptation for the Church of England nationally: to retreat from forms of passionate presence in economically marginal urban areas. In terms of a purely financial economy, such presence is often not seen to be ‘sustainable’.\textsuperscript{204} That would, however, miss the abundance of gifts, invitations, and (at times difficult) ‘schooling’ offered by the ‘angels’ which inhabit such neighbourhoods – a ‘proliferation of flows’, as Coles would describe it, with a markedly different quality to the ‘mega-circulations’ of neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{205} My argument over the course of this thesis, writing from a Birmingham outer estate neighbourhood, is closely paralleled by that made by Richard Sudworth from a Muslim-majority inner city area of the same city: ‘[t]he question is perhaps not whether the Church of England can afford to be present in such areas, rather whether it can afford not to be present’.\textsuperscript{206}

6.5.ii Returning with Ward to the Oxford Road

How might radical receptive political theology take flesh in an encounter between one priest-theologian and one of his/her neighbours, then? If we were to return Ward, again, to his ‘haunting’ encounter one May morning with a homeless person on Manchester’s Oxford Road, we might now be in a position to offer a few tentative words of advice. Firstly, stop. Let this encounter be an interruption for you. Even if it delays the delivery of your 9 o’clock lecture. Secondly, now is not the moment for ontology, for ‘making sense’ of this situation within the grand scheme of things, or indeed to ‘speak for’ them like a good public theologian. Your task right now is not ‘to amplify the voice of the accuser’. Right now, they have no voice to amplify. At most, the initiative required of you is one of gentle touch, of tentative questioning: ‘are you OK?’, perhaps. Be the ‘constitutive outside’ that ‘solicits’ a response. Thirdly, don’t ‘pat your pockets’ but open your eyes, wider. You’ve noticed the book, ‘a philosophical classic’, and the ‘bottle of okay Italian wine’. Get in touch with your thirst. And get over your preference for the fine wines of Marks and Spencer’s. Shared together, the two possessions of this homeless stranger could easily be enough to satisfy your

\textsuperscript{203} (see section 1.3.ii, above)
\textsuperscript{204} (see Bishop Philip North’s comments quoted in section 1.3, above)
\textsuperscript{205} (see sections 5.4.i, 6.4.iii, above). See also Rumsey’s recent suggestion that ‘[a] humbler role for the parish may ... find the seeds of renewal in its classical origins as the society beside the boundaries, the \textit{paroikia}. That the Church employed and adapted a term essentially denoting those who do not belong to describe a new kind of community is as enticing a piece of ecclesiological paradox as one is likely to encounter – brimming with potential for imaginative reinterpretation’ (Rumsey 2017:187).
\textsuperscript{206} ‘The financial vista of the Church of England suggests that many inner-city parishes for which that formative encounter with Islam is a daily reality are under threat. Many of these parish churches have small, dwindling congregations and are in some of the most deprived communities in the country. There are very real possibilities that the unique ways that religion in the public square is negotiated in the Christian-Muslim encounter will be lost to the Church within a generation. This would be a travesty for any remaining integrity that the Church of England retains for speaking into the national consciousness, and demands creativity, imagination and strategic sacrifice in the training and deployment of ministers in the future. The question is perhaps not whether the Church of England can afford to be present in such areas, rather whether it can afford not to be present to the Christian-Muslim encounter in our inner cities and towns’ (Sudworth 2017:187).
longing for ‘a new relationality’ – for communion, even (as urban theorist Bob Catterall points out with not a little irony207). Then, if this encounter makes you turn anywhere, don’t turn to the middle-class ekklesia of those ‘similarly ashamed’. Why not head, with your new companion, to a drop-in for homeless people, the kind of ‘untidy’, ‘postsecular space’ (as described by Muers and Britt), within which ‘extraordinary’ encounters can happen – where volunteers so often seem to discover themselves not as providers of a one-way ‘hospitality’ but as those who are ‘learning’ within relationships of surprising reciprocity, ‘the grateful recipient[s] of an unearned welcome’ from others?208

Lastly, perhaps (although there could be no end to this new journey), what ‘schooling’ might you find yourself undergoing, as this unwonted relationship develops? Will you find your habits, attitudes, movements, ‘investments’ changing as a result of that chance encounter on the Oxford Road? What trouble might it get you into, back at the university? How might you tell the story, next Sunday at your parish church? What chains of relationship might you have triggered, as others are drawn into being heard, or being similarly ‘haunted’ in turn?

6.5.ii Returning to the Bromford Passion Play

The Bromford Passion Play, like the drop-in for homeless people, was another of those ‘untidy’, ‘postsecular spaces’. It can be seen to embody many of the key elements of an embodied, receptive political theology as I have outlined here: a creative initiative that came from the beyond the ‘edges’ of ‘church’, and which emerged and flourished in the context of friendships which bridged many differences; a mutually-constitutive relationship between a (receptive) ‘church’ and an (active) theatre group, with each bringing out the best in the other; a space in which the story was wrestled with and argued over; and a dramatic, open-air performance, profoundly shaped by its environment and yet pointing to a hope beyond its present reality. Not perhaps accented, but still discernible, we might also note a parallel ‘dis-investment’ (‘disbelief’) in the mainstream media’s individualising, disembodied forms of ‘entertainment’, and a lightness of touch in the church’s attitude to a story it could so easily have clung onto as its own possession – but instead was able to receive afresh as a gift of ‘disruptive grace’. More instinctive than explicit at the time, but now much more articulate, was the approach of a number of us who were part of the cast, who had intentionally moved to live on the Firs & Bromford estate, and who had equally intentionally renounced ‘doing to’ and ‘doing for’ models of mission for the ‘wild patience’ of being present and making friends with our neighbours (around many, many tables), and getting involved with whatever was already happening here.

It is not surprising, of course, that the Bromford Passion Play should reflect much of what has been developed theoretically in this thesis: the experience of being part of that event has profoundly

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207 On this occasion the Good Samaritan (who might also have grasped that the title of the book was relevant to the person’s plight rather than merely “a philosophical classic”) did not make an appearance. Had he done so, armed with the “bottle of okay Italian wine” (ah! the pleasures of connoisseurship!), they could soon have been on their way to communion (Catterall 2002:155 n.20).

208 Muers & Britt 2012. Muers and Britt caution us against ‘romanticis[ing] this untidying of social space, or minimis[ing] the adjustment of expectations and behaviour – that volunteers have to undergo in order to sustain’ their presence there. Such an ‘adjustment’ process was necessary, often ‘for material and hard-to-avoid reasons’, such as learning to cope with the ‘awful, overpowering’ smell, and the occasional ‘fights’ (Muers & Britt 2012:215). Sharon Betcher’s urging Ward to practise ‘empathic interdependence’ by looking attentively, to attend to the ‘suffering servant’ of Isaiah 53 as a ‘therapeutic ritual’ for ‘working through disgust’ seems particularly relevant again here (section 4.4.iv, above).
shaped the research questions of this thesis, and the more deeply-rooted questions I have lived with over the four years since it was first performed. It was something of an early ‘milestone’ on a learning journey, among a growing number of us here, which has continued and developed since then in all kinds of hoped-for and unexpected directions (some of which are mentioned briefly in the previous section). Echoes of the story of that first community Passion Play have found their way into Church Urban Fund briefing papers, and Archbishop’s presidential addresses. But most significantly, at the end of 2016, in the ongoing grip of the British government’s fiscal austerity regime, and after the EU referendum ‘Brexit’ vote and the national rise in racist hate crime and media-legitimated xenophobia, the Firs & Bromford is a neighbourhood where movements and spaces are proliferating, that are led by local people, and are shaped by the explicit intention of discovering and receiving the gifts and challenges of our neighbours. The ‘linkages’ and ‘trajectories’ of ‘wormhole hope’ forged in the Passion Play – ‘bridges’ across vast distances of space and time – continue to ‘ricochet’ and multiply around our estate, stirring and sustaining possibilities and ‘miraculous connections’ beyond the present limits of our collective imagination.

6.5.iv Returning... to resurrection?

Just before sunset on Easter Eve 2011 (two years before the first Bromford Passion Play), a small group of Christians from Hodge Hill Church gathered in ‘Comet Park’, with picnic blankets and folding chairs, lanterns, and a container of ‘seed-bombs’. Six days earlier, the brand new play equipment in the park, installed by Birmingham City Council just a month or so before, had been set alight, with a significant amount of petrol, and burnt beyond repair. On the blackened earth where the climbing-frame had so recently stood, we sat in a circle and shared stories of hope: stories of hopes shattered, stories of hopes longed-for, stories of hopes occasionally glimpsed or realised. We shared our own, lived stories, and other, more well-known stories we had heard many times before.

In the midst of our sharing, a group of children came into the park. More than there were of us, ages ranging from mid-teens to a toddler, and Muslim, judging by the girls’ headscarves. They came to play, but were diverted first by their discovery of the recent destruction, and then by their curiosity with this odd circle of lantern-lit adults. They came across and asked us, quite understandably, ‘what are you doing?’ We explained, as best we could, that this was Easter Eve, and we were sharing with each other our stories of death and resurrection. They shared with us their bewilderment, their anger, that these new places for play had been taken away from them, so quickly. We heard their bewilderment and anger, and acknowledged that we shared similar feelings ourselves. And then...

209 Church Urban Fund 2013:7
210 Sentamu 2013 (a presidential address to the Church of England’s General Synod meeting in York, November 2013, a month after the publication of the CU F briefing paper noted above).
211 In a recent conversation with Phil Howkins (writer of the Bromford Passion Play), he described a very similar sense of ‘alternating current’ to that outlined above (e.g. section 6.4.vii): ‘you know, there’s a lot of good stuff going on, so we need to focus on the good, and sort out the bad, as we’re going along... I think sometimes people make the mistake of trying to sort all the bad stuff out all in one go... and it just makes people more depressed then... so, let’s have a bit of fun, and sort out the bad stuff as well at the same time, or, you know, alright, we’ll have the panto, and then we’ll tackle this doctor’s surgery, then we’ll have, the Easter thing, and then we’ll... you know... we’ll have the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party and then we’ll tackle the name of the estate... let’s... and rally the troops, really, ‘cause that’s what we’re doing, we’re rallying the troops, we’re getting people to these events, and it’s a perfect soap-box to having a quiet chat with them, and ask ‘what do you think about that?’... you know, on a serious note, ‘what do you think about that?’, and then they’ll tell you, and then you tell them another joke...’ (Howkins 2017 – Appendix 2, below).
they asked what we had in the box. I took out one of the seed-bombs and showed it to them, explaining that they were a mixture of clay, soil and seeds, and that if you threw one somewhere, and the rain watered it, the seeds would begin to grow. ‘How much do you want for one?’, one of the boys asked. We explained they weren’t for sale, that they could take some for free – to their amazement, and growing excitement. ‘Can we really throw them anywhere?’ another checked. Anywhere, we replied. And laden with handfuls of seed-bombs, they went away and left us to finish our Easter vigil.

