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**On Wording the Unwordable**

“With Christians, a poetic view of things is a duty” – John Henry Newman[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Poetry is the language that most truly reflects the life of the soul” – Mark Oakley[[2]](#footnote-2)

“A poem is a showing forth of the way that poetry brings

human existence into a fuller life” – Seamus Heaney[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Every poem is rooted in imaginary awe” – W H Auden[[4]](#footnote-4)

“I write poetry because it is part of my piety” – Wallace Stevens[[5]](#footnote-5)

“Poetry raised to its highest power is identical with religion grasped

in its inmost truth. At their point of union both reach their

utmost purity and beneficence” *– George Santayana[[6]](#footnote-6)*

“A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” - Percy Bysshe Shelley[[7]](#footnote-7)

“Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor.

When I preach poetry, I am preaching Christianity” – R S Thomas[[8]](#footnote-8)

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**The Poetics of Faith**

This chapter reflects on the form and content of my Christian faith, drawing particular attention to its holding and harbouring effects on my life, which together provide a strong sense of loving comfort and acute belonging – a spiritual ‘home’ of sorts that complements the material one I equally, but differently, enjoy and flourish within.

Constituting a long footnote to something I wrote earlier about my religious sensibility in *Keep on the Move,*[[9]](#footnote-9) this reflection theologizes my belief in God *poetically*, arguing that poetry is not just a person of faith’s native language, but also the person of no faith’s religion, a conclusion anticipated by the fact that much secular poetry focuses on ideas and themes that strain easy explanation, often ethical and meaning-of-life ones, and the holy texts of the world’s religions, which deal with such matters routinely, are frequently distinguished by their poetical expressiveness.

If you don’t believe me on that last point, tell me I’m wrong after having read *The Journey by Night* and *The Cave*, two of the Qur’an’s 114 *surahs*, followed by the opening sections of the *Book of Genesis* in the Bible, a selection of its *Psalms* and the first four verses of *John’s Gospel*. Consider too that of all the available scriptural texts, the Christian Bible includes between its covers arguably the greatest range of poetic types: epics, lyrics, ballads, and elegies.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Later, to reinforce my point, while elaborating R S Thomas’s, as I’ve mastheaded it above, I will illustrate how an apparent history narrative in the Christian Gospels to do with Jesus’s resurrection is best understood poetically rather than as a strict chronicle of events. At the very end, I will take this a step further, drawing into the mix of my analysis discussion of three theologically-enlivened Christian poems - one of George Herbert’s (‘The Call’), and a pair from Gerard Manley Hopkins (‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ and ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection’) - suggesting that the language of each, and the last one in particular, enables us successfully to disinter and better attend to the Ground of Our Being (the “granite of it, and master of the tides”[[11]](#footnote-11)), which is what I sometimes call God.

**Too Incredible for Words**

Like all Christians, my faith is significantly expressed by me in words as much as in actions – notably spoken and sung ones uttered during worship or theological terms voiced in discussion or written form – the meanings of many of which are puzzling and enigmatic. In *Keep on the Move*, I wrote for example that “my conception of God is focused less on believing in an object of worship, which I am able to placate, even manipulate, and more on *worshipfully embracing* a life-enhancing *process* which privileges Love”.[[12]](#footnote-12) In expressing myself in that (let’s face it) very ambiguous way, I was trying to give shape to the conviction I have that what I call ‘God’ is not a supernatural projection – an object displaced to the edge of my life, somehow ‘up there’ and ‘out there’ – but rather an intelligently-informed sensibility I possess about the Ultimate Source of my Being which elicits from me huge trust in the power of love to ‘bring me home’ and ‘hold me fast’.[[13]](#footnote-13) That all makes complete sense to me; but to many others it doesn’t. For them it all sounds too incredible for words, which of course it is, literally.

I am likely to be equally misunderstood by my endorsement of the theological utterances of Terry Eagleton who once wrote that God is “the reason why there is something rather than nothing, the condition [in fact] of the possibility of any entity whatsoever”;[[14]](#footnote-14) and also by my approving minor rewrite of Marilyn Robinson, who said on one occasion that God denotes in her imagination “another reality, beyond the grasp of her ordinary comprehension, yet wholly immanent in all she thinks and does, powerful in every sense of the word, invisible to sight, silent to hearing, foolish to wisdom, yet somehow steadfast, allowing all her days and years”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Eagleton’s and Robinson’s words sum up well the nature of my theism, each giving voice to the strongly felt idea I have that God is in the midst of my life, indeed of life itself, reached not at its borders, but at its centre; he is, for me, following the sentiments expressed in John Mason’s famous hymn, “a sea without a shore, a sun without a sphere, now, evermore and everywhere ”[[16]](#footnote-16) – an intuitive awareness of that which spiritually holds me fast and brings me home. And the fact that all of this, as for Robinson, originates ‘in my imagination’ does not make it subjectively beyond credibility, for there is no system of perceiving or receiving the world that does not depend on the resourceful manipulation of ideas. To that extent, science and religion and poetry have more in common than some think.

Responding to my life in this way moreover enables me to make sense of and overcome those moments when bothersome doubt has made me wonder if being a Christian is worth the effort. The former Bishop of Durham, the late David Jenkins, enemy of both the Tory Establishment and many Christian Traditionalists, was then speaking fully to my condition when he wrote towards the end of his days that it was an integral part of his faith that he was “assured God would provide him with sufficient resources to see him through any challenge to or apparent contradiction in his spiritual life”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Like me, David felt ‘supported’ by God’s presence. God ‘held him up’; kept him ‘moving forward’. I know the feeling well. And where does Jesus Christ fit into all of this? For Marilyn, for David, and for me, he is literally the Christian name we each give to the Ground of Our Being or Source of Our Existence - “the self-expression of God in all nature and history as revealed in an actual historical individual”.[[18]](#footnote-18) I will say more about the meaning and implications of this later when I discuss Jesus’s resurrection.

