

In-Between God

Stephen Pickard

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In-Between God:

Theology, Community and Discipleship

Stephen Pickard

ATF THEOLOGY

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The essays collected in this book represent a number of key themes that have occupied my thinking, teaching, preaching and writing over the last decade and a half. They cover three main areas: theology, community and discipleship.[1] This present volume gathers these themes in one place. It contains a number of previously unpublished essays; however, the majority of essays have already appeared scattered in journals and book chapters in Australia and overseas. I felt it was time for the scattered seeds to be planted in one garden. Of course there are always dangers in such an exercise; the seeds might not grow happily alongside each other and the result may produce an unbalanced crop. I hope that is not the case but the reader can make his/her own judgement. A great deal of my own thinking and writing is concerned with the practice of Christian life in challenging and changing contexts. How we might inquire into and engage with such concerns in such a way that will help to repair and benefit what has become broken is a major question for the Church of Jesus Christ today. These essays hopefully contribute to such a project.

Each chapter includes a brief background statement to introduce the essay. Chapter one is an extended essay unfolding the logic of the book. The three themes addressed—theology, community and discipleship—represent three vital and interrelated strands in the Christian tradition. I am reminded of the ancient wisdom from Ecclesiastes: 'And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken' (4:12, NRSV). For the purposes of the present volume the three strands are differentiated and ordered sequentially. However, as I hope will be displayed throughout the book, the themes intersect and complement each other.

1. A fourth area of my concern over the last decade is ministry; see Stephen Pickard, *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

In times of significant social fragmentation and an anxious search for communal life the church has to rediscover resources to both draw upon and offer to society. The fundamental resource of course is the Holy Triune God who can be neither owned by the church nor managed by its leadership. The church's vocation is to bear witness to the remarkable ways in which this God is woven into the fabric of the world. This witness takes the form of a story of the life of Jesus: his living, dying and rising into the world. The resurrection of Jesus in the power of the Spirit gives shape and texture to the narrative of Christian faith and life with God in the world. This is the story the church is called to interpret in each generation. In this sense the theological task is to listen for and give voice to the deep rhythms of faith. This is always an ecclesial exercise undertaken in the company of others who share this faith and those who do not. In this sense it is a witness that is always reaching beyond the known boundaries of the community of faith. As the Jesus story is shared and practiced new communities of disciples emerge and the joy of God expands. Theology, community and discipleship are indeed three tightly woven strands that breed strength and resilience in the midst of the pain, joy and violence in the world. Of course much more can and ought to be said about such things. This book hopefully makes its own small contribution.

The short title 'In-Between God' reminds us that we are never alone in this world; that God is in-between all things, mediating and sustaining life. There is no space left untouched by the Spirit of Jesus who is the Lord and giver of life. However 'In-between God' is not simply a spacial category but has temporal significance. All things exist and have their being in between the eternal God, the alpha and omega. Furthermore within this wider temporal frame the church bears witness that we live between the rising of Jesus and the final consummation when God will be 'all in all'.

I am grateful to editors and publishers of books and journals for permission to publish the following:
Chapter 2 in *Risk and Uncertainty: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Gabriele Bammer and Mike Smithson (Hamburg: Earthscan, 2008); Chapter 3 in *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W Hardy*, edited by David F Ford and Dennis L Stamps (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); Chapter 4 in *The Task of Theology: Doctrines and Dogmas*, edited by Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan (Adelaide: ATF Press, 1998); Chapter 5 in *Agendas for Australian Anglicans: Essays in Honour of Bruce Kaye*, edited by Tom Frame and Geoff Treloar (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006); Chapter 6 in *Missionalia,* South African Journal of Mission Studies,

Volume 21 August (1993); Chapter 7 in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 2.2 (December 2004); Chapter 8 in *Journal of Anglican Studies,* 7/1 (May 2009); Chapter 9 in *'Into the World you Love': Encountering God in Everyday Life*, edited by Graeme Garrett (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007); Chapter 10 in *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology*, edited by Geoff Thompson and Chris Mostert (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2000; Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999); Chapter 11 in *Pacifica* 9/2 (June 1996). The essays are published here as they originally appeared with slight changes to the chapter titles in some cases. I would also like to record my thanks to Canon Professor Martyn Percy, Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon for a generous Visiting Fellowship for the academic year 2010/2011 during which time I benefited from a faculty seminar I gave on 'The Passions' (chapter 12) and completed the manuscript. Thanks are also due to Hilary Regan at ATF and Robyn Cadwallader, editor.