We could, with hindsight, have been more receptive to what those children brought with them. Did they have stories of hope – or hopes frustrated – that they might have shared, if we had asked them? What gifts and challenges might they have offered to us? For that evening, however, the church in Hodge Hill was receptive in the ways it was then able to imagine: receptive to be shaped by the places and the events of our neighbourhood; receptive to the stories from our midst; receptive to the interruptions and bewilderment, questions and requests, of a group of children from another faith tradition. And that, for Easter Eve 2011 at least, might just have been the beginning of some new relationships, and a new, sporadic fertility in some of the waste places of these urban borderlands.

Might it be, perhaps, that the ‘obstinate uselessness’ (Williams)\(^\text{212}\) of some of our acts of presence, touch and receptivity – an outpouring of oil, the waiting and watching at a death, the carrying of a body, the returning to a tomb; a vigil in a park, a conversation with some children, the scattering of seeds – are nevertheless, or perhaps exactly as they are, invested with christological significance? Might it be that the ‘vigil’ of the women at the cross (those who had followed Jesus, remained with him even to the end) need not be merely a distanced, intellectual ‘theorising’, but ‘theorein’ (Mk. 15:40), an embodied ‘copresence’ through which we find ourselves ‘caught up in the event, affected, wounded’ even?\(^\text{213}\) Might their hearing of Jesus’ cry of god-forsakenness (Mk. 15:34) be hearing, paradoxically, ‘with God’s ears’ – hearing him ‘to speech’, even in his dying? Might their ‘witness’ there, and their attentive ‘displacement’ of Jesus’ mute body to its resting place – might these ‘delegitimate acts of tending the dead’ (as Gillian Rose describes another context of mourning), ‘against the current will of the city’, in fact be acts which quietly, barely noticed, ‘reinvent the political life of the community’?\(^\text{214}\) And what of the returning of these women, early on the Sunday morning, with the same anointing oil which had previously drenched Jesus’ head? What of their ‘passionate constancy’, as Rowan Williams describes Mary – their ‘unspoken, unformulable hope’, their ‘daily refusal ... to accept that lostness is the final human truth’?\(^\text{215}\) Dare we imagine that, in some sense, they co-create with God the ‘constitutive outside’ that ‘calls forth’ Jesus to resurrection life? Might not such resurrections be the ultimate goal of our receptive political theology?

\(^{212}\) (section 5.5.ii, above)  
\(^{214}\) Rose 1996:35  
\(^{215}\) Williams 1982:40-41
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

(Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’)
Appendix 1

*Interview with Graham Ward (2015) – transcript*
GW: [...] and it became, then, just, how do I hold down a full-time job running my own parish (‘cos I was just, I was a curate) and having 2 kids and trying to do academic work. I couldn’t see how it would work. So maybe you could write a book and tell us how it’s possible to... Because in fact I get a lot of people wanting to do that kind of work, and I really want to encourage it because it seems to me it’s one way that the Church actually keeps theology alive. Because there’s such an anti-academic feel about the Church at the moment. And I’ve tried all sorts of things, trying to get all kinds of things being done at church level, and it’s not worked out. So it’ll have to come from the grassroots up, saying “we actually want some theology!” You know!

AB: It’s a real struggle. I don’t have any written-down time set aside for it. So it is just about carving out bits and bobs here and there.

GW: Right. But you see, what I was wanting to do, and we did manage this with one... it was actually someone in Birmingham, because it was the Bishop of Aston, somebody else and myself, we wrote to him and said there’s no way this person will finish this work this person needs an extra day off a week... been trying to get them to see, ‘if you want to get this work done, you’re going to have to give them time to do it.’ Not just a £250 book token a year, but the encouragement that it’s really important, and use them – you know, use them in the Diocese... But the bishops are all so weighed down with a million and other things, that they listen and nod their heads, and I know, the moment you leave this room, you’ll have forgotten what I’ve just said, you’ll be on another train to London and another committee meeting...!

AB: And it’s not the top priority, is it?

GW: It’s not the top priority. And I think that actually is very, very short sighted. Because you can only give to the extent that you’re in depth with the theological. And that means, you know, being involved in retreats, it means actually being involved in prayer; and it actually means thinking what the faith – it’s part of faith seeking understanding. That’s what you’re trying to do with your congregation, to get them to understand more. They will only understand to the extent that you understand. So you have got to be continually involved in that faith seeking understanding, because otherwise they will just get bored, they will have heard it all before.

So I think it’s very, very short-sighted, and it seems to be going backwards rather than forwards with this call now for non-residential training. Because I do think that residential training has its real advantages, not least because it takes you out of doing the normal job, in order to focus and concentrate and get some ballast to your theological, um, vocation...

Anyway...

AB: Thank you. Can we start at the beginning? I read an interview with you for Oxford Diocese last year, where you talked about the formative experience of living in Salford with your grandma. I wonder how that’s influenced your theology since then? What’s remained with you from that experience?
I think that what remains most particularly is to actually see that theology’s got to speak. And that it can’t simply be some kind of conceptual game that’s done by academics. It’s got to be something that can speak to the environment, the people, the circumstances, the culture, the society in which you’re actually embedded. Now... that doesn’t mean it can’t be distinctive, it can’t say anything distinctive. It’s not that you’re compromising. But it’s got to find a way in which it speaks. And so I do tend to, er, think – you know, not only did I grow up in Salford, when I went to teach at Manchester University I lived back in the house where I was born, and in the environment where I was born. And in an environment where I suddenly was one of the high income earners in an environment in which many if not most were on social benefits. And so I saw at first hand the, um, enormous discrepancy which is getting larger and larger between the, those wealthy – although the middle classes are being squeezed, but not – but the way in which it impacts upon the, the lower classes in terms of, those who haven’t had the education, haven’t had the opportunities for one reason or another... it’s just appalling, really. I think the way that that impacts upon my theology is actually wanting a theology that speaks to that world. Because I can’t see - if you’re harping on about salvation then it’s got to relate to what you’re seeing in front of you. Because otherwise you’re just filling your churches with a lot of people who are forming a kind of imaginary society, you know, that everything’s wonderful and aren’t we redeemed!

One thing, and I think it was Desmond Tutu who said this, ‘while one person suffers, while one person remains unredeemed, then the gospel of redemption has just not got far enough!’ And I think that, that is part of, you know... What are you doing theology for? In the university, you could be ‘well, we’re trying to train minds to think rationally’. Well you could do anything, then! You don’t have to do theology to do that. What are you doing theology about? What are you doing the gospel about, unless you’re trying to get it out there in some way. That it’s not just a case of training those who will become the teachers or whatever. It’s about salvation. So you kind of think, OK, so it’s got to be about more than keeping the university faculties running. So I don’t therefore want to just write theology that’s just going to be read by those people within university and faculties. But that’s hard, it’s for me, because, most of my training, you know, I see things in complex ways. And it’s then trying to find ways in which you, you can try and still speak.

So there was no way that I could speak even to my next-door neighbours in Salford. I mean, I had a desperate need for - We just didn’t have a vocabulary that either of us could share. And they used to tell me quite up front, ‘people like you shouldn’t be living round here’. Um, and however much I said, ‘but I was born here,’ they, it just didn’t register.

So what I can do, is try and speak to those who’ve got the education, and a level like people within the churches. People who are interested in faith, belief, interested in these things, but don’t know how to... So I can probably start to engage with those, and want to engage with those. I can do that better – there’ll be people with gifts better than mine at communicating that to people in schools for example, or communicating that through the church in terms of the pulpit, for example.

I mean I do a lot of preaching here, but our congregation here is just not typical of a normal congregation. Even where I did my curacy, in St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol, that was not a
But you offer resources which other people can translate...

I try and offer resources that other people might be able to translate. And keep the questions on the agenda. Like the end of Cities of God when I was walking down Manchester and just stepping over people who were sleeping in doorways. And so, something is going wrong. And I don’t have the answers to the questions as a theologian, but it does raise the question to me as a theologian. You know, I can’t be theologian, activist and everything else, I’ve only got a certain amount of things I can actually do... but I can raise the question that theology needs to talk about this. You know, it’s got to talk about these things, because these things are real, they’re what the world is. And otherwise we’re living in some kind of, you know, well yeah, kind of ‘Bible Land’, fantasy land, a theme park that we’re creating in our heads.

Moving on in your life story, can you chart some of the other influences as your theology’s developed?

Yeah, I think, you know, I didn’t come from a particularly Christian... We were nominal Christians by background. So, one of the key stages in my own, was actually being involved, from the age of 17 through to the age of about 25 with a charismatic house church. Um, now, church-wise I’ve moved a very long way from that tradition. But it gave me an awful lot at that particular time that I wouldn’t want to, um, see as unimportant. The importance to me of Scripture is their background. And the kind of daily readings of the Bible, which I know we are supposed to do in the Church of England and can do here, because you know, there’s Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, Evening Prayer which is attended by 3 to 400 people here... they’re tourists, and most of them don’t speak much English, and they wouldn’t know one of the service from the next... But the Bible and lectio divina is very much part of the tradition here. And although the house church movement didn’t call it lectio divina they called it ‘having your quiet time with the Lord’, nevertheless it was a kind of lectio divina, it was spending time, morning and evening, reading the bible and praying. And I don’t think that’s a discipline I would ever have wanted not to have.