**Giving Theology a Chance**

This is heady stuff. But that’s not surprising, for I am not writing here about a straightforward, easy-to-grasp, matter. The idea of having a simple faith has never commended itself to me. Nor has the related notion of sudden conversion. Faith has been for me a long and often very bumpy and sometimes turn-around journey, which I have worked hard at and doubted prayerfully over. For it to have become true in my imagination, it has required from me a lot of dedicated effort to understand it. There are then no startling blinding revelations in my life-long pieties, which is why it took me over forty years finally to make up my mind to become a confirmed member of the Anglican Communion. I learnt ages ago that, like reading and writing good poetry, faith is not meant to be easy. Most things worth engaging with aren’t, I find. It’s why both Muhammad and Jesus periodically felt the need to retreat from society to pray and meditate – to interrogate fiercely the meaning and implications of their Faith. It’s why I will do the same shortly at Worth Abbey, aided by Benedict’s Rule. Indeed, I know that in speaking and writing religiously I am strenuously stretching language in unusual ways, *wrestling hard* to express the near inexpressible, about which, to defer to Ludwig Wittgenstein, I sometimes think maybe I ought occasionally to remain silent.[[19]](#footnote-19)

On the other hand, to the extent that even what is ordinarily commonplace always comes under pressure when one writes and talks about it, and because language never offers exact reproductions of its subject matter, excuses surely must be found for all those who seriously try to embody in words aspects of their sense of the ineffable. Indeed, if good poets are rightly given the benefit of the doubt when they use their special literary gifts to bring human existence into a fuller state, often using allusions that are not immediately self-evident (try T S Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, for example), then serious-minded theologians must warrant it too as they seek to explain the significance and relevance of their belief in God?

As I’ve said, meaningful representations in any language are necessarily partial, never complete, though I am always pleased when I dare to think I’ve nearly got it right, recalling to mind that other famous statement of Wittgenstein’s that “uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination”.[[20]](#footnote-20) So, why should thoughtful theologians be castigated any more than anyone else as they try honestly to create a way of speaking that is relevant to their understanding of the world as they find and experience it through their faith, and about which they want to make expanded and renewed sense on our behalf? If we trust poets to teach us a thing or two, we doubtlessly can learn from theologians as well, I suppose I am saying. To refuse them airtime, which is the ambition of some humanists, it seems to me, is both parochial and short-sighted because theologians are a potential source of profound imaginative reflection. They can of course be ignored, and regularly are, but at some cost, in my opinion. Radio 4’s ‘Thought for the Day’, the target often of their criticisms, is rarely anachronistic in my experience of it. Also, many of those who contribute to it are deeply mindful people who often call directly on poetry or speak poetically to communicate their ideas.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**The Indeterminacy of Language**

Amplifying a bit something I’ve already said, attend then to my version of some wise words borrowed from my favourite Anglican theologian and published poet, Rowan Williams, who in his challenging (I admit not always easy to read) book, *The Edge of Words,* writes: “our language is systematically indeterminate, incomplete, developed through paradox and metaphor, interwoven with silences which realize further possibilities of speech, denoting a reality which consistently indicates a hinterland whose full scale is always partially obscure to us.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The difficulty of finding what to say about *anything,* Williams is here saying to us, ought obstinately to undermine the view of those who say that religious language is, by definition*,* meaningless, and irrelevant. For the truth is far more complex, given that language – religious and non-religious – “always behaves as if it were in the wake of meaning, rather than owning or controlling it. *Language cannot describe or contain the conditions of its own possibility*”, which explains why all the writers I know well spend lots of time revising what they have written. Composers of music do the same, of course, and maybe more so. I am no exception when it comes to writing, regularly jotting down new bits of text, always as a reaction to an earlier effort, which unconsciously wait in the wings of my creative imagination, eventually to emerge on the page. (I have already written at least five versions of the previous page, for example.)

Sadly, the iterative and highly contingent character of spoken and written language, as I have described it, is very under-acknowledged by evangelical atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins when they pour contempt on the integrity of the religious expressions found in texts like the Qur’an and the Bible. Indeed, in making their scorn about these books known, they each ironically give the impression of not understanding the nature of the very medium they make a very good living out of using.[[23]](#footnote-23) In particular, by tediously literalizing what are meant to be scriptural metaphors, while simultaneously forgetting that science has its own rightful share of figurative terms (‘selfish genes’, and all that), they each mistakenly think they successfully rob religious discourse of its communicative potential.

Neither the Bible nor the Qur’an, don’t they each know, is a databank of facts, each expressed in strict empirically-verifiable terms. Indeed, it is impossible to stand in an unbelieving state outside the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and identify compelling evidence within theirscriptures that might satisfactorily underpin them. Scripture doesn’t work like that. It’s not a set of proofs. It’s rather, as I remarked earlier, a collection of many books, reflecting a diversity of literary genres, through which the faithful have tried, not to offer explanations of anything, but instead to articulate the *meaning* of what spiritually they take most seriously, which is always a temporary settlement of things, realized at a particular time, with a unique audience in mind. If you don’t already have confidence in God’s intermittent revelation in history – which neither Hitchens nor Dawkins does, of course - these writings consequently make no or little sense. How could it be otherwise? Which is why I have always found it hard to understand what some people mean when they say that reading the Bible as an unbeliever caused them to become a Christian. How is that possible without already having some kind of faith, or a general disposition that takes religious ideas seriously?

Whatever the answer to this query, and later in my discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s theological aesthetics I hint at one, it’s clear to me that Hitchens and Dawkins ignorantly don’t know what they are talking about in their hostile diatribes on the rectitude of holy scripture, which makes their enormous influence on public, including intellectual, opinion about religion disturbing. As Terry Eagleton has satirically observed, reading Hitchens and Dawkins to learn about theology is the equivalent of thinking that the *British Book of Birds* is a good textbook guide to the arcane questions of biology.[[24]](#footnote-24) Each, like many of the atheists I know well, is a theological illiterate, though this does not stop them either pontificating about theology’s failings or refusing on a point of principle to engage with its outputs, reminding me a bit of those other people I know who undervalue classical music, criticizing it as highbrow and elitist, and me similarly for liking it, but who have never seriously engaged with much of its products. Just as it’s acceptable to have a go at classical music in this way without knowing much about it, so religion it seems is fair game in a like-minded fashion to those who neither share its adherents’ beliefs nor make any empathic effort seriously to understand what they amount to, particularly as expressed by its more thoughtful exponents. This is even more frustrating, I find, when religion’s critics are individuals who exercise considerable intellectual competence about other matters.