I also thank my colleagues in the Public and Contextual Strategic Research Centre (PACT) of Charles Sturt University, Australia, of which I am a member, for their support and in particular those colleagues who have commented on various chapters in this book

The final essay in the book reflects on the story of the road to Emmaus. This story forever remains an essentially unfinished journey for disciples of Jesus. Luke offers a discipleship without shortcuts or dead-ends. I am grateful for all those Emmaus road companions I have travelled with over the years. I am especially mindful of those who have helped me avoid the tempting short-cuts and dead-ends. Their friendship has given me joy, courage and strength on the way. This book is dedicated to Jennifer with whom I continue to travel to the farthest and deepest places on a remarkable journey of friendship and love; and to Ruth, Andrew and Miriam who fill me with joy and thankfulness.

I am also aware that we are constantly surprised by the One who walks as a stranger among us; whose presence is etched into our hearts and minds. This risen Christ is woven into the geography of our shared lives through the work of the eternal Spirit of Love who surrounds and holds all creation past, present and future.

Stephen Pickard
September 2011

Chapter One
Seeding Communities of the In-Between God

Beginning in-between

I recall a comment of Stanley Hauerwas that the appropriate location for Christian ethics was always 'in the middle' of things. His point was that we did not have the luxury of beginning outside or at the periphery of life. This resonated with my own instincts in relation to the theological enterprise. We begin and proceed encompassed by the God who is our beginning and end and who is the holy presence in and through all things. The work of theology ought not take place at some remove from the circumstances of our life nor ought it presume to deliver purified statements for DIY application. Theology begins 'in the middle' of our lives, their complex and often painful circumstances and joyful celebrations. This gives theology an inescapable ecclesial flavour; it is a work undertaken in and by the human community. The most rigorous intellectual work of theology is always framed and informed by our life together in God's world.

Human community, like theology, does not come neat and finished but is complex, constantly changing, remarkably creative and often in need of repair and renewal. It is no surprise then that Christian discipleship exhibits similar characteristics. It is also no surprise that in company with all peoples and communities the Christian disciple and the community of faith can at times feel quite overwhelmed. Try as we might it is difficult to avoid this. Indeed there are no shortcuts. It's 'in the middle' or nowhere at all. Theology, community and discipleship take place in between the many tensions and possibilities of our life on this planet. They take place in between the God of our beginnings and endings for God is a God of the in-between. We might say, following John's Gospel, that 'God so loved the world that he sent his Son into the middle of things' . . . And it is precisely here that we can expect to find the abundance of God's presence and activ-

ity. It is in the middle of things in company with God that the seed of faith is planted, new things sprout and the kingdom grows.

From small beginnings

From 2007 to 2010 I had the privilege of joining with a number of colleagues in ministry each Thursday in the chapel of a cavernous old Anglican church at Port Adelaide in Australia. A short while after I began as Assistant Bishop in the Diocese I was made Archdeacon of the Port and Locum Tenens at the parish church. The halcyon days of the parish in the first half of the twentieth century had long since passed; the demographics of the area had changed significantly, it was an aging and relatively poor area, unemployment was high and nearby new apartment dwellings were sprouting up for a new generation of the unchurched. The congregation had dwindled to a very small but resilient and extremely dedicated band of people. And it was a mixed bag indeed, including long-term members of the congregation and refugees from Africa and Asia with limited English. What was to become of us? Some voices harked back to the glory days. Others looked to a new future but had difficulty envisioning what it would look like. We all knew we needed each other and that the future belonged to God even if we were a bit in the dark. Believing for a new future was the key issue.