Also what has been good from that tradition is recognising the importance of experience. That doctrine and theology is not about just ideas. You’re going to convince no one by ideas. It’s not a trickle-down intellectual system. It’s about people having relationships with God that are real. And if it’s not real, and they don’t have a 2-way relationship, then in fact they will stop! In other words, um, what I have from that is a real, um, sense of - don’t denigrate religious experience, or what people say they’ve experienced. It may need rethinking, it may need developing, it may need maturing, but if God is not actually incarnate in our lives in what we do as bodies, and in our emotions, then I don’t see where it’s working out. Which again then – so how do you write theology that’s not just trying to engage with the head, but actually trying to engage with issues to do with embodiment. And also to try and see how
you engage the body. I mean, you read someone like Augustine, they are wanting to get you involved in what they are saying, they are wanting to persuade you, you know, they... And I think actually, in some ways this is what sermons were trying to do as well. I think sometimes a lot of our theology...

I’ll tell you a story that really frightened me to death when I heard it. This was an experience, I was at Westcott House giving a study day on Atonement, that’s right, to prepare clergy and lay people in the area for Easter, and for what they were going to say about Easter. And we began the workshop by me actually saying ‘why have you come here?’ Rather than me creating something and giving you ideas, let’s start to think about what this means for us, so let’s start with something basic, why have you come here?’ And someone eventually said, ‘I’ve come here because I want to learn the latest theory of the atonement.’ And I, I really, I thought, no one knows what went on because Christ on that cross and the Father. No one. And no one, there’s nothing in Scripture — It’s all pictures. There’s metaphors... of justification... of cleansing and purification... of sacrifice and blood offering, but there’s no one understanding of what that transaction was. So we’re never going to get what you want! You know, so, so let’s start with what we don’t know. And then think, well, we have got these metaphors in Scripture... so what are these kind of moving us towards understanding?... and building a kind of doctrine of atonement from Scripture, from reflection on Scripture, that people... It seems to me that the language of sin for example, everyone gets hooked up on whether you’re into someone else’s wife or into someone else’s husband or stealing from your office, or whatever... And in fact, it’s not, it’s about damage, it’s about real emotional, physiological, psychological damage that we do to each other! And so we... those people who come and say, ‘well I haven’t done this, this, this’, but OK, what’s the disposition that you’ve got within you? So it’s trying to get them to see, you know, this is what it means... bringing it down to what you know...

I saw my next-door neighbours in Salford. The youngest girl was on the streets, earning money. The others were fencing goods to make ends meet. I saw that as damage, huge damage. It wasn’t just, they were being criminalised, or whatever... It was emotional damage. And I remember having social workers and the police coming in, saying it would take 30 years, even if we could put them in safe places now and give them everything, it would take 30 years to work through the effects of what that damage is. Now that’s, it seems to me that if, when you talk about sin in those terms, when you talk about salvation in terms of being healed from some of the fears and some of the abuses that you have experienced and that you have perpetrated, then you’re getting at what’s more real in people’s lives.

So you can use the concepts, but you’ve got to relate it to – so where is sin, and where do you see it around you, and where is salvation and hope, and where do you see that around you? And start relating it to, to the conditions in which we live. Because then we’ll be able to speak to those conditions. If we simply say that ‘Jesus died for their sins’, then you need a very, very conceptual framework in which anyone can understand that.

I remember one of the things that used to happen at the fellowship that I went to... and I’m not doing them down in this, but you’d get people standing up, saying ‘I’m saved by the
blood of the lamb’. And I did used to come back even at that time and think, ‘what on earth do we mean by that? What on earth do we mean by that?’! You know, if you said that down at an abattoir, they’d go crazy! You know, so what’s this language that we create, that we live within? You know, and how does it relate to the other languages that we speak? And if it doesn’t, then what are we doing?

AB: So what do we do with those different languages? Some theologians would talk about the importance of learning the language of the church...

GW: And I’m absolutely about that. But we need to learn it in different ways. This is... the book I’m bringing out in February with OUP... Doctrine is lived. If you look at the – and that doesn’t mean it’s non-conceptual. It is conceptual. We think, that’s part of our living. We’re not brain dead. But doctrine is lived. In the very early church, with someone like Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, when he was teaching people the creed, he never gave them the creed. He would talk to them actually for 4 or 5 lectures without even mentioning anything to do with the creed. And when he gave them the creed, he said you’ve got to learn it, you’re not writing it down. ‘I want you to just learn it.’ Life is about learning about the connections of that creed. For 200 years, more than 200 years, all the church had was regula fidei. A couple of handfuls of rules about what the faith was. It was 4 centuries – and it was still fought over after 4 centuries – before we got the creeds. It was 1000 years before we got the first summa theologica. We have to see that - at the level of teaching, we’ve got to teach the way that... the Trinity has to be lived. How do you understand it as a thing that is being lived. So how do you understand the way in fact you have... today’s just been foul and horrible and you’ve gone into your time of prayer, and you suddenly feel a movement that’s taken that away, and you suddenly feel... a settledness within you. That’s the movement of the Spirit. Now if you want to talk about how does that relate to Jesus, and how does that relate to God the Father, you can do so, but... This is a language that helps you understand what you are experiencing, and shapes the way you will experience the world in the future. You don’t have to get your doctrine right to live right, you really don’t. And that’s part of what I want to do. It’s not about getting your doctrine right, and therefore now we understand. Every major theologian has said ‘we do not know what we are talking about when we talk about God. We don’t know.’ We have certain things that come down to us through the church and through the Scriptures, so we have God’s revelation of Godself, but our ignorance, has to be a learned ignorance but it’s nevertheless ignorance. And it’s getting people to see that the apophatic tradition ... Someone’s just asked me to write a book about God. A short book, 30,000 words. You have to start from what we don’t know, not what we think we know. And part of the reason that I had to move out of the fellowship of the church ... was because there were things that I felt I didn’t know that somehow it was felt that everybody should know. So those questions got deeper in a way that the structures then couldn’t permit that kind of inner questioning that was necessary for me to mature. So, it comes to the crisis where you have to say ... then I’ve got to go off, because I can’t be in obedience, because these things have existential weight for me. I need to know what it means to be saved. And I need to know what that language that I’m using.

AB: Could you talk a bit more about your theological influences? There’s clearly been quite a lot of significant ones over the years.
GW: I think there has been quite a lot of different theological influences, really. I think when I first moved to Westcott and began to study theology ... Already when I was doing English Literature, I was doing a lot of work on Puritan concepts of metaphor. So I felt at home in the Reformed tradition, in some sense. So it made me head for the major theologian within that tradition which was Barth. And increasingly then with Barth some of the conversations that came up were to do with Barth on the question of analogy ... on the question of creation ... My concern with trying to develop some kind of ‘pure theology’, how is that going to cope with just the messiness in which we have to live. And part of it is the difference between Barth and Barthians... That Barth was much more involved in those kind of discussions then maybe some of the Barthian thinkers that have interpreted him.

Some of the questions opened up by von Balthasar for me, who had very intellectually rigorous debates going on with Barth. And that opened up a lot of, more, it was chiming in with a lot more of the kind of Anglo-Catholic understandings of – again, coming through that apophatic, um, more about what we don’t know, more about how we are continually negotiating invisibilities, mysteries... And, um... And so Balthasar then became an important influence, and a number of the nouvelle theologie people like Henri de Lubac, then became quite an influence as well.

I think that throughout that, there’s been one particular main influence even prior to Barth, and that’s Augustine. And Augustine’s been a major... And partly because I do see him wrestling constantly with what’s in front of him. And he is dealing to me with, a kind of... um... a kind of contextual theology. I mean, if you look at City of God, it’s trying to answer a very real question about, you know, these pagans who are actually coming out of Rome and actually blaming the Christians for what’s happened in Rome, and de-sacralising things. You know, it’s working within a very real kind of situation that’s actually involved there. Working... and I find that, I still find that really challenging about Augustine. So within that kind of Anglo-Catholic world then, I’m very much influenced by some of the leading Catholic thinkers, and in doing that moving in some ways further away from some of the Reformed tradition, though a section of the book I’ve just written is on Melanchthon, and I’m very interested in the early Melanchthon, in the early writings of the Reformation, before it really kind of got under way – again in the way that they’re trying to deal with the existential, they’re trying to deal with what Melanchthon calls ‘affectus’, you know, disorientated desire – and again, this partly comes through, because with, you know, certainly Luther comes from that Augustinian tradition, and Melanchthon in going to work at Wittenburg and things at Wittenburg was also working within an Augustinian understanding of education.

Eventually things mature beyond that, I suppose, in so far as... I’m very influenced by people like the Victrines – Hugh of St Victor in particular – and the way that that builds into a lot of work with Thomas... um, so, there’s been a kind of, you know, whole range of influences of major theologians – I do see Barth and Balthasar as being the major theologians of the 20th Century. I’ve done a lot, done some work with Rahner, and I’ve done quite a lot of work with Schleiermacher... I’m very interested in Schleiermacher and the German tradition. But I don’t find much that I’m interested in, in people like Pannenberg, for example, or even Tillich – ah, they don’t speak to me, I mean, people would think that Tillich might, but I still find I want to be much more rigorous with Scripture, if you like...
AB: That leads us nicely into my next question. Early on in the thesis I’m wanting to do some mapping political, public, liberation theologies – ecclesial turn in more recent decades – I’m just wondering where you’d put yourself on that kind of map – and I guess in relation to things like liberalism, postliberalism, postmodernity...

GW: Well I’ve never considered myself to be a liberal. I mean, Don Cupitt was one of my supervisors at Cambridge, but ... that to me is the beginning of a kind of pantheism, and Don moves increasingly towards that kind of pantheism. And, my sense is that we’re still dealing with a Christ who speaks to the world. So that’s got to be in some way distinctive, and not collapse into...

Postliberal – some of the Yale School I’m interested in and, you know, have got increasingly to know – and I don’t believe in scoring points off people saying ‘I don’t like this about what they do’ – I think this has been a really interesting movement within theology. It’s taken, with people like Kathy Tanner, a more cultural turn, and I think that’s really important. Or with Serene Jones, a more contextual turn, towards womanist theologies. And I’ve been interested in those kind of voices that come from the postliberal tradition... To some extent Stanley, Stanley Hauerwas who I know, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson at Duke, people like Mark Jordan at Harvard... So these people are important people to me within that postliberal school. In a wider sense I can see postliberal – but much more probably in Kathryn Tanner, the way in which KT wants to talk about economics and politics as well as gender. So it’s that more, a wider ambit of postliberal, that is in fact working with, and you know, has learnt from schools like liberation theology but has reacted against the liberalism of some of that liberation theology – um, some of the capitulation, or seeming capitulation to ... the ideological or... a philosophy that’s based, whether that philosophy is Marx or whatever. I think there are much richer interpretations of liberation theology in Latin America. And I think that actually, part of the difficulty, and Gutierrez has always said this, is it doesn’t translate, and you’ve got to be in the context. It’s very easy to be an armchair critic in your European ivory towers, but in fact what matters is what was being done actually there. And I take that very much to heart.