To be fair to both Hitchens and Dawkins, many Christian fundamentalists, and the naïve realists which populate other faiths, don’t know what they are talking about either. Unquestionably, to believe in a god who, *to the letter literally* visits mountain tops, burns bushes, divides seas, causes fortress walls to collapse and speaks human recordable words (and in English!) is surely beyond the comprehension of any sensibly serious person. Certainly, such a way of reading scripture adds not a jot of value to life as I experience it. I don’t believe in such a god; and I don’t want to. In signifying the fantastic, the impossible and the untenable, such ‘god talk’ brings me no existential illumination. Instead, it alienates me. This isn’t the fault of religion, however. It’s the result instead of too many of the religious, including, sad to report, too many clerics, using a way of speaking about their faith that is either surplus to all meaningful requirement or, worse, deeply repellent because its narrow-minded dogmatism and arbitrary authoritarianism is shameful.

When this happens, as Paul Tillich reminds us, God is “deprived of his ultimacy and, religiously speaking, of his majesty. It draws him down to the level of that which is not ultimate, to the finite and conditional”.[[25]](#footnote-25) Sometimes, it also entraps believers in webs of calamitous behaviour, culminating in some of the most unimaginable abuses, as for example recently documented in connection with John Smyth’s network of military-style Christian holiday camps in England in the 1970s and 80s and in Fintan O’Toole’s newly published personal history of modern Ireland which surveys in a series of dramatic episodes the cruelty and gross duplicity of that country’s established Catholic church.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is then one of the huge paradoxes of my own faith, I find, that the very moment I name God, I know I am limiting Him, since I am speaking about that which is beyond all commonplace utterance. As Saint Augustine warns, *Si comprehendis, non est Deus* – “if you grasp him, he is not God”, because God is not an object among others.[[27]](#footnote-27) For the very fact of speaking and writing about God is to bring Him entirely within the horizon of human understanding, which would be the best evidence available that what is grasped is not God, but an idol.

This also explains why I am regularly stuck for words when I am called to prayer, thinking that sincere silent absorption is the better, indeed the only, course open to me at such moments, reminding me of Saint Benedict’s injunction that “there are times when [even] good words are best left unsaid out of esteem for silence”.[[28]](#footnote-28) The modern Christian contemplative, Thomas Merton, says something similar: “The deepest level of communication [he says] is not communication, but communion. It is beyond words. It is beyond speech.”[[29]](#footnote-29) It’s no wonder therefore that I find solace in *The Cloud of Unknowing’s* ancient proclamation that “short prayers [best] penetrate heaven”[[30]](#footnote-30), which is why when I am fully wrapped up in my near silent meditations I still try hard wordlessly to ‘speak’, reflecting that during those times in church when actually I do find the right things to say, usually as a result of following attentively the liturgical words set down in *Common Worship*, there is always more to be spoken that I’ve left out, not because I am forgetful or because I am not reciting accurately, but because that’s the way language works. Saint Paul seems aware of this in his letter to the church in Rome, in which he writes: ”The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought. . . . [It] intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Poetry does the same, it seems to me, which explains why I always struggle to write it, finding the process beyond my imaginative competence.

**Jesus’s Resurrection**

The Second and Third Sundays of Easter have always been occasions when I have felt under strong pressure to account for what it is I have faith in when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus. The prescribed Gospel Reading for each of the principal services on each day puts this pressure into scriptural context. In *John 20, vv.19-end* the evangelist reports the incident of Jesus’s resurrected appearance to the disciples on the evening of Easter Day. Behind locked doors, no doubt fearing what the Jewish authorities might conspire also to do to them, having plotted successfully to have Jesus executed, the eleven remaining disciples experience his presence – “Jesus came and stood among them”, offering the conventional Jewish salutation, “Peace be with you”. Jesus then shows the disciples the wound prints on his hands, simultaneously directing their attention to his spear-gashed side. Jesus’s unquestionable identity is thus established, occasioning great joy – “the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord” - after which he gives them a commission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

The story told in *Luke 24, vv.36b-48* closely resembles John’s. It similarly emphasizes the corporeal nature of Jesus’s resurrected form, additionally reporting him eating grilled fish. While Luke reworks the commission, its meaning is the same as in John: “You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised”. And the disciples’ happiness is similarly unbounded: “They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God”.

Many of my non-Christian friends pour doubt on the historical credibility of the events described in these two readings. The stories they narrate are fictitious inventions, they tell me, for people don’t rise from the dead. Quoting James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, one of them declares, “it’s absurd; it’s Barnum. Jesus comes into the world, God knows how; walks on water; gets out of his grave and goes up off the Hill of Howarth. What drivel is this?”[[32]](#footnote-32) They’re right – dead people don’t get out of their graves. But it’s also true these stories of Jesus’s resurrection were not made up by their authors to hoodwink those who first heard and read them, encouraging me to ask what their purpose was in writing and distributing them.

Immersion in modern commentaries[[33]](#footnote-33) tells me they were probably written to be read out loud to first century Christian converts attending early church gatherings, chiefly to motivate and endorse their piety at a time when being a follower of an emerging and controversial Jesus-Jewish sect was not just a minority vocation, but also a highly dangerous one. To begin to make sensible sense of these stories they also must be read through the interpretive eyes of both their authors and those who first encountered them, whose way of reasoning about reality was characterized by pre-scientific ideas, including highly literal notions about forms of post-death existence. Assessing their verisimilitude in the light of modern empirical methodologies is thus a false starting point because everyone at the time when they were first set down, read and heard in public were totally ignorant of them. And, even if they hadn’t been, that wouldn’t have fundamentally altered their nature and reception because both John and Luke were anxious mostly to communicate an *imaginative-theological truth* and *not* an analytical-empirical one.