Compared to other congregations and parishes I had known the people in the Port weren't opposed to change. I had realised some years before that there were congregations for whom the pain of dying was far preferable to the cost of living. I had known priests who considered that their particular calling was to help congregations die peacefully. It is one thing to fight against the principalities and powers in ways that are futile but it is quite another to simply capitulate for the sake of peace and harmony. It never seemed to me to be the way of the Jesus of the gospels nor indeed the story of the early church. The congregation at the Port seemed to recognise that something new was required. But exactly what? And in which direction ought we go?

The senior associate priest and I decided that when in doubt—and we knew about that—the best way forward was to begin to pray. We could have found a congenial lounge room or coffee shop in which to meet. Nonetheless the lady chapel of the large cold and empty church seemed to be the right place. We felt we had to pray in that place as a sign of faith and belief for the future. The first week, I remember, I turned up but my

colleague forgot. The next week, the tables were reversed. It was not the most determined start. But after that we began in earnest. Morning prayer was often interspersed with rambling reflections of a personal kind in response to the lectionary readings; our prayer traversed wide territory and it unfolded each week in an unhurried manner. We had one unspoken rule: those that pray together eat together. Prayer in the chapel was always followed by a stroll into the Port Mall to Coco's where we became familiar Thursday customers. The conversations that began in morning prayer overflowed into our breakfasts.

Over time the two prayers grew to three then four. Some weeks it was more, others less. A new priest was appointed, I ceased my responsibilities for the area, the previous priest moved into another ministry and others also joined the cell of prayer. A seed of prayer was planted on those Thursday mornings. We had to learn to believe into a new future even before we could see it. We didn't have a strategic plan. We didn't have many resources. In fact it was a struggle to make ends meet. Over the same period the congregation slowly grew; one person invited another. We were a motley bunch and a real testimony to the variety of the body of Christ. The Thursday prayer and breakfast was only one aspect of a diverse ministry undertaken by the small band of disciples at the Port. There was an emerging sense among the people that we were on a new journey together. What made the difference? What kick started it? Was Thursday prayer the catalyst? Who knows? I put it down to the work of Spirit who binds people together. 'The wind blows where it wills; you do not know where it comes from or where it is going, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' The life of the congregation probably doesn't feel that it is what some may term a 'fresh expression'. And there have been challenges and difficulties to deal with at the interpersonal level. A new congregation has not been intentionally planted though some re-potting has been taking place. The parish is not wealthy, far from it. The Op Shop expanded and people from the Port flowed through the church hall. The parish began a magazine aptly named *Reach Out*. What we were about was growing the kingdom of God. God of course gives the growth but growing is what we are about.

Port prayer and life is itself a parable of the kingdom. It begins over and over again as seeds are sown and nurtured. There are so many parables in the gospels about the kingdom of God growing and expanding. The accent is always on growth and life from insignificant beginnings. Questions of structure are located within an environment of growth and renewal of energy. And it is not the kind of growth that feeds off competition, suc-

cess, and performance, nor is it fixated on the numbers game nor rigid adherence to tightly controlled strategic plans. Rather it is growth that is more at home with sowing seeds, tiny mustard seed beginnings and patient labour in the field. The accent is on a growing environment rather than quantitative growth. Strengthening and energising faith is the primary concern; numerical growth follows (Acts 16:6). Such an approach is the hallmark of an ecclesially intelligent community and leadership.[1]