I’m not a contextual theologian in a kind of applied theology, I don’t see myself as doing that kind of applied theology – I’m much more philosophical, interested in hermeneutics, than some of the kind of contextual theology is, and want to engage, you know, if I want to engage in film, I want to engage not in terms of their plots and even characterisation, but what is the pathology of the culture that these things are saying to us? So I’m not interested in, you know, Jesus figures in various films, or whatever. Um, and so the films I choose then tend sometimes to be quite, er, provocative. I would want to talk about American Psycho because what is that telling us about greed, what is that telling us about our various dispositions... And more recently, The Blair Witch Project, what is it that’s frightening us, and what is this telling us about our fears? And so in that sense I’m much more into film theory, rather than just sort of taking, and trying to develop contextual theology in... what on the whole can be a way that speaks, but isn’t a way that speaks sufficiently. It’s not doing the real cultural analysis, if you’re going to really be theological about that. There is one sense in which you could take Blair Witch and say, well it’s about the evils in our society and how does theology address those evils? ... But that’s a really superficial reading of that film. And
to my mind, you’re not going to get people who do know film to be interested in your reading. Because they won’t see anything in your reading other than in the very superficial reading that you’ve done.

[...Christopher Nolan’s films... *Batman, Interstellar, Inception...*]

I don’t want to strip them back to some kind of basic theology that might be in them. It’s much more complex... I don’t want to map this onto... It does seem to be that’s a kind of colonisation. ‘Ah, right...’

AB: ‘it’s really talking about...’

GW: It’s really talking about... and didn’t they know it? And that’s not – you know, when you’re working with interdisciplinary... working with other disciplines, you’ve got to respect their differences and learn about how they’re doing things, rather than just culling what you want and making them kind of grist to your mill.

AB: Sounds like there’s a bit of overlap with something like Sarah Coakley’s project, ‘theologie totale’?

GW: Well, I call mine ‘engaged theology’, that’s the language that I use. And, um, ‘theologie totale’ would be something... I’ve actually, you know, said, the kinds of moves that are being made within theology at the moment, the kind of moves being made by Kathryn Tanner and Sarah, um, yeah, are very similar. I don’t know whether *Sarah* would like that, I don’t know whether Sarah even likes my work at all, but I would see there were affinities between what we’re trying to do there, and in what we’re trying to do in terms of embodiment, embodied theology, in turning theology back to realising, if you don’t pray, you can’t be a theologian! Don’t even try! It’s dangerous, and I kind of fear more for the people you’re teaching. You’ll just live in a bubble, but you’ll get others to live in a bubble that you have created, which is really dangerous. So I do see affinities with someone like Sarah’s work, and someone like Kathryn Tanner’s work as well... um...

...and... *some* work with John Milbank. *Some*. I mean, I think John is much more philosophical than I am. And much more would see himself as a philosophical theologian. I am philosophical but I’d see myself as wanting to be much more culturally engaged. And I’d want to speak into a situation where politics is both, you know, high politics to do with the nature of states and constitutions, and the rest of politics which is cultural politics about what happens here, and what are we valuing and what are we not valuing? What are we forgetting and not forgetting? What are the power plays going on which are enabling us to think like this rather than like that, you know... Does that help?

AB: That’s great, thank you. You mentioned John. Where would you place yourself in relation to...

GW: Radical Orthodoxy?! This is always the big question. Everyone always asks me about RO. John and I, John and Catherine and I, are very good friends. We’ve just spent days in South Africa together. We don’t often talk theology. And there’s quite a lot of times when I’m reading John’s books where I don’t understand John. It’s – and that may be his writing style –
it may be, I often feel with John, that you’ve needed to read so much before you can even understand the connections, you know, some of these people I’ve not read! And I spend most of my life reading, and writing. So if someone like me cannot, finds it difficult to understand John, then I don’t know how other people find him. John is totally, totally brilliant, but it operates on a level sometimes I can’t fully appreciate.

And I do something different. And I’ve been increasingly, well, no, it’s different now, but... There was a few years when Radical Orthodoxy was developing where I was increasingly frustrated that my work wasn’t being read as my work, but it was being read in the light of John’s work. And I still find that that goes on. So I’d be giving a lecture somewhere, and they’d raise a question, and I’d say – no, that’s not a question addressed to my work, that’s addressed... ‘Why do you feel you need to overcome this?’ And I’d say, ‘the language of overcoming isn’t my language, it’s John’s language. Or ‘outnarrate’, or any of that stuff... That’s not my language, that’s not what I do. I hope, partly because I try to engage in a way that’s not just a stream of names, I try to engage... then I hope that I give enough evidence that I have read these people with courtesy and respect, even if I’m going to be critical about them at the end. Like Metz, for instance. But I want to hear what they’re saying, before I dismiss them, or, or whatever. So my strategy is not one of trying to ‘outnarrate’ them. If it is a strategy, I would say my strategy is to act as a corrective, a corrective voice. And when I’m being polemical, like the piece I did years ago on the death of Protestantism, I say ‘I am being polemical.’ And that’s because I am inviting confrontation and contestation. And I am saying this in strong ways to invite this contestation. And so you want to get the contestation, because you realise that actually you’ve got a very privileged voice in being a writer and being a theologian, and that voice has to be disrupted, and other voices have to come in and say it’s not like that, and you have to listen to those voices. So in that sense, some kind of views that there have been about RO, I don’t see my work as fitting within. You know, I was the editor of the series, etc, but even the series is far wider than...

...usually when they’re talking about RO it’s usually John’s work that they’re talking about. They may be saying something about Conor, because Conor’s work comes out of John’s work. They may be saying something about Catherine, though I think Catherine’s work is more distinctive, and has its own voice; you can’t just assimilate it into John’s work... but nobody takes note of the work of Jamie Smith, or the work of Stephen Long... or, you know, these other voices, they’re not voices that easily fit within what John’s actually doing. And to me, you know, those were part of... you know, if you go back to the first book, which was not a programmatic statement, it was engaging with where the world is speaking. We want to speak about cities and bodies and culture and music and... because this is where the world is at. So what have we got to say, as theologians to this world? That’s where any kind of notion... and in that sense, then I’m fully still signed up to RO. But when what people mean is actually something to do with John’s work, and I have enormous admiration for John’s work, though I don’t understand all of it, I just don’t! Because I haven’t read as much as John, and I have read a lot, I just haven’t read as much as John! So really that’s where I’d say I sat with RO. Still friends, very good friends, still happy to use... I think RO has done an awful lot of positive work for theology in energising new theological debate... And I think, anyone who does that, that’s good. So in that sense, it’s a bit like the Yale School... it created a way in which there were a number of publications that kind of got linked to Yale School.
which changed the direction of theology. And I think one of the ways it has changed the direction of theology, and I hope that my work might have helped there, and Sarah’s work, though Sarah wouldn’t want to associate herself with RO… is in the, if you like, the ecclesial turn that has happened – in the turn towards understanding liturgy, and the way liturgy, sacraments, prayer, meditation, you know, all these material aspects, rather than the kind of ecclesial turn that Barth does, which is really just the sermon. … you know... in fact, the ecclesial turn is about much more than just the sermon.

AB: Brilliant... Coming on more specifically to some of your stuff: in PoD, the ‘proviso’ at the beginning, you do some really helpful, kind of charting a bit of a journey from Cities of God through... but Christ and Culture, which isn’t part of what you call the ‘cities trilogy’ gets skirted over quite quickly, and I’m really interested in where christology fits within what seems in some ways to be quite a well-formed political theology, because in PoD...

GW: I’m kind of focused on ecclesiology, rather than christology. And that’s because Christ and Culture was trying to do much more the Christology, so where does... And I felt that Cities of God, because it dealt with the, um, the scandal of the eucharist, and then dealt with, um...

And that opened out the question of the displacement of, of Christ’s body, that that was sufficient to enable me to then really start to deal with the much more concrete questions to do with the politics of being the church, and how... you know, I say within the PoD that I wanted to move away from an historical emphasis, and historical exegesis of the body, to actually realising the political body, and to actually understanding the Body of Christ, rather than Jesus Christ, and that was the move I was actually making... and, you know, Christ and Culture was actually, in many of the essays, was trying to do much more, give much more substance to the historical Christ. In the volume I’ve just started, then, it’s a 4 volume Systematics, and the second volume is on, it’s just all christology. Although, my christology means you can’t deal with christology outside of anthropology, and you can’t deal with either of those things outside of a doctrine of creation. So... But it goes back... because it wants to go back, I want to go back to some of the gender questions, and talk about, problematise the concept of nature. As it was deeply problematic at Chalcedon, where they were talking about physis and whether physis was hypostasis, whether physis was ousia. So I want to get back to that aporetics of the nat- of nature, and actually re-question therefore some of the older dismissals of the biological. Biological essentialism I think is dead, but there’s no biologist I know that would talk about biological essentialism any more. So, but the problem with you rejecting biological essentialism, and you don’t want to go all the way down constructivism. But you end up with people like Judith Butler in a very arid conceptual land... She’s turned recently because she’s got more involved in politics, but Bodies that Matter and Gender Trouble are some of the most theoretically tormenting books you’ve ever actually read! And I think in fact we now need to go back to the natural, go back to the biological, but in a different way than the simplistic, essentialistic way in which you read off from these gonads what their form will take place and transpire...! you know, which no biologist I know of would actually... In fact, in biology you mention gender and it is so complex, it is so complex, they don’t even want to talk about it! ... [ ... ] ... None of the gender questions have gone away, homophobia has not gone away, the problem that women have still has not gone away at all, and so I think we’ve got to go back, and say, for all the Irigarays and Kristevas, it’s not done much, and we need to re-think again!
AB: is there a place for christology within politics, political theology? Is there a place for it? Or does it always have to be translated through church, the ecclesial body?