Although Luke, unlike John, was a not a Jew, his resurrection account reflects, like John’s, the characteristic cast of the Semitic mind at the time when he was alive. Whereas Greeks tended then to think of reality in terms of abstractions and universal truths, for Jews it was particular and concrete, which means it’s not at all surprising to find each of John and Luke accounting for Jesus’s resurrected presence using highly explicit corporeal imagery. In each case this was designed to draw attention to the *idea* that Jesus’s flesh-and-blood identity had not been eliminated at his death – that, instead, it had survived in a manner that was *intensely felt* by his heavily grieving followers, and to such an extent that he was alive to their imaginations rather than dead to them. In this connection, I have long thought that one of Jesus’s major achievements was to create a group of disciples who simply refused to let him die.

The huge question this gives rise to is why they did this, assuming their motives weren’t malicious. Was there instead something highly distinctive about the character and presence of Jesus which caused them earnestly to want to perpetuate and spread his legacy, using a resurrection narrative significantly for this purpose? Jesus’s ministry suggests there was, which had everything to do with his fantastical capacity to embody and mediate goodness, making him a human conduit to that to which the word ‘God’ was attached by his followers. It is not incidental then that we read elsewhere in the gospel story that Jesus regularly elicited awe among many of those who directly encountered him, provoking some people even immediately to fall to their knees and worship him. The evangelists desired to generalize this response, believing it heralded a brand-new stage in religious sensibility and commitment. For them, Jesus’s ministry was like no other; it was mould-breaking because it was exceptional.

While our present-day sense of empirical literalism is not one that either Luke or John would have recognized as making any kind of helpful theological sense, they desired nonetheless firmly to knock on the head any suggestion that the resurrection appearances of Jesus were ghostly occurrences – disembodied, unreal figments of the disciples’ fanciful imaginations. They wanted rather to make absolutely clear that Jesus’s continuing existence after his execution was experienced by them as *very real, hugely substantial, and a source of uncontained joyousness and hope*.

Learning that the medieval church consolidated this experience into a belief that, by joining its ranks, believers were able to survive their deaths by inhabiting a heavenly realm doesn’t take us very far, not least because it has no first century scriptural justification. The word ‘heaven’ in the New Testament refers, not so much to a place to which people go after they have died, as the anticipation of a new positive order of things on earth which has been inaugurated by Jesus’s ministry. The Book of Revelation for example ends with a vision of heavenly bliss associated with the advent of a New Jerusalem *in human history*. The Lord’s prayer also says as much: “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus’s conception of ‘eternal life’, as reported in the Gospels, and John in particular, is thus not associated with a post-death existence in a parallel universe. It rather posits a heightened form of ‘everlasting’ life articulating with a post-apocalyptic ‘age to come’ which is being realized in the *here and now*, conjoined with the idea that fellowship with God is not broken by death. This is then less about human survival after death as about the superabundance of God’s grace *while one is alive*, which does not end when one isn’t.

When we encounter and read today the story of Jesus’s resurrection we are therefore comprehending *poetic metaphor in the form* of *myth,* not a record of events informed by the methodologies of historiography. They are narratives rooted in their authors’ *faith in Jesus,* which included the conviction that he was still very much alive and active among the disciples, capable of continuing to sustain and promote their pursuit of a life in God, operating as well in the lives of future converts. For unbelievers, this is no kind of proof. But then how could it be? For neither John nor Luke is concerned to write an evidence-based history of the events that immediately took place following Jesus’s death to prove empirically to unbelievers that Jesus was literally immortal. Rather, they were anxious *theologically* to elucidate for his followers the *meaning* of what happened and to commend its continuing relevance and importance. As I read and study them, as a Christian convert, their stories supply a permanently valid *metaphor* for answering a fundamental question about the best way to live the Good Life: how can I successfully bridge the gap between what I know I am like, which is less than good enough, and what I desire to be, which is closer to God? Answer: akin to Jesus’s self-sacrifice, I am required to kill off my old self as the first step in *rising* to a superior everlasting way of being.

What I am saying then is this: that the resurrection of Jesus was not a historical, publicly observable, event in the way his execution was. The stories the evangelists wrote about Jesus’s continuing existence after his death were not histories. They were instead poetically inflected motivational homilies directed at first century members of a struggling church, alerting them to the idea that God had decisively acted in Jesus by ‘raising him up’, and to such a degree that he was able still to inhabit and improve their lives, bringing them closer to the Ground of their Being than was ever previously the case - to ‘save them’, in other words. Or, as I wrote earlier, fully to ‘hold them up’ and ‘bring them home’ – not literally, but metaphorically.

This *imaginative truth* is one I fully embrace, entirely because it helps to rescue me from my egotistical sinful self, providing a moral and spiritual template which I work hard, admittedly rarely with fully successful results, to try on and reproduce in my own life, intending to make better the lives of others as I do so. That’s what Jesus did, of course, as he sought out every opportunity to ‘bring down heaven to earth’ – to initiate what he called the ‘Kingdom of God’.

I am not saying non-believers can’t do something similar. They can; and they do. But there is a difference, which is to do with context and source. Unlike unbelievers, I have *Faith* that my struggles are part of a wider overall *purpose,* even *intelligence*, which their disbelief denies, gifting me maybe a slight strategic advantage entailed by an increase in moral clarity, calculation and self-evaluation, each leavened by the opportunity worshipful prayer provides. How does Iris Murdoch put it?: “whatever one thinks of its theological context, it does seem that prayer can actually induce a better quality of consciousness and provide energy for good action which would not otherwise be available”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In telling the story of Jesus’s resurrection, the evangelists, to repeat myself, are sharing with us *a poetically infused existential truth*. They are not communicating a verifiable analytical empirical one, least of all any kind of recognizable proof of Jesus’s divinity*.* They and their fellow converts didn’t need any corroboration of that. They knew as much already based on their knowledge of the different stories in circulation about what Jesus had said and done. And what is that existential truth? It’s the promise that faith in Jesus’s ministry and elevated status initiates, through replication, a means of making oneself better in the image of a God who is the God of Love.