On planting theological seed

The garden of faith needs hardy theological seed that can survive in adverse and unfriendly conditions. I am reminded of the Australian gum tree that can often be seen growing out of a rock face on road cuttings. How on earth did such a tree ever find root, let alone eke out an existence with minimal soil and nutrients half way up a wall of rock? The seed must be robust to say the least, and the root system extensive. I often think of theology in the church as such a gum tree on a rock face. Its survival is a wonder, particularly given the minimal attention it receives in an anxious and outcomes-driven church. For some the theological enterprise is a means of shoring up the dominant ideology of whatever flavour. For others theology has value in the practical life of the church somewhat akin to the support cast for the leading actors in the show. Alas, for others theology is simply a luxury the church can ill afford. There is some truth in these depictions, if only because theology requires an engagement of the mind (as well as heart and soul) and ought to aspire to the most rigorous intellectual standards and be subject to the highest scrutiny. As a result it can often become a slave to ideological interests. Vigilance is required in this. Furthermore theology ought to serve a practical wisdom for living without forfeiting its critical function. And resources do seem to be stretched. Planting the theological is indeed a fraught business: the seed may not take root; the soil may be barren or under-prepared; growth may be stunted due to lack of attention and care. The parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–20, Matthew 13:1–23, and Luke 8:1–15) is really a parable about the fate of the seeds and the even more remarkable fact that some seed does take root and flourish in such unpredictable and hostile environments. Sowing theological seed is an ecclesial responsibility because

1. See Stephen Pickard, 'An Intelligent Communion: Episcopal Reflections Post Lambeth', in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 7/2 (2009): 127–37.

the gospel of Jesus has to be constantly re-interpreted for every generation and context. It is a dynamic process which ossifies and dies when the critical and constructive theological voice is muffled or neglected.

The essays on theology in this volume identify the different kinds of environments in which the theological seed has to be sown. In an uncertain and risk-averse world, religion can often be promoted as the antidote offering certainty and solace (chapter 2). This gives 'uncertainty' a bad name and creates an environment in which innovation and creativity are frowned upon as contaminating influences upon religious purity. However, familiarity with the long tradition of Christian theology indicates a very different story in which adaptation, innovation, creativity and venturing into unknown and disturbed areas of life has proven over and again to be part of the nutrient for the theological seed. This is not to bless every theological whim and fancy but it is to say that uncertainty is not an enemy of religion and that doubt is not inimical to faith but part of its inner dynamic—'I believe Lord, help thou my unbelief'.

The remarkable thing about theology is that as it responds to new and surprising events, it is called to dig deep into its own soul—to the sacred scriptures, the centuries of intelligent interpretation of the word of God, the human capacity for finding wisdom, the liturgical enactment of the gospel story, the myriad practices of discipleship. What this abundant inner resource reveals is an abiding trinitarian pattern to the church's thinking, believing, teaching and practices. What can be observed is a trinitarian dynamic in Christian belief that is resilient and creative (chapter 3). This does not mean we have a fail-safe guidance mechanism—the church has erred and no doubt will continue to do so—but it does mean that there is wisdom in the body that ever calls the church to continually refer its life and struggles to the deeper wisdom of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such referring is undertaken under the agency of the Spirit of wisdom. God's heart is greater than our heart; God's wisdom is greater than our wisdom (1 John 3:20).

If the DNA of the theological seed is trinitarian, what then is the task of systematic theology—a relatively recent term to signal a long-standing preoccupation? Perhaps staying on task is the critical matter for theology (chapter 4). Minimally, this means not giving up on the responsibility to articulate a rational and intelligent account of the ways of the Triune God with the world. This task has, in the modern period and under the pressure of immense diversification in the disciplines of knowledge, become both difficult and urgent. Theology itself has diversified into many areas

and the coherence of the enterprise has more often been lost or only faintly seen. The theological seed has been scattered. How do they all cohere; how do they contribute to grow faithful disciples and what after all is this thing we name Christianity? Systematics asks such questions and does so in the context of an explosion of new knowledge in the world, knowledge that can enhance our understanding of God's ways. The theological seed has to take root within a large field where other seed is also being sown. The separation of fields of knowledge generates intense scrutiny of particular areas of life but danger occurs when the connectivity between fields is lost. The internal coherence of theology cannot be forged in a stand-alone religious field but actually requires engagement with the work of God throughout the whole interrelated complex of knowledge and wisdom. Under such conditions is it possible for a new wisdom to be forged that grows out of God's rich and dynamic presence? This is a tall order but it is the peculiar task of systematics.