GW: I've written several articles on, um, developing... you know, there is a part towards the end of PoD where I look at the Pilate- and the Christ dialogue, and I've done a lot more on the that, the relationship between state, what's going on there... um, I think a lot of the kind of christological, or what I would want to call 'christomorphic' politics will come out in vol. 3 which is much more to do with ecclesiology... I'm thinking here of some of the interesting work done by Agamben on 'economy', oikonomia, and the way in which, I think, when we're talking about the politics of Jesus, and we want to say it in a way that's not going back to someone like Yoder, then - and we have got to get to a much more complex situation – then I think we've got to understand it in terms of 'christomorphic' rather than 'oh, what did Jesus say about politics?' – that's not going to answer anything at all... but the oikonomia of, um, divine providence and governance with respect to sovereignty... some of the work partly done by Oliver O'Donovan... um, that does, that will feature. But it is not going to be pure christology as such, it will always be christology with respect to Trinitarian, and the ecclesiology of vol. 3 of this study is very much to do with Trinitarian theology. How we... in other words, we need to understand the christology, but we need to deepen the christology with respect to Trinitarian, and the ecclesiology of vol. 3 of this study is very much to do with Trinitarian theology. How we... in other words, we need to understand the christology, but we need to deepen the christology with respect to the doctrine of God. And we have to see that all that is done within an ecclesiology, because we have no other language, we do not have a language in which we can speak of these things, such as the trinity of God, outside of the language we have learnt, which is therefore the language that the church has been using. And even the Scriptures are ecclesial documents.

AB: In Christ and Culture there's a really suggestive essay where you look at Luce Irigaray, and I think I read you as affirming what she's wanting to say about the divinity of the women

GW: It wouldn't be the divinity of women per se...

AB: no, within those interactions...

GW: I found it useful – found it very interesting about Irigaray was in fact notions like ‘divine becoming’, ‘sensible transcendence’. I've now seen that they’re actually quite vacuous. I don’t think they do the work, I think they need to be developed rigorously, and I don’t think that she has developed them rigorously. I think Grace Jantzen tried to develop this, though Grace wasn’t actually interested in really the christological aspects because, being a Quaker, she just found that, that there was no way of getting round the maleness of either Christ, or the church that was in the image of Christ, or the body of Christ, she just found that was too much to actually take on. So I haven’t... (pause) I’d want to see that divinity in terms of, um, a theosis that was a human theosis, so it’s an anthropological... um, I want to actually, kind of open up... you know, Barth has this great... the, if you like, anthropology is both male and female... and there are other theologians, like Evdokimov, the Orthodox theologian, who wants to also talk about that, um, image... I want to open that up a lot more, again, by raising, as I tried to raise even in Cities of God... what do we mean by male and female? And that is actually, bringing in much more the aporetics of the biological... we've learnt so much more about the nature of hormones, and it’s because of that we know how complex it is then to define ‘this is male’ and ‘this is female’. The test though is not to dissolve it into pure
ambiguous. There are people who, because of their own, the nature of who they are, we will all self-identify. I do not self-identify as a woman. When Sarah Coakley and I did feminist theology here, that’s a bit, it is slightly difficult, because, you know, I’m not a woman. And that’s important because I have not then experienced what it is to be what you are, either biological or sociologically. ... So whatever kind of self-identifications we’ve gone through, there is something male and female, there is something transgendered, there is intersex... So you’re not getting rid of the self-identifications... you are being socialised into them, but they become physiological ways in which you have been treated, and your body has responded to that kind of treatment. But you can say it’s a great deal more complex beyond that, those kind of ways in which you came to that self-identification are complex. In other words, you de-naturalise them, that’s the whole point. And to de-naturalise them is not about getting rid of the biological and physiological within them.

AB: How would you describe the mission of the church in the city today?

GW: (long pause) Well... there’s... various answers to that kind of question. I suppose my first answer is a critical one to the church as an institution, and that is, it is severely under-resourced, and that under-resourced comes down to its lack of education, its lack of adequate education for, um, and ongoing education, you know, when you become a priest that’s not the end of your education that’s the beginning of an education. We’re so bad at actually seeing that, this is a lifetime, and seeing that work through... So, I see the church as being, or should be, one of the lights in what is actually a very difficult situation, urban situation, difficult because of the complex notions of consumerism, and those who can’t consume; complex notions of social degradation; and complex notions of social forgetting at the other end, just being able to turn away and not kind of heed anything. The church could actually be a help, an enormous help, but it needs the resources to actually be able to do that. And what I see is dwindling resources, ‘learn how to cope!’ So it cannot be, in other words, it’s desperate that it should be, and yet, it cannot do that work, unless you are relying on, just some sheer grace, you’ll get yourself to the point where the church is just so, so low, that only grace will enable - because I don’t believe in grace working in that particular way, I just think it’s just wrong. It can’t operate on sheer grace. It cannot! Because only God can operate on sheer grace! Which means it needs to be resourced adequately. And until it’s resourced adequately, we can see all the potential, and in one or two places it might be able to fulfil that potential, but in a great many other places, it’s actually people inside battling with their own sense of failure. And I see that a lot from the Diocesan conferences I do. People who don’t feel they’re winning any fights, who don’t feel they’re being listened to, who feel alone in their situations, er, not particularly supported. Those very sensitive to – I’m thinking of large team leaders – very sensitive to the diversity of the churches under their care, and inadequate to actually be able to, um, either help or to bring them to another stage. That, it takes time, and the church, it seems to me, you know, is, needs to, er, well I think it will have to come from below, it’s not going to come from above, because above is going in for more managerialism as far as I can see. So it’s got to come from the educated below. Because you are the educated. And, you know, those people have got to realise, when you get... There’s a huge forgetting that goes on, when people move into places like becoming a bishop or an archdeacon. There’s a phrase called ‘purple haze’ where you just kind of move into a different world ... and forget all that you learnt about being at the coal...
face, and I don’t know how you remember, but unless you do, then you’re going to forget how under-resourced people are, and living on prayer is just not adequate! And if that says something about our conception of God, it says something about our conception of God if you, in a way that is dramatically wrong. Because God is the giver of things, the provider, Jehovah Jireh. Alright. It’s not therefore that you would not, it’s not that things should have to rely on constant miracle, because it doesn’t work like that!

AB: So it’s got to come from below. But what is ‘it’? What does it look like?

GW: It might look like, um, groups of young – and on the whole they tend to be – young clergy, coming together, who are both enabling each other and, er, enabling a putting-pressure on... Um... I mean, there used to be a young theologians’ group that John Inge ran... Because I tried with John very much to say, this needs to go further, it needs to go further. Someone’s got to arrange area and local meetings of that young theologians... And you’ve got to sit down and do some theology, and think, how does this address the questions that we’re living...? That’s what I mean by the grassroots. I’ve tried it from above, and nothing happens, I can’t shift them. They all see the need but none of them do anything more. Some cell groups do it, a few, but some do it, but you actually need it to be done in area ways, where there’s a kind of area seminar, or there’s an area... And, the bishop... First thing would be to get the bishop to realise, ‘we need, us people who do this, one day a month in which we can meet and do this’. And this should be part of our work allocation. And good things will start to emerge, once we actually start to do some theology among ourselves! And that theology may simply be that we’re going to spend the next few hours being quiet! ... I must, actually...

AB: Could you give me just two minutes?

GW: Two minutes.

AB: Could you give me just a couple of concrete examples of the church in the city being what you would like the church to be?

GW: (long pause) No... I can give you one in a village, just outside Oxford. But it could only do this because the people were part of conversations within the city of Oxford. And they put on an inter-faith group within the village hall. And they invited 3 of what... a Jewish rabbi, an Imam, and myself. Not, to actually talk about... who were all interested in inter-faith. And they had an audience of 50 - 60 people who came. And we, they organise it so that in fact, um, we said a little bit, over, it began by saying, by someone asking us each to define the things that we liked and disliked about the other two religions. And we weren’t allowed to talk, you know, interfere with each other, just, you know... So we listened to that and it was a very painful time, listening to that, for all 3 of us. And then it was opened then to, questions that had been asked, by some of the people in the 60, and they had arranged some of the questions that they wanted answers to, about the way interfaith was impacting on their life, or how other religions were impacting upon their life, and how were we, how did we see that. And it went on for about an hour and a half, and there was coffee afterwards, um, very simple, but I thought, this was great, they’d got people who were trying to deal with a real issue that’s on their doorstep, you know, Oxford’s multifaith, multicultural – um, trying to
deal with those issues, and trying to deal with them in ways which were listening, and that in fact were, gave space to go into certain things, um, but I thought, you know, because the church is central to the village, because the church had the village hall, which was also next to the pub, because of all these things it had the resources, it had centralised resources to stage events of that, at that particular time – and that’s what I mean: here it had the resources to do that, and it employed those resources. Those resources will not be there if you are, if you’re one of 13 different parishes and your parish is actually only open on... the resources won’t be there. So how then can you speak to that local congregation? You know, so that’s what I mean by... If there was more resources, then the church could do much more of that kind of work, it could ask some of these kinds of difficult questions.

AB: Fabulous. Thank you very much.
Appendix 2

Interview with Phil Howkins (2017) – transcript (excerpts)
PH: I wouldn’t consider myself to be a particularly religious person, *per se*, I mean I’m not a regular churchgoer or anything, but I have got a faith and a belief... And sometimes I find it very confusing, especially the things that are going on in the world today... the things that they say are going on in the name of God, and I find that very confusing, because for me that’s not what it’s all about...

I was brought up as a child... and I think that’s probably what turned me the other way a little bit... not against the church, but for not going... because when I was a kid I was *made* to go three times on a Sunday: that was bible class, morning service, evening service... and whether I liked it or not I was made to go... whereas I quite enjoyed bible class, because of the stories... and I think that’s what gripped my imagination right at the beginning, were the *stories*... and obviously at an early age, 5 or 6, you do take things for gospel sometimes...

It was the ‘50s, a lot of things were changing, it was post-war years... there was still a lot of deprivation, but there was a lot of enjoyment as well... for a 5 or 6 year-old, or a 10 year-old, you didn’t *think* you were poor, although it was only when you met people who’d got lots of money, it wasn’t very often...