To concentrate exclusively on the question of whether Jesus literally survived death is therefore entirely to miss the point of the original story, akin to wanting to exclude the sleepwalking scene in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* because it couldn’t have happened, or to think Sophocles’ Antigone has got hold of the wrong end of the stick because she holds fantastical ideas about life after death. Paradoxically, too many Jesus sceptics *and* Jesus believers, when it comes to his resurrection, do just that. Extraordinary as it may seem, they ignorantly argue against each other using the same false premise. Neither appreciates that engagement with what is ineffably true does not require a supernatural provocation or proof. Rowan Williams agrees, writing, “so, to believe in the risen Jesus is to trust that the generative power of God is active in the human world; that it can be experienced as transformation and recreation and empowerment in the present; and that its availability and relevance extends to every situation”.[[35]](#footnote-35) The Anglican liturgy for baptism underscores this sentiment when it includes these words: “To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life in Him”, which I translate not as living forever, but as living to the full a dying life. This then is about faith not empirics! Indeed, if religion’s truths can in principle only be established by historical enquiry, then it’s surely dead. My faith is concerned with stuff that is radically unknowable, and that the methods of empirical investigation simply can’t touch. Poetry, on the other hand, can, as I plan to show in the next three sections.

**From Poetical Scripture to Theological Poetics**

It’s very difficult to make sensible sense of this journey because, as I’ve said several times, language, both spoken and written, is chronically ambivalent, persistently straining significantly to say anything about everything, habitually expressing approximations, which only through dialogue are capable, iteratively, of being improved upon, but never perfected.

Thus, however hard I try better to express myself religiously, it’s clear to me that the conception of Jesus’s resurrected state which I have just outlined will be found very wanting by Christian Traditionalists who abhor the kind of revisionist theology it assumes, preferring to literalize rather than to elucidate scripture. Secularists and neo-atheists won’t be impressed by my approach either, for they think *any* kind of theological discourse is nonsense because they conclude it always articulates unwarranted claims.

A different way of looking at the problem – which is directly through the optic of poetry - may provide a common point of entry for both sides of this argument, offering unbelievers in particular a back route into the buried life of Christian sentiment and religious experience generally. So far, I have sought poetically to make sense of *scripture’s story* about the character of God, stressing the role metaphor plays in communicating aspects of its core message. Now I want to illustrate how poetical expression *itself* can successfully elaborate the nature of God’s existence and the life of the soul.

Why does poetry offer a potentially useful portal into better appreciating God and thinking and acting in religious ways? A brief answer lies in appreciating its nature. The insights of the American poet and civil rights activist, Audre Lorde, writing in 1985, are worth reading about this, I find: “poetry [she says] is the way we help to give the name to the nameless so it can be thought”,[[36]](#footnote-36) by which I think she means it is able to make heard what is silent heard visible what is obscure. Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his famous 1840 manifesto, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, said much the same, defining a great poem “as a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom . . . the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight . . . *It creates anew the universe*”. He also told us that “poets are the *hierophants* of an apprehended inspiration” [because they are] “philosophers of the very loftiest power”, [capable of] “apprehending the true and the beautiful, in a word, the Good which exists in the relation subsisting first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression”. As a result, he concluded, they “enlarge the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight”.[[37]](#footnote-37) Shelley’s hierophant allusion, which I have just quoted, is very fit for my purpose, for it encourages us to characterize poets as literary artists possessing the ability to bring the readers of their poems into the presence of that deemed to be holy, thus making them would-be interpreters of sacred mysteries. And how are they able to do this? Answer: by writing fictional, verbally inventive, moral statements that deal in and with ultimate concerns and foundational human values, which it will be recalled are the organising ideas I associate with my conception of God.

Although ambiguity is regularly built into their poetry, poets are not free-for-all fiction writers. Techniques of writing and organization are made disciplined use of, like stress, metre, rhyme, stanzas and refrains and tropes (notably, simile, metaphor and metonymy), alongside schemes such as anaphora, epistrophe and chiasmus.[[38]](#footnote-38) It’s the creative way these are used that typifies a poem and distinguishes one poet from another. What makes most poems different from most novels, then, is that their language overtly draws attention to itself in a verbally self-conscious fashion. To that extent, to quote John Carey, “poetry is language made special, so that it will be remembered”.[[39]](#footnote-39) He might also have said that it “distils our experience into what feels like a purer truth”.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Eschewing developed plot lines and strict character definition, poems work this trick more by compression and association than by fully spelt-out associations. They are provocations designed to help us consider better human experience, in particular the decisions we reach, the human ends we pursue, the bedrock meanings of things which confuse us, and, recalling Audre Lorde, the matters we shy away from, even deny, death being a recurring theme. To requote Seamus Heaney, who could here be impersonating Shelley, they “bring human existence into a fuller life”. Not all poets of course have such high-flown intentions; and not all poems are hugely pregnant with either challenging moral or significant spiritual significance. But arguably any poem warranting the evaluation ‘great’, and any poet deserving the accolade ‘genius’, must satisfy more than averagely both standards.