The scattering of the theological seed referred to above can be observed in the recent history of my own Anglican tradition in Australia. The modes of theological engagement have diversified and all contribute in their own way to the larger theological task of unfolding the character and ways of God with the world (chapter 5). As the Australian experience bears out, this work is significantly influenced by the location and context of the church in society. This points yet again to the inescapable ecclesial character of theology. It also highlights the nature of theology as witness, in the tradition of John the Baptist. It is an ecclesial deed undertaken in order to give testimony to God's remarkable presence and action. To the extent that this is the case we ought to expect a deep resonance between the work of theology and the church's evangelistic responsibility (chapter 6). Alas, this has not often been the case, and at a practical level the separation of these two forms of Christian witness has only served to diminish the church's witness to the gospel. Those who bear witness to the God of the gospel cannot but be caught in the slipstream of praise, for such a God is worthy of our highest praise. Theological seed is planted for the praise of God.

On growing new communities

When good quality theological seed is planted alongside a robust and compassionate evangelism one consequence is that new community begins to sprout: 'first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head'

(Mark 4: 26–28). This always takes us by surprise, sometimes sneaks up on us, and is always regenerative of personal life and relationships and connections in the world. The great Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner once said that 'a Christian has to be an ecclesial Christian'.[2] He was pointing to the inescapable reality of human life given and nurtured by an interpersonal God. From another point of view Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of God and community being given in and with each other:

> Social community is in essence given with community with God. The latter is not what leads to the former. Community with God is not without social community, nor is social community without community with God.[3]

The trinitarian theology of the fourth-century Cappadocian theologians gave voice to this truth from early times.[4] What then will the social form of Christianity look like? What does it mean to confess belief in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church? Part two of the book focuses on such ecclesiological matters.

We are all too aware of disturbances in the world and in human life that cause fracture, disintegration, isolation and loneliness. We are also reminded from time to time of the remarkable power for life that emerges through healthy social networks where respect, recognition and compassion are the chief characteristics. What then does it mean to discover our sense of place in such a world (chapter 7)? How might this place include not simply human beings and their social life but also the landscape and environment? Further, how might a sense of place and human dwelling with God be influenced by the nature of the physical environment? These are important questions for many people today and particularly for the people of an island continent the size of Australia located at the underbelly of the globe. Finding our place with each other in God's world belongs to the human project and it is a pressing need where communal life operates at such impoverished levels in many areas of the world. This points to the liminal nature of the places we occupy: at the intersections

2. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, [1976] translated by William V Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishers, 1978), 345.
3. Quoted in E Feil, *The Theology of Deitrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 8.
4. See Catherine LaCugna Mowry, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

between living and dying; wealth and poverty; yesterday and tomorrow. This liminal space is well captured by George Steiner when he refers to human life as 'the long day's journey of the Saturday'.[5] It is a way of being placed in the world that lies between the pain and suffering of the world (Good Friday) and the triumphs and utopian dreams symbolised by Steiner in Easter Sunday. To learn to live as new community enables people to find their place within such a world of tragedy and triumph. It is an in-between place and finds resonance with the God who entered the in-between places of life through Jesus and the Spirit.

How then might people live together in society marked by liminality, stress, fracture and glimpses of new possibilities and joy (chapter 8)? Under such conditions chaos will always be unfolding new creative forms of life. The dynamism and unpredictability characteristic of such life requires above all else the cultivation of patience to live well. Sowing the seed of that ancient virtue of patience is vital for growing new community. The way of patience is a way of living faithfully in the unresolved and ambiguous nature of our world. As the ecclesia of God nurtures patience a community of resilient disciples becomes a possibility once again.

Of course such thoughts remain a pure fantasy unless they are incarnated in real community life. What then might the emerging church of the coming kingdom learn from the ancient way(s) of monasticism (chapter 9)? I do not advocate a naïve return to an imagined communal past but I do believe we ought not ignore the wisdom, energy and witness associated with Christian monasticism in its many and varied forms. This is made more urgent when there is so little wisdom at present about how community life works and what justifies our life together beyond a purely utilitarian motive. Perhaps what we need is a new style *monasterium*. Such communities provide locations and forms for engagement with God in an uncertain and often disturbed world.