It was funny because my playgrounds were the back streets of Nechells and Aston... my playgrounds were bombed-out derelict buildings... and I think, from an early age, my imagination took over everything... because you hadn’t got a lot of toys... you had a stick for a gun, or a sword...

one of the highlights for me was a Saturday matinee at the pictures... I was given a shilling, which was a *lot* of money... it was sixpence to get in, and then you had sixpence for your sweets and things like that... and depending on what you’d seen at the pictures would depend on what your play was when you came out... it was *brilliant*... it’s a shame we don’t have that now...

...I think, just from a novelty point of view... having somewhere like the community centre, set up as a cinema... and doing what they used to do then... a cartoon, a main feature, a serial, and then more cartoons and you come out...

When people come out of the cinema, you’d see them riding down the road on their horse, because they’d just watched The Lone Ranger... that’s what it was all about...

[...]

[5:30] ...and you’d come out, and you’d be Robin Hood for the day... it was brilliant... Imagination was the key... because there was no telly...

[...]

[6:30] I learnt a lot on those streets, that I like to think has put me in good stead... about community spirit...

[...]
We lived in a two-up, two-down... back-to-back houses... my mother used to talk to the lady next door through the hole in the wall... it’s true, nobody ever locked their door, because nobody had got anything to steal... and you were in and out of people’s houses all the time... cups and sugar, and all that... we spent hours running around all the air-raid shelters... to a child, it wasn’t deprivation, to a child it wasn’t a bombed-out building, it was a German bunker, or it was Robin Hood’s forest, or it was a castle, or it was a fort or... it was like exploring all the time... so it was a good childhood, for me, really...

I came from a family where it was important to go to work... education wasn’t as important as getting by... the important thing was getting out there, to bring money into the house... it’s gone full circle – we have got poverty, but it’s poverty in luxury...

so for me, the important things for me, is a roof over your head, heating if it’s cold, and food in the cupboard... anything else is a bonus... and that’s what drives me on sometimes, is the fact, that entertainment was made by the people... it wasn’t made by footballers, or actors, or things by that... it was made by the people that you lived with, by your community... you made it yourselves... and we’re doing exactly the same now, we’re just calling it different things...

what really has changed a lot, really, is the way we earn our livings... technology... it’s not people that have taken things away, it’s technology that’s taken things away... you can go back as far as the Luddites... that was a form of technology, that was taking people’s jobs... and now, you look at robots, you look at computers, and although they may have created some work, they’ve taken away more than they’ve given, I think, personally... and a lot of them have taken away social intercourse as well, I think... and a lot of the kids are becoming withdrawn because of that kind of thing, and you get all of this trolling and bullying and all of that...

that’s how I look at the theatre group... I try and put myself in the young person’s mind that’s in the audience, or another person that’s in the audience that’s my age... What Steve said, is ‘I’ve been to the Hippodrome, and it’s all stars and that... but what I loved about the panto is it took me back to my childhood’... a lot of it’s come about by accident because of the people surrounding me... they’ve gone along with me on this little journey... they’ve put up with my little foibles... the theatre group is bringing people together that wouldn’t possibly normally be together... and I like that as well... you’ve got people from every sort of spectrum, really...
the theatre group was like... me being able to sort of show off, really... people ask me what I do for a living, and I say “I’m a show-off”... I say, I work in a factory but my main job is I’m a show-off... and they laugh, and I say, I’m telling you the truth, I’m a show off! ...I’d turn up to the opening of an envelope, you know what I mean... and I’m star struck... and I’ve got to that age where I know I’m not going to be able to... I’d have loved to have been an actor... for me to go to university and then go to drama school would have been fantastic... but it wasn’t going to happen, and I’ve had to wait a long, long time... and I’ve had a little dabble here, and a little dabble there, and I’ve put my toe in the water there, and... for me the theatre group... makes everything happen... for me... and the group... apart from the fact that I’ve made some really, really nice friends... that’s an offshoot, a bonus... and we’ve had some people come along, and they’ve done a couple of things, and they’ve gone off, for whatever reason, and that’s fine... we’ve always said, if you want to come along and do something with us, that’s great... come in, come out, as long as once you’ve signed up for one thing, you stay with that until it’s finished, I haven’t got a problem with that at all... but I think a lot of what happened when I was a child, it’s made me more determined, to make sure that those kids out there, and those adults out there, go away smiling... I like to see big belly laughs, big belly laughs are great, but if there’s one person out there that goes away smiling...

... to see people go away, and I mean this genuinely... for me, personally, I’d spend every last penny I’ve got, if it makes them go away saying “do you know, I really enjoyed that, weren’t he good, weren’t she good”... and watching the people in the theatre group develop... when we have the rehearsal sometimes I’ll sit there, when I’ve not got any lines, I’ll watch ‘em, and I’m in awe of some of them, because they’ve progressed so much, and they’re loving it so much... most of the time, when they get up there, and all the commitment they put into it, and I’m so proud of every one of them... and eventually, they’ll all be doing little bits like that... they don’t know it yet, but they will be... and anybody that shows an interest in it, I’ll try and grab them and say, ‘come and have a go’... a lot of it, they don’t get a chance anywhere else... and I’ve been to some of those amateur dramatics groups, and they’re like minefields, they’re fraught with snobbiness, and one-up-man-ship, ‘we want the best part, this is the best part’... and I don’t mind doing serious stuff, I haven’t got a problem with that, mixing a bit of serious stuff into the comedy... for me, it’s making people smile, and making people laugh... life’s hard enough as it is, isn’t it?... if someone can go out and have a bit of a theatre experience, it may not be the whole mega theatre experience, but if they can have a bit of a theatre experience and they say to themselves “do you know, I wouldn’t mind going and see a proper theatre now” ... that’s great...

AB: do you think there’s something special about having a theatre group on an estate like ours?

PH: Yes, definitely... because, how many have got them? ...and this is another thing, it guiles me... it’s one of the things I’m going to bring up... I’d like to see the name changed... I think ‘estate’ is outdated... I’d like us to go for something like ‘Bromford Village’... you know, because straight away, straight away, and I don’t care who they are, straight away you talk
about ‘Bromford housing estate’, ‘Firs housing estate’, and ‘Council’, and people automatically think you’re scumbags, really, you know... and it’s usually people that have got money, that they’ve not particularly earned, if you get my drift... or it’s people who’ve been where we are, and have made their life better for themselves, and all of a sudden they forget where they’ve come from... I’m a great believer in remembering where you’ve come from... my old granny used to say, ‘if you can do one good kindness, it’ll come back to you three-fold’... and up to now, touch wood, she’s always been right...

...but I think, yeah, to have something like this on a Council estate is a good start... because if it gets youngsters interested in the theatre, then they’ll go off and think... if they think ‘that old fart can get up and... I can do better than that’, then that’s great... the beauty is you’re young enough to make a mistake, and put it right... when you’re 19 or 20, you can afford to make a few mistakes, and you only learn by doing things... If you fancy doing something, do it... I’ve always been a great believer in, if you want to have a go at something, have a go... what’s the worst that can happen? It fails. But through failure, you find other things... or you decide, right, I did that wrong... so, where did I go wrong? And then you work it out for yourself... never mind other people, people are always full of good advice... but you learn through your mistakes: that didn’t work, so I’ll try that... ooh, that worked, that was brilliant!...I’ve made so many mistakes in my life, if I had a pound for everyone, I’d be a millionaire...

[...]  

[36:30] I like to pick on the traditional and put something in... you pick out things that you’ve learnt as a child, you pick on things that are really old... I mean, some of the gags I’ve told are a hundred years old... but they still work in perspective to what you’re doing... But my biggest problem is my mind races at 100mph, all the time... The worst thing you can ever do is tell me to sit down and relax, because if I do sit down and relax, my mind’s going at 200mph...

[...]  

[40:00] ...I love the comedy side of everything, and I love the drama as well, I loved it when we did the passion play, and the WWII thing, and the Remembrance Sunday thing... but you can still put a bit of comedy in there, which we did... you know, make them laugh, make them cry, make them laugh, make them cry...

AB: can I ask you, why the Passion Play? Because it was your idea, wasn’t it?

PH: yeah. Well, because, as I’ve already said, I’m not what you’d call 100% religious... if there is such a thing... but I have got a faith, and I do believe in ghosts and... that’s why I’m not scared of dying... I know that sounds really weird... I know, when I pop my clogs I’m going somewhere better... I don’t believe in hell... I don’t know whether I believe in heaven either... but I think there’s something else there, and I know it’s going to be lovely... don’t ask me how, I just do... I’m quite fascinated with spiritualism, and stuff like that, and ghosts, and things like that... I love the gothic-y side of things... but the Passion Play for me, is such a wonderful story, apart from anything else... how one person could give up everything for everybody... for me, that is the ultimate... what’s that passage where, ‘man has no greater gift than to give up his life for...’ and for me that sums it up... he’s the ultimate super-hero...
I was brought up with stuff that was good guys and bad guys... and in life there was good guys and bad guys... I was naive right up to 18 or 19... but for me, and there’s so much, the Passion Play, that’s exactly what it’s about, it’s about passion... and treachery... and friendship... and the ultimate sacrifice... and that’s why for me it’s one of the favourite things we do... I love stories like that...

...for me the Passion Play is like... I just love... I like the whole thing about the Passion Play... whether it’s the chance to dress up as a Roman soldier... it’s not an easy thing to do, because you’ve got to get the feelings right... and the fact that we’re out there on the streets, so that people can see what we’re doing... and we get hardly any grief, do we... not with the nativity play or the passion play... and that’s really nice... and I like people to see... I want people to...