**George Herbert’s Economy of Means**

Consider George Herbert (1593-1633) in this connection. Throughout his life, but especially during the few years he was a priest, Herbert regularly wrote poetry, entirely of a devotional kind, in which he explored the nature of his personal relationship with God, acknowledging passionately His Maker’s glorious existence, whom he fervently hallowed, and to whom he exclusively and privately dedicated his art, resolving only on his deathbed that his collection of ‘English’ verse, ‘The Temple’, might one day be considered for publication, which is what happened, in Cambridge, a few months after he died.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Because all of Herbert’s late poems, of which there are over 160 in ‘The Temple’, are deeply theological, it’s difficult to choose just one that outstandingly fits my purpose here, which is to exemplify how poetry can be the best language of God. In showcasing ‘The Call’, I readily admit my choice is based simply on the fact that I have since my teenage years liked it enormously, despite knowing that many critics don’t rate it as highly as I do. The English composer and Christian agnostic, Ralph Vaughan Williams, ignoring such sentiments, was happy enough in 1911 to set its words to music as part of his now very famous song cycle, ‘Five Mystical Songs’, confirming in my mind the idea that its verses, for all their alleged poetical limitations, communicate a deep longing for God, including among even those, like RVW, who radically doubt his existence.[[42]](#footnote-42) Its simplicity-in-complication character also makes ‘The Call’ for me one of Herbert’s touchstone works.[[43]](#footnote-43) Certainly, and very significantly, given the nature of my own pieties, it’s a poem I find that successfully supports and roofs me:

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life;*

*Such a Way as gives us breath,*

*Such a Truth as ends all strife,*

*Such a Life as killeth death.*

*Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength;*

*Such a Light as shows a Feast,*

*Such a Feast as mends in length,*

*Such a Strength as makes his guest.*

*Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart;*

*Such a Joy as none can move,*

*Such a Love as none can part,*

*Such a Heart as joys in love.*

This short poem – just a dozen lines long – is beautifully simple and enormously direct. It is almost completely composed of words of one syllable. Like in all of Herbert’s late poems, Biblical allusions predominate, in this case *Revelations 22, v.26* – “Come, Lord Jesus” – and *John’s Gospel (14, v.6)*, where Jesus is described as “the way, the truth and the life”. Importantly, “come” is *both* the appeal of the poet to God and the response of the poet to an appeal from God. Helen Vendler subtly accounts for the holding power this articulation exerts in these terms: “Herbert creates a wholly human tenderness between Jesus and man, claiming for him the right to be the true love of his redeemer. There really is no inequality between the two partners in the last stanza of the poem . . . For the first time, the titles by which Jesus is addressed come from the speaker himself rather than from his scripture reading. . .. The end of ‘The Call’ comes as a pure satisfaction.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The Ground of One’s Being in other words is opened up and consolidated by it, offering a reminder that “Christ has joy when love is celebrated and made the true meaning in a life”[[45]](#footnote-45) - for those, that is, who have eyes to see.

**Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Theological Aesthetic: Wording the Unwordable**

And, of course, thereby lies the problem: if you don’t possess such ‘eyes’, and many don’t – if you are not *already* a Christian Believer or someone inclined in that direction – Herbert’s ‘reminder’ is nothing of the kind, connecting with what I said earlier about the power of scripture directly to convert, which I insisted must be limited if the person involved is profoundly sceptical of the value, including sense, of religious argument and sensibility.

Just as an ‘ought’ can’t be derived from an ‘is’, God can’t be invoked by assertion, even one as appealing as Herbert’s, unless, that is, it can be shown there is something distinctive about the character of what is said or written that, *of itself*, makes it a carrier of the divine; or, to put it another way, again linking with previous comment, unless one can be persuaded there is something quintessentially spiritual about the indeterminacy of such ‘God-talk’ which, by enlarging the conditions of the possibility of linguistic utterance, allows those who use, read and listen to it, even despite themselves, to ‘see’ God in the world.

The English Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, certainly thought so, which is why, like his mentor, John Henry Newman, he believed poetry – uniquely, poetry that successfully draws its readers close to Beauty’s Self - can give form and life to the Mystery of God, Beauty’s Giver. Indeed, for both Hopkins and Newman, the life of the imagination had primacy, not only in an individual’s apprehension of religion, but in the church’s living knowledge of itself. In each case their poetry was thus significantly their theology. As Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford and ‘Thought for the Day’ regular, says about Hopkins: “It is clear that after his religious faith the creative side of his nature, expressed especially in his poetry, meant more to him than anything else in his life.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The same could easily be written about Newman. Herbert may well have thought similarly. We don’t know, however, because Herbert did not, unlike Hopkins, self-consciously theologize his imaginative gifts, which in the latter case led him to develop a unique poetic aesthetic that gives his poems a distinctively sacramental character.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Herbert and Hopkins have things in common, even so. Each was a dedicated priest; both died young, having suffered indifferent health throughout their lives – Herbert aged 39, in 1633, of tuberculosis; Hopkins, 45, over 250 years later, in 1889, of typhoid; each was a one–time university lecturer; both were practical musicians – Herbert a skilled lutenist; Hopkins a violinist and composer of fugues; each was shy of seeing their poetry published in their lifetimes; and both exploited a form of ‘sprung’ rhythm in their writing, though in Hopkins’s case this was characteristically ground-breaking, constituting the very heart of his view that the sort of poetry he wrote was emphatically bound up with revealing God’s glory. Thus, while Herbert worshipped God in his poetry, Hopkins sought to disclose him in his.

A word and concept at the centre of Hopkins’s aesthetic theory is *inscape*, which he invented, and which is not easy precisely to define, not least because its creator used it in a variety of ways, never fully explaining what he meant by it.[[48]](#footnote-48) Hopkins’s best biographer, Robert Bernard Martin, however, is a good guide through the confusion. He writes that when Hopkins used *inscape* he was “expressing his belief that when one understands through close study a person, an object, or even an idea, that which is studied *radiates back* a unique meaning. *Inscape* is [thus] that meaning [which is] not dependent upon being recognized; rather it is *inherent* in everything in the world, even when we fail to notice it”.[[49]](#footnote-49) Interpreted in this way, *inscape* is what I like to call the ‘thisness’ of things – both material and ideational – which, in Hopkins’s scheme, are kept ‘in being’ in each case by an invisible divine power, which, akin metaphorically to electricity, ‘charges’ them up, an energy for which the poet invents another word, *intress*, which he says ‘holds’ the inscape together, becoming his way of underlining how God’s will is insistently expressed in and through all things: *“The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook oil.”[[50]](#footnote-50)*