Disciples on a common journey

The Spirit at work in growing new communities is the same Spirit that gives energy and direction for disciples of Jesus. Not surprisingly there are myriad ways to live as a disciple. There is no one blueprint for discipleship. The seeds for Christian discipleship sprout a richly varied and abundant

5. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 231–32.

harvest. But is there a common bond that informs the nature and path for disciples? In this respect Dietrich Bonhoeffer has an intriguing essay in *The Cost of Discipleship* simply entitled 'The Individual'.[6] It is a title that hardly does justice to the radical nature of Bonhoeffer's proposal regarding the place and significance of God's presence in human life. Writing in the fourth decade of the twentieth century Bonhoeffer sought a way beyond the iron cage of the individual as an autonomous self-sufficient agent. Such a conception was for Bonhoeffer both idolatrous and disastrous. In the light of the life, death and resurrection of the Messiah the deepest truth of the world is that all relations are mediated through the presence of Jesus Christ. There is in fact no such thing as a direct relationship with anyone. All relations are mediated and to this extent indirect. Christ 'has delivered them [disciples]' from immediacy with the world, and brought them into immediacy with himself. We cannot follow Christ unless we are prepared to accept and affirm that breach as a fait accompli.'[7] As a result,

> we now learn that in the most intimate relationships of life, in our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, in married love, and in our duty to the community, direct relationships are impossible . . . Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognise him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside of ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves.[8]

The recovery of a proper reference of human life to God through Christ's work as mediator provides the basis for a new community (Ephesians 2: 13–16). Indeed the same Mediator who makes us individuals is also the founder of a new fellowship. He stands in the centre between my neighbour and myself. He divides, but he also unites. Thus although the direct way to our neighbour is barred, we now find the new and only real way —the way which passes through the Mediator.[9]

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'The Individual', in *The Cost of Discipleship* [1937] (London: SCM, 1959), 84–91.
7. Bonhoeffer, 'The Individual', 84.
8. Bonhoeffer, 'The Individual', 86.
9. Bonhoeffer, 'The Individual', 90.

Bonhoeffer's account of the individual presumes an ontology of persons-in-relation established and mediated through Christ.[10] The practical consequences are far reaching for the nature of Christian discipleship. The dialectic of the either/or approach to life and faith characteristic of religious fundamentalism is exposed as a cruel distortion of faithful life with God. There is no one single way to be a disciple of Christ. Rather the reality is a rich and diverse practical discipleship. This is generated from the abundance of a divine life mediating ever-new possibilities for life in the world. The simplicity of God has, on this account, a rich and complex triune character. This kind of divine simplicity is the deepest foundation for the rich and diverse nature of those who are God's friends and followers (chapter 10). Christ the mediator is grounded in the eternal work of the Word, through whom 'all things came into being' (John 1:3). The incarnation instantiates this eternal work of God in Christ. It is the way of God with the world, for as Daniel Hardy states, 'the incarnation is the concentrated historical occurrence of the dynamic relation between the mystery and revelation of God and humanity which pervades all history'.[11] Furthermore this is transformative through the agency of the Spirit of Christ who raises all things. Christ in-between all things gives everything a new place and significance; all things are reconnected in new ways; all things are enmeshed in the One who is 'all in all' (Ephesians 1:22b). This is the work of the Spirit of the in-between God.

So what kinds of options open up for discipleship beyond the fundamentalisms that beset us? The mystical way is one such shoot that has proven to be resilient through the history of Christianity and indeed the religions of the world (chapter 11). It has particular appeal in Western Christianity in the modern era, the reason being that the latter has invested significant resources in structure and institutional arrangements and less in tapping the sources of sacral energy. In such a context the mystical turn offers a way of undercutting and critiquing the powers associated with the status quo and at the same time provides more direct, unmediated routes into divine life and energy. There is nothing between the believer and God; a new immediacy is established through the Spirit. This is the work of the in-between God. Is there a particular Christian way in

10. Such an approach clearly requires the agency of the Spirit but this was not on Bonhoeffer's horizon.

11. Daniel Hardy, 'A Magnificent Complexity: Letting God be God in Church, Society and Creation', in *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel Hardy*, edited by David Ford and Dennis Stamps (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 334.

mysticism which can act as seed for fresh discipleship and community? One of the great English mystics, William Law, is an interesting case study in this regard.