...when I moved onto the Bromford, I didn’t particularly like it... but I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else now... I started to get to know people, started to get to know my way around, met all of you guys... do you know, and then I thought to myself, OK, it ain’t so bad... and then the gangs started to disappear, the police actually got their act together... and I can see so much good on the estate, if you look around, we’ve got the motorway, and the trains, and the low-flying aircraft, but... we’re surrounded by so much greenery and wonderful things... that’s why I kick off sometimes when people say we’re going to rip up the grass or... because this is our village... I would love to see a bandstand on the green... and I’d love to see a big sign up saying ‘welcome to Bromford village’, you know what I mean... and I can’t see any reason why we can’t, but I’m not the powers that be, am I... and that’s why I think it’s so important that we fight for every little thing we have on this estate... we had to fight for the bus service, we have to fight for the doctor’s surgeries ...and we have to fight for people who can’t fight for themselves... I don’t want to be one of those ‘residents’ associations’ that like are going round telling people ‘you should take your dustbin in at night’ and all that kind of crap... I want to be the guy that goes round and says ‘look, we’ve asked about the doctor’s surgery, we’re trying our best to get it going’... if people are giving me grief over it , that’s fine... I just say to them, ‘look, this is what we’re doing’... the wheels of progress grind very slowly, especially when you’re dealing with Council and NHS and stuff like that... and that’s just one of the issues, and then there’s this issue, and that issue... so that’s why I think it’s important that the theatre group is one of the things that’s here, to give a bit of light relief... you know, because you go on to some of these estates, and all it is all the time is drugs... alcohol... violence... you know, needles... picking up litter... this has got to be done, that has got to be done, the police have got to do this... so, we have all those sort of things to a certain degree... but we’ve also got the theatre group, and the Hub, and Ambridge House... do you know what I mean? ... they’re having a nice time down at Ambridge House, the Hub’s doing a good job, we’ve got the bike shop, you know we’ve got positive things, we’ve got the theatre group are making people laugh, giving them a good time, we’ve got coach trips...

[...]

1:01:00 AB: do you see there being a role for the church in a neighbourhood like ours?
PH: definitely... because there are a lot of people like me, that aren’t regular churchgoers but they have this thing about the church... if tomorrow, somebody came along and said ‘this church is closing’, there’d be hell to pay... half the, if not all the estate would be up in arms, probably... because it’s our church... and I think as well, it’s not just the services that you offer, and it’s not just the comfort that you offer... because for me, church is about a ‘safe haven’, it’s about cheerfulness, it’s about comfort, you know... and when I go into your church I can relax straight away... it’s about atmosphere, it’s about church fetes, it’s about the good that you’re doing within the community, it’s about all the little groups that are run from the church... and you’re welcoming...

[...]

[1:07:00] I think with your church, it’s because I know you... this is Al’s church... because of the way you are, that affects the way I feel about

AB: is there anything that members of a church community bring to a neighbourhood when they’re outside the building?

PH: take someone like [P], she takes the word Christianity to its true meaning... nothing’s too much trouble... but again, that’s down to you... because I’ve been in some communities, where the people coming out of the church aren’t particularly as nice as they’d like to think they are... there’s a lot of snobbery in religion, I think... ‘oh, I’m better than you, because I go to church on a Sunday’... I’ve seen that in villages... I lived in one called Ramsey, in Cambridge... very middle-class, very middle-class people, a few upper-class people... it didn’t feel welcoming at all... but the majority of people I know that go to your church, they do bring something out of it, and I think personally that’s down to you, it’s down to whoever’s running the thing...

[...]

...the majority of people within the church’s communities, do a lot of good... brings people together, helps people out...

[1:12:30]

AB: when you think about our neighbourhood, when you think about the world as it is today, what does hope look like, for you?

PH: Hope for me is people just being... getting on with each other, really... it’s like a ‘band of brothers’, really, and sisters, I suppose... if you can bring a community together, and somebody else brings theirs together, and somebody else brings theirs together, then everybody’s together... the only thing that scares me more than anything else is the haves and the have-nots and the gap that seems to be growing wider... I was brought up with nothing, had something, now I feel like it’s going the other way again... for me, progress is about people leading better lives, whatever it may be... not just ‘hard-working people’, but people who, for whatever reason, can’t do any hard work... they shouldn’t have to suffer because they can’t do it... hope for me is people coming together, helping each other... I’ve seen a lot of that on the Bromford... first example, is the lady Tina from the boxing club...
she was taking out the hampers at Christmas... Tina went home, and what does she do, she goes off, gets all her friends together, and they all chipped in, they all either gave or bought a present, and she took a whole car-load over and the woman cried... that’s hope for me... she didn’t even know the woman, just took her at face value... if everybody did a little bit of that for somebody else, than what a world it would be... I mean, for me, I don’t care what people have done in the past, I care what they’re doing now, and what they want to do... they live on this estate, and trying to make their lives a little bit better... if we as a group, or we as a church, or we as an individual, can make life a little bit better for that person next door, or down the street... then your life wasn’t in vain, was it... one good deed... and alright, there is an agenda, because you go to bed feeling a lot better...

[...]  

1:16:45]    ...my old granny used to say ‘hard work has its own rewards’, but it doesn’t... it’s about the simple fact that one human being has helped another... you’ve got to start somewhere, start somewhere... and what’s it going to cost you? It might cost you a little bit of money, it might cost you a little bit of time... I live on an estate that as far as I’m concerned is going places...

[...]  

1:18:00]    when I went to the hospital... I don’t need any of that, because I’ve got the best support group... Loren, my family, and you guys – you’re my extended family... for me, that’s what community is about, you go with people on the highs, and you go with people on the lows, and if the whole estate could get around to doing that, it’d be brilliant... if you didn’t have the bad times, you wouldn’t appreciate the good times... but again, that’s a good reason for the church being there... I think it’s as important to be there for somebody, no matter what they’ve done... that’s all you can do... you may not be doing right, you may not be doing wrong... people say to you sometimes, ‘how are you?’... and you have a listen, a listen to them, and sometimes that’s enough, for them to have someone to talk to... I spent more time having a cup of tea and a chat with them than I did doing the garden...

[...]  

1:21:30]    so again, it’s about that, it’s about community, and for me that’s what community’s about... it doesn’t matter who you are, it doesn’t matter how much you earn, it doesn’t matter where you come from, it doesn’t matter what colour your skin is, if you can get on and have a chat and get along, that’s it, that’s your community, isn’t it? But it’s important that we help people as much as we can possibly help... and for me, the theatre group does that by helping people smile, making them laugh... and that’s why I’ve got such a bee in my bonnet about making it better every time... the money... it’s there to make life better... it’s about making lots of people... as far as I’m concerned, the theatre group doesn’t deal with just one person, it’s about getting as many people as possible into a room... not everybody’s got a high-powered job, not everybody’s got lots of money... the unusual is good, and the stranger is good, and for me that’s great... some people lead such, not boring lives but, because of the way they are, they can’t do anything else... they might be invalid, or they’ve got no money, they can’t go anywhere, so if they can walk down the Bromford, and see
something doing something stupid, and have a burger or a hot dog, and interact with other people, even somebody dressed in a bunny costume, then for me that’s what it’s all about... and yeah, you will get horrible people, but you get a lot more nicer people than you do horrible...

[1:24:00]   AB: there’s a write called Lynsey Hanley who grew up just down the road in Chelmsley Wood, who talks about ‘the wall in the head’... I wonder if sometimes something like the theatre group helps break down the wall a little bit?

PH: I think so... she’s quite right... I was born in the backstreets of Nechells, and wherever I went in the country that was still with me, and it always will be... in my case, it spurs me on to do better, it makes me realise how lucky I am to have the things I’ve got... [...] but you can break down that wall, brick by brick, but it takes a long time... but we don’t want other people to grow up with a wall round them, do we... and I think the theatre group does do that, it breaks down all kinds of barriers... because laughter is... laughter hasn’t got a religion, it hasn’t got a race, laughter hasn’t got any prejudices... if it’s funny, it’s funny... we had one or two Somalians in the audience, and the little kids were looking up, and some of them didn’t know what was going on, but they laughed in the funny bits, and that’s a good start... you can break down the walls with laughter... I just think like the theatre group for me is the perfect place for people to be, and there’s so much scope... you can do anything you want...

[...]

[1:27:45]   ...you know, there’s a lot of good stuff going on, so we need to focus on the good, and sort out the bad, as we’re going along... I think sometimes people make the mistake of trying to sort all the bad stuff out all in one go... and it just makes people more depressed then... so, let’s have a bit of fun, and sort out the bad stuff as well at the same time, or, you know, alright, we’ll have the panto, and then we’ll tackle this doctor’s surgery, then we’ll have, the Easter thing, and then we’ll... you know... we’ll have the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party and then we’ll tackle the name of the estate... let’s... and rally the troops, really, ‘cause that’s what we’re doing, we’re rallying the troops, we’re getting people to these events, and it’s a perfect soap-box to having a quiet chat with them, and ask ‘what do you think about that?’... you know, on a serious note, ‘what do you think about that?’ , and then they’ll tell you, and then you tell them another joke...
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Summary

Beginning from the ‘entangled dramas’ of ‘othering’ and agency on an outer urban estate, and the Church of England’s current wrestling with questions of missiology and its public role, this thesis seeks to develop an embodied ecclesial political theology that is radically receptive to the gifts and challenges of the agency of the church’s non-Christian neighbours, particularly in contexts of urban marginality. It does so via sustained engagements with the work of theologian Graham Ward and political theorist and activist Romand Coles.

Chapter 1 begins by re-narrating the community Passion Play enacted in 2013 in a neglected corner of the Firs & Bromford estate, east Birmingham, where I live and work. The play expressed a sense of abandonment felt deeply by many people locally, but it was also, in itself, the creative initiative of a local resident: an initiative which did not come from within the local church, but an invitation to which the local church willingly responded. It thus represents three ‘entangled dramas’ which lie at the heart of this thesis: the forces and discourses of exclusion, the agency of the marginalised, and the role of the church in the urban margins.

The chapter then examines each of these in turn, beginning with the way wider societal discourses target their ‘symbolic violence’ (Pierre Bourdieu) against two supposedly distinct groups – residents of outer estates (typified as ‘white working class’) and minority ethnic groups and immigrants – pitting them against each other, while obscuring the structural inequalities that marginalise both. Against these dominant discourses of ‘othering’, I then turn to highlight two accounts of human agency (Ruth Lister) and interaction (Ash Amin), even in the midst of multiple exclusions. Finally I explore the currently vexed question of the church’s role and mission, both locally and nationally (focusing on the Church of England particularly), in the face of numerical decline in church attendance and affiliation, diminishing influence in the public sphere, and the challenges posed to the church by ongoing austerity and deepening social and economic inequality.