Hopkins’s highly sophisticated *inscape-intress* thesis was initially formulated by him between 1863 and 1867, during his undergraduate years at Oxford, where, like many students of his generation, he came under the influence of John Ruskin’s beatific worldview.[[51]](#footnote-51) The overlaps are obvious, aren’t they? Subsequently, in 1872, midway through his period studying philosophy at St Mary’s Hall, Stonyhurst, Hopkins’s reading of the medieval Franciscan theologian, Johannes Duns Scotus (“the rarest-veined unraveller”[[52]](#footnote-52)), particularly his philosophical validation of the reality and revelatory uniqueness of individual things, confirmed the bond he had by that time consolidated in his own mind between the aesthetic and the theological, of which the *inscape-intress* dynamic is foundational.[[53]](#footnote-53)

In my imagination, itprovokes thoughts of cause and effect. As cause, *intress* directs me to the inherent actuality or *inscape* of the objects I perceive; as effect, it stands for the specific individual impression those objects make on my perception as they ‘look back at me’. I think of it also as a sort of theological cipher, which I connect with Hopkins’s conviction that, not only is God ever-present in the process of on-going creation, but also that we are able periodically through concentrated effort partially to glimpse what’s happening during its course – more often than not via attending very closely to what is self-evidently beautiful in the natural world, which is what Hopkins did regularly and frequently – *the perception of which can be represented in language, and poetry in particular, whose expressiveness is consequently a potential revelation of the Divine*. This is not however to be interpreted as Hopkins trying to provide a new *proof* of the existence of God. It is rather his way of explicating how God – who exists in his aesthetic because he does - reveals himself to us.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Hopkins then is telling us that the Christian poet’s function is to write poems that draw those that read them closer both to Creation and to the Creator, who is God. Such poets, in Hopkins’s aesthetic, are particularly challenged to explicate the *intress* of the created order with the aim of emphasizing its Godly *inscape*, which is what I am sure he is doing here in this most famous of examples:

*I kiss my hand*

*To the stars, lovely-asunder*

*Starlight, wafting him out of it; and*

*Glow, glory in thunder;*

*Kiss my hand to the dappled-with-damson west:*

*Since, tho' he is under the world's splendour and wonder,*

*His mystery must be instressed, stressed;*

*For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.[[55]](#footnote-55)*

In the same poem, Hopkins also ‘words’ his intuitive experience of *inscape* via *intress,* invoking as he does his love of God, whom he titles ‘Ground of Being’, which of course is one of my favourite notions, often repeated in this chapter:

*I admire thee, master of the tides,*

*Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall;*

*The recurb and the recovery of the gulf's sides,*

*The girth of it and the wharf of it and the wall;*

*Staunching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind;*

*Ground of being, and granite of it: past all*

*Grasp God, throned behind*

*Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides.[[56]](#footnote-56)*

A second example from Hopkins’s output captures brilliantly the sacramental sensibility I find so enormously appealing in so much of his poetry, and from which I derive considerable devotional comfort as a result. I first encountered ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection’ nearly sixty years ago during an A-Level English Literature class at the grammar school I was then attending. As the only Christian member of that class, I think it’s fair to say that the poem’s theological message on that occasion made more of an impression on my young mind than it did on anyone else’s, including the teacher’s, who was a proud atheist. Unlike my classmates, I was totally prepared to meet the poem on its own Christological terms. Accordingly, I was less interested in copying down line-by-line revision notes to help me pass the examination than with using the poem as a resource to tutor better my then developing faith.

It pleases me a lot then to be able to write today that its pulsating rhythms and fantastic alliterated wordplays spiritually energize me as much now as they did then in that classroom; and that the resurrection reference at the poem’s conclusion elicits a sense of awe as strong at this moment in time as when I first encountered it in 1966. At that time, I was instructed by my teacher that the poem’s artistic merits did not require a theological intelligence to be appreciated – “They stand up on their own”, he told me. I disputed that then as I do now, for the poem’s art, as I appreciate it, is the flip side of its theology, and vice-versa. (I think much the same about the music of Bach’s cantatas and masses, by the way, which means that while these works can be appreciated as good music by any non-Christian, a significant part of their aesthetic appeal is theological.[[57]](#footnote-57)) Indeed, mirroring R S Thomas’s sentiments, as I mastheaded them at the start, it seems to me that when Hopkins wrote poetry, he was also writing Christianity, which is why I agree fully with Philip Ballinger who says “[Hopkins] saw the poet’s task as crafting poetic language in such a way that it sacramentally ‘carried’ the presence of Christ and encouraged the reception of this presence by the hearer”.[[58]](#footnote-58) This kind of conveyancing moreover is massively writ-large in his ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection’:

*Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-*

*Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches.*

*Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,*

*Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.*

*Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare*

*Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rut peel parches*

*Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches*

*Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there*

*Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.*

*But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark*

*Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!*

*Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark*

*Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone*

*Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark*

*Is any of him at all so stark*

*But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,*

*A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.*

*Across my foundering deck shone*

*A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash*

*Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:*

*In a flash, at a trumpet crash,*

*I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and*

*This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,*

*Is immortal diamond.[[59]](#footnote-59)*

Hopkins began to draft this poem – one of his last – in the summer of 1886, not long after returning from a two-week long vacation to Hampstead, his childhood home, from where he dropped in on his adored alma mater Oxford. He had escaped to each for brief respite from a very sad and stressful time in Dublin, where he was then working as Professor of Greek and Latin Literature in that city’s recently established catholic university. The primitive working conditions of that place – it was very dilapidated and without adequate plumbing or heating - plus the heavy teaching and excessive marking duties he was required to undertake there, had brought him badly down emotionally, occasioning the writing of his six frightening ‘Sonnets of Desolation’.[[60]](#footnote-60) This context is important because ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection’ is not a poem whose mood is akin in any way to the depressive frame of mind reflected in those ‘terrible’ sonnets. Quite the contrary, it is a poem which manifests huge optimism, even light-heartedness, suggesting that Hopkins’s break in England had helped considerably to restore his highly depressed spirits, including replenishing his Faith which he felt able once again keenly to celebrate in his writings.