The mystical turn is both full of promise and inherently dangerous. Negatively the whole enterprise may become self-referential; communion with the Divine may end up in self-delusion of a Feuerbachian kind. This should not surprise anyone, given the power of the basic human drives to skew life in unhealthy and dysfunctional ways. The disciple does not live in a hermetically sealed bubble insulated from the stresses and strains of human life. There are no short cuts of a spiritual kind for the human project. Some of the greatest battles take place within the human heart as we engage with the passions that exercise such power over us. The ancient tradition of the passions has undergone various mutations in the course of human history and in the West has reappeared on the agenda of psychology, DIY self-help industry and as a whole range of methods and processes for dealing with the challenge of being a person in the world. Revisiting the passions may be a timely reminder that the greatest challenge facing humankind is ourselves (chapter 12). The Christian disciple has to rediscover that finding one's life is a fraught and time-consuming business which only occurs through learning to lose one's life for the sake of Christ.

But what is involved in a life of giving up in order to find life? Like a red thread through the two millennia of the Christian tradition there are three intertwined themes: word, sacrament and witness (chapter 13). These three together form a threefold cord that cannot be quickly or easily broken. These three operate in a dynamic way giving energy and direction to Christian discipleship in the world. All three refer the disciple beyond the self to the voice of God which requires attentiveness; to the sacrament of bread and wine which nourishes and heals; to Christ who comes into the present as testimony is offered in faith and hope. There is an outer-directed dynamic in these three elements of the Christian life. Through word, sacrament and witness the disciple proves again and again that to lose one's life for Jesus has a gift-like character for others and for self. The Emmaus road story reveals itself as a two-way journey for discipleship. It remains an essentially unfinished journey for a travelling people following the footsteps of Jesus.

Planting theological seed, growing new communities of faith, joining on a common journey as disciples of Jesus, these are the themes of the essays of this book. They are the marks of discipleship following the God who is 'over all, through all and in all' (Ephesians 4:6). This is the

in-between God 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden.'[12]

12. From the *Prayer of Preparation* at the beginning of the service of Holy Communion in the Anglican tradition.

Part One:
Theology: Seeking the Rhythms of Faith

Chapter Two
Uncertainty, Religion and Trust[1]

At the Perimeter

This essay focuses on the wider cultural and philosophical issue of uncertainty. This is a fundamental feature of our contemporary world and as such is the late modern context for religion and theology. We seem to be increasingly risk-averse in direct proportion to our fear of living with uncertainty. This essay begins the conversation at the outer perimeter of theological concern and at the interface with other disciplines and social and cultural life. Uncertainty is an all-pervasive feature of our world. How might theology engage with this issue? And might it be possible to provide a positive theological account of uncertainty? The essay leads to a reflection on the nature of trust and patience within communal life, a matter I return to in part two of the book.

Towards a positive account of uncertainty in religion

In the popular mind uncertainty is rarely associated with religious claims, particularly in an age of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism. This chapter examines the nature and function of uncertainty in religion. It does so by way of ten provisional theses: five general theses regarding religion in contemporary society and five theses exploring uncertainty from within the Christian tradition. In Part I the theme of uncertainty is considered against the background of fundamentalism and the accompanying lust for certainty; the impact of appeals to certainty with the rise of the modern sciences from the seventeenth century and the religious response; and the relationship between faith, doubt and uncertainty. Part I highlights the essentially negative way in which uncertainty has operated

1. Originally published as 'Uncertainty and Religion: Ten Provisional Theses', in *Risk and Uncertainty: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Gabriele Bammer and Mike Smithson (Hamburg: Earthscan, 2008), 55–69.

for religious traditions in the modern period in the West. Part II offers a constructive and positive account of the nature and role of uncertainty from the perspective of Christian theology. Critical here is the link between uncertainty and the long tradition of innovation and creativity that has generated such diversity and richness in the modes of expression of faith. This very diversity opens up new problems and 'undecidables' and imports a great deal of uncertainty into the religious life. This positive account of uncertainty calls attention to the need for communities of fundamental trust wherein uncertainties can be held and life can be lived with hopefulness and faith.