In Chapter 2, I propose a working definition of ‘the political’ as ‘the ongoing actions and interactions through which forms of common life, and divisions between people, are both shaped and contested’, and ‘political theology’ as critical (and self-critical) theological reflection not only on ‘political arrangements’ per se but also on the praxis of Christian involvement in ‘the political’, from the perspective of God’s ways with the world. Within this broad definition, I then offer a taxonomy which divides contemporary British political theology into three main strands: public theology, liberation theology, and ecclesial political theology. In public theology I highlight a desire to ‘speak truth to power’, and a ‘convocative’ quest to ‘envision’ and ‘cultivate’ a common space where different voices are able to engage in dialogue together. In liberation theology I identify a preferential attention to those people on the ‘margins’ of power, along with a commitment to action for change, alongside those people and in solidarity with them. And in ecclesial political theology I outline a three-fold re-assertion: of the political nature of the church’s own embodied life and witness, of theology’s own capacity to describe and critique the world, and of the ultimate authority of God, in Christ. Where the ‘public space’ of public theology can be seen to be excluding of certain ‘others’, and the liberationist impulse risks slipping into a fragmented ‘identity politics’, the theological ‘confidence’ of the ecclesial strand also brings its own dangers. However, in all three
strands I also identify a call for, and embryonic resources to enable, the theologian to undertake some form of ‘self-dislocation’, in order to develop a receptivity to the gifts and challenges of her/his ‘others’.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I attend in depth to the work of Graham Ward, a political theologian firmly in the ‘ecclesial’ strand, who develops with depth and complexity a theological conception of the political agency of the church (as ‘performing Christ’) in the postmodern city, while seeking (unlike some of his ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ colleagues) an explicitly ‘engaged’ theology, that seeks to make space for the ‘disruptive grace’ of the theologians’ ‘others’.

In Chapter 3 I focus primarily on Ward’s diagnosis of the ‘ailments’ of the postmodern city: its economic and geographical ‘segmentation’ and ‘ghettoisation’, the ‘social atomism’ and ‘disembodiment’ embedded in its cultural dynamics, and the ‘depoliticization’ (the exclusion of the vast majority of people from meaningful engagement with ‘the political’) which he argues, is a direct result. Reversing such ‘depoliticization’ would thus require, I suggest: releasing politics from its captivity to economics; shifting our attention from politics as a spectacle to be consumed by people, to politics as something which people ‘produce’; rediscovering the political agency of those currently marginalized; and creating and sustaining spaces for ‘dialogue’ and ‘contestation’ across the multiple differences which often separate people from one another. Because the roots of ‘depoliticization’ are to be found in our cultural ‘disembodiment’, however, ecclesial political theology’s primary task, for Ward, is the development of an ‘analogical worldview’ in which bodies become ‘heavy with meaning’, through their ultimate (that is, both definitive and eschatologically-realised) participation in the (eucharistic) body of Christ. From a perspective rooted deeply in Augustine, Ward draws a fundamental distinction between the endlessly unfulfilled consumption of ‘postmodern desire’, and ‘Christian desire’ which moves beyond itself towards the other, driven by the ‘infinite plenitude’ of God’s generosity. Out of this divine ‘pleroma’, the church is able to ‘materialise’ as the ‘erotic community’, ‘performing Christ’ in its performances of the eucharist, in its engagements in ‘cultural politics’, in prayer, and in service of those ‘in need’. In Ward’s description of the church’s life, however, I identify a crucial equivocation. At times he describes a very ‘concrete’ ecclesial body, within which self-centred and divine desires are ‘commingled’, ‘humble’ in its judgments and ‘open-ended’ in its narrative. At other times, Ward’s ecclesiology is more ambitious, describing an ‘erotic community’ which ‘transgresses’ institutional boundaries and ‘incorporates’ its ‘others’ in its expansiveness. At Ward’s most confident, he comes close to identifying the concrete church with the ‘heavenly city’, and thus putting ‘church’ and ‘world’ into stark opposition.

Chapter 4 turns to examine in more detail the implications of Ward’s more ‘confident’ ecclesiological stances for the specific embodiment of the church’s engagements in the urban margins. At its most extreme, Ward’s ecclesiology is shown to have patriarchal and imperialist tendencies – which risk doing violence to the church’s ‘others’ – governed, as it seems to be, by a one-way logic of divine ‘flow’ with both implicit and explicit masculine, penetrative characteristics. In Ward’s more explicitly christological reflections – specifically in his ‘schizoid’ (and Markan) christology constituted in the interactions of desires, touch and flows – we find a promising ‘opening’ to the gifts and challenges of the ‘other’, but one which is rapidly foreclosed by his recurring return to the (more Johannine) ‘economy’ of God’s activity, a bounded, impermeable, and all-consuming ‘world’. This return, I demonstrate, precipitates multiple retreats in Ward’s writing: not only from the challenge of the other, but also from the materiality of Jesus, from the particularity of christology, from the
engagement of praxis, from the negotiation of what Gillian Rose names the ‘broken middle’, and from Ward’s own embodied locatedness as a theologian. Moving beyond Ward’s limitations to a more radically receptive ecclesiology must, I suggest, involve finding additional resources which enable us to reverse these retreats.

In exploring the work of Romand Coles, in Chapter 5, I find just such resources. Coles, a non-Christian, post-liberal, radical democratic political theorist and practitioner, articulates both a deep appreciation for the necessity of ‘traditioned’, ‘teleologically-oriented’ communities (such as Ward’s church), and a call to an essential, ‘ateleological’ vulnerability to the voice and actions of our ‘others’ (expressed theoretically in Derridean deconstruction). These two might be animated in a creative tension, Coles argues, through the adoption of a ‘tragic sensibility’ which both strives towards a community’s ‘highest values’ but also seeks to acknowledge, articulate and ‘work at’ both its failures and the unintended suffering even its best intentions cause. Beyond the ‘paralysis’ of Ward’s retreat from praxis into ontology, Coles develops a ‘visionary pragmatism’ which is both rooted in ontological claims (the ‘fecundity’ of ‘edges’ and ‘borderlands’) and embodied in concrete practices of receptive engagement (such as the radical democratic practices of ‘listening’, ‘world-travelling’ and ‘tabling’). Further developing Ward’s political and economic analysis of the significance of ‘flows’ (both material and non-material), Coles outlines how the receptive practices he proposes can nurture alternative, ‘polyface’, ‘counter-flows’ to the ‘mega-circulations’ of neoliberal capitalism. Through Coles’ generously receptive readings of the theologies of John Howard Yoder, Rowan Williams and Jean Vanier in particular, he enables us, finally, to articulate ecclesially-rooted practices of radical receptivity, ‘held open’ by a christological equivocation between ‘performing’ a ‘receptive Christ’ and welcoming ‘Christ the stranger’.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I develop an ‘ecology’ of ‘tactical theological stances’, ontological descriptions, and ecclesial practices, which together constitute trajectories towards a ‘radically receptive political theology’. What emerges seeks to incorporate the most virtuous leanings of all three strands of political theology surveyed in Chapter 2. Starting necessarily from an attentiveness to the theologian’s ‘location’ and embodied ‘habitus’, I argue for the necessity of a tactical ‘dis-location’ of the theologian’s particular relationships of privilege, through an engagement with the christologically-inflected insights of critical white theology. This ‘dis-location’ involves ‘flipping the christological axis’ from dominant identifications with an ‘active’ Christ (or generous gestures towards a ‘needy’ Christ), towards either (as in Coles’ work in Chapter 5) identifying with a ‘receptive Christ’, or dis-identifying with Christ so as to be able to receive his/her challenge to us. This in turn shifts our imagination towards expecting to discover abundance not primarily in our liturgical ‘centres’, but at and beyond the ‘edges’ of church. Finding ways to ‘let the ghosts speak’ names that re-awakening of our senses to those ‘others’ that we have either ‘repressed’ or ‘appropriated’, and via a (re-)consideration of the film The Full Monty, I develop the idea of the ‘constitutive outside’ as a way of imagining the practice of both ‘calling forth’ voice and agency in others, and being ‘called forth’ ourselves, by our ‘others’. Ontologically, I suggest that such radically receptive work can be understood as participating in divine receptivity, ‘hearing with God’s ears’, nurturing receptive, divine ‘counter-flows’ to the mega-circulations of the neoliberal economy. These flows, moreover, can be conceived as running between (rather than into and out of) bodies and – to deliberately

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1 i.e. with a clear sense of direction
2 i.e. open to the unanticipatable
subvert Ward’s own erotically charged language – lubricating and enlivening their ‘surface touch’ (rather than their interpenetration) with divine transcendence.

Turning finally to concrete practices, I suggest that we theologians – first ‘located’ and then ‘dis-located’ – might then find ourselves ‘re-located’ receptively, both ‘re-rooted’ and ‘re-routed’ to be able to attune ourselves to and learn from those around us. Such re-location, if it is to be truly receptive, requires the ‘art of pregnant waiting’, resisting the urge to re-take the initiative, and a receptively-inflected practice of ‘confession’, which opens us to both ‘exorcised’ and ‘initiated’ by those others whom we have been complicit in marginalizing and excluding. Finding, or occasionally creating, spaces in which to practise such ‘confession’ with others might then itself lead to discoveries, negotiations and even contestations of our shared limits and exclusions, at best nurturing a ‘contagious receptivity’ through which our own efforts at receptivity to our neighbours ‘catches on’, and those ‘heard’ become ‘hearers’ of others in turn. While our engagements with Coles highlight the ‘concentric liturgical imaginary’ shaping Ward’s eucharistic ‘economy’, they also point us towards the possibility of receiving ‘communion’ at ‘tables’ and ‘places’ that are far from our own ecclesial ‘centres’. What Rowan Williams calls ‘para-liturgies’ names practised ways in which we might open ourselves to being ‘overwhelmed’ by the gifts of our neighbours – gifts which we might then, if we can make our own liturgies more receptive, bring back ‘into church’. Shifting our understanding of the church’s worship from ‘receiving to give’ to ‘formation for receptivity’, we might discover in that worship a new politically disruptive potential. Finally, we might re-conceive ‘prayer’ itself, firstly, as an alert receptivity to the abundance both around and far beyond where we are presently ‘rooted’, and secondly, as precisely that ‘perpetual reanimation’ which Coles urges, of the tension between an ‘eschatologically-stretched’, teleologically-informed ‘yearning’ for what is ‘not yet’, and a radical sense of ‘insufficiency’, of ‘thirsting’ for the unwonted disruptions and graces that come from our human and non-human others.

This thesis ends where it began, returning to the Bromford Passion Play, to see whether we can identify aspects of a ‘radically receptive political theology’ within that particular ‘performance’. It concludes, in deliberately Markan style, with the tentative beginnings of a trajectory that takes us, from Easter morning, onwards.