Part I: Five general theses

Thesis 1: *The denial of our desire for certainty is the root of our problem*

In March 2005, in a column in *The Canberra Time*s, the Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn, George Browning, discussed the 'drive for certainty in human affairs' both political and religious.[2] The implication of his column was that part of the art of living involved learning to live either beyond or without certainty in many areas of social, political and religious life. Apparently for the bishop, to live with uncertainty in matters of religious faith and practice was neither unusual nor something to be avoided. In contrast to this position, a recent edition of the *Griffith Review* offered an intertesting commentary on the lure of fundamentalism in contemporary religion.[3] One feature of most religious traditions is the emphasis upon certainty, which appears very much at odds with Bishop Browning's view. Two other articles from the *Griffith Review* caught my attention. The first, 'Beyond the Cathedral Doors', was by the Melbourne journalist, historian and prominent laywoman in the Anglican Church of Australia, Muriel Porter. Porter examined recent developments in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney and argued that a fundamentalist mentality could be observed.[4] She referred to the definition of fundamentalism by the UK scholar James Barr, noting the emphasis on the 'inerrancy' of the Bible, 'hostility' to modern critical study of the sacred text, and an 'assurance' that views differing from the fundamentalist position were in error and those who

2. George Browning, 'As I see It', in *The Canberra Times*, 6 March (2005).
3. *The Lure of Fundamentalism, Griffith Review*, edited by J Schultz (Meadowbrook, Australia: Griffith University, 2004).
4. Muriel Porter, 'Beyond the Cathedral Doors', in Schultz, *The Lure of Fundamentalism*, 178–84.

shared them were not true believers. These three key words struck me: inerrancy, hostility and assurance. A symposium on uncertainty would probably be off limits!

The other article was by John Carroll, Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University, entitled 'Nihilistic consequences of humanism'.[5] Carroll reflected on the rise of fundamentalism in Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions. He noted that the motive in each case was a reaction against 'Western modernity', 'which combines the material progress that has been generated by capitalist industrialisation and the humanist culture that framed it'.[6] Carroll proposed that the 'bleak view' of Nietzschean nihilism had generated in humanist modernity a 'range of reactions against itself', of which fundamentalism is one. Thus 'from believing in nothing there is a leap to the opposite—fanatical attachment to a body of doctrine that is claimed to be absolute and universal'. Yet this move masks a 'fragile faith' that harbours significant insecurity. Carroll's own scepticism regarding religion emerges; fundamentalism 'is merely the general church orientation magnified'. Yet the crisis of modern society—the lonely, anonymous and restless individual, and the lack of social cohesion—suggests that one of 'the most tempting of antidotes is certainty. In particular what beckons is the certainty provided by belonging to a strong community with fixed boundaries, and the certainty of dogmatic, unquestioned belief'.[7] Carroll thus concludes that fundamentalism is one of humanism's pathologies and 'will continue as long as we fail to rediscover from within our own culture persuasive answers to the central metaphysical questions'[8]—where do I come from? What should I do with my life? What happens to me at death?

Carroll's brief reflections are illuminating because the themes of certainty and fundamentalism are so closely linked. Not simply fundamentalism but the need for certainty itself might be one of humanism's pathologies. Or perhaps it is the modernist denial of the need for certainty that masks the real issue. Until our society recognises its own drive for certainty—and it cannot as long as it denies this primal need—we will virtuously shun certainty and in so doing ensure that the drive re-expresses itself in new forms. Religion is just one such form. Uncovering the desire for certainty as a feature of the human condition and learning to come

5. John Carroll, 'Nihilistic consequences of humanism', in Schultz, *The Lure of Fundamentalism*, 46–48.
6. Carroll, 'Nihilistic consequences', 46.
7. Carroll, 'Nihilistic consequences', 47.
8. Carroll, 'Nihilistic consequences', 48.