My Sixth Form teacher of this poem typically emphasized strongly the meaning of its central allusion: ‘Heraclitus, the Fifth Century BC, Greek philosopher, believed that everything flows and that the world is an eternal and ever-changing modification of fire’, prompting Hopkins to *intress* in words the great flux of nature in its variety (“*Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air- | Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches” etc)*. ‘Heraclitus believed too in the unity of opposites, causing Hopkins to further *intress*: “*Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on. |But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark |Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!”.*

*‘*Well, not quite *“gone”* – for, out of shipwreck “*across my foundering deck”,* Hopkins writes, “*shone a beacon, an eternal beam”* gifted by God through Jesus’s sacrificial death – “*Enough! the Resurrection, A heart's-clarion!”.* At which point my atheist teacher and agnostic classmates must have stopped fully attending as Hopkins ends by writing straight out of his Christian playbook: God becomes man, and, in a unity of opposites of immortal and mortal, we ‘Jacks’ are able, like Jesus, to become immortal and permanent. ‘That’s a bridge too far’, I can hear them chorusing across the years, even though it all sounds rather like what I was saying earlier in my discussion of Jesus’s resurrection, where, quoting Rowan Williams, I drew attention to the “transformation and recreation and empowerment in the present” which faith in it inaugurates. Hopkins is saying the same here, isn’t he?: “*In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, Is immortal diamond.”* The poem’s initial contrary impulses are brought into harmonious vision by Hopkins at its conclusion: Hopkins’s ‘Jacks’ – each one of us – are affirmed by him as “unique selves or souls with the capacity to become like Christ”.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Well, that’s how I read and understand it, confirming my view that poetry in the hands of a poet like Hopkins is able successfully to carry and capture well in words our Ultimate Concerns, which I also call ‘God’, providing as a result a near unique window into the ineffable, capable of mirroring even the incarnation by wording the perfect *inscape* of Christ himself, who sustains all other *inscapes*. But it’s easy to see why unbelievers might be sceptical of that. And their doubts extend well beyond being critical of Hopkins’s theological aesthetic, which has never in any event become established and influential,[[62]](#footnote-62)embracing as well, and crucially, a fundamental problem which I have alluded to twice already: if you aren’t already a Christian, none of it makes any kind of sense. Just like my Sixth Form teacher who did not find remotely compelling Hopkins’s theology, while admiring his skills as a poet, few of today’s critics of religion are likely to be persuaded by his positive allusion to Jesus’s resurrection. Belief in God and Jesus’s divinity are necessary conditions for that. Disbelief in both renders the Christian sentiments of the poem meaningless.

There isn’t a way of getting round this because there is ultimately no exit from the confines of the variety of linguistic worlds we create for ourselves and go on to privilege by using them in their daily lives, constituting what Wittgenstein called ‘language games’. On the other hand, because, as he insisted, *meaning is use*, and not an inherent quality of anything, and because language can be meaningfully stretched in all sorts of ways – as poets routinely remind us, there is no ‘final word’ to it – this means we all are free to choose those ways of speaking and writing which best help us to think and act – that is, successfully to move forward and better to make sense of things and experience. This is a pragmatic matter as much as an epistemological one, I am trying to say. Mind you, if my teacher found compelling “*Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on”,* why wasn’t he able also to embrace the idea that “*I am all at once what Christ is*”? I recall asking him as much at the time, and not finding his answer one bit convincing. He seemed to think that appreciating poetry was all about studying its form, which gave him permission to ignore its content. I really did not get that then, and I don’t get it now.

Which is why in my case religious language, and religious poetry in particular, adds considerable value as form *and* content. My confidence I have not made a bad choice in this matter is bolstered by what one of my favourite philosophers, Richard Rorty, who was no friend of organized religion, once said. Writing over forty years ago in the book which first made his reputation, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he remarked that “it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions”.[[63]](#footnote-63) That’s more than good enough for me. Indeed, because the written-up religious experiences of poets have the character, not of data gathered to support a certain conclusion, but, to defer to T S Eliot, of “hints and guesses”[[64]](#footnote-64), I am very happy to use them to open my eyes to a world larger than the one I regularly inhabit, thereby increasing further my sense of spiritual security and belonging which, as I have stressed throughout, is the start and finish of my faith. I was strongly reminded of this at a baptism service I recently attended at my home church in Harrogate, St Wilfrid’s, which I mentioned earlier. At one point in the liturgy, the priest said to the congregation, “Brothers and sisters, I ask you to profess together the faith of the Church. Do you believe and trust in God the Father, *source all being and life, the one for whom we exist*?”. We replied: “We believe and trust in him”. That’s my Christian conviction in a nutshell, I thought at the time, containing just six unwordable words.

1. Quoted in John Cornwell, *Newman’s Unquiet Grave: The Reluctant Saint*, London, Continuum, 2010, p.69. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry*, Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2016, p.xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, London, Faber & Faber, 1995, p.xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W H Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, p.47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in William V Davis, *R S Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, Waco, Texas, Baylor University Press, 2007, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Gloucester, Mass, Peter Smith, 1969, p.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley* (ed. Bruce Woodcock), Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 2002, pp.637-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R S Thomas, ‘A Frame for Poetry’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 3 March, 1966, p.169. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Chapter 5 (‘Spots of Time’) of David Halpin, *Keep on the Move*, York, York Publishing Services, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Robert Alter & Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, London, Collins, 1987. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted from stanza 32 of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s great poem, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (ed. Catherine Phillips), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p.118. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Op cit, p.103. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I have condensed here insights from each of three sources which have had an enduring influence on my theological thinking since I first encountered them in the 1960s: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, London, SCM, 1967; Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962; and John A T Robinson, *Exploration into God*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Marilyn Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*, London Virago, 2015, p.224. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *The New English Hymnal*, Norwich, The Canterbury Press, 1986, pp.376-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David Jenkins, *The Calling of a Cuckoo: Not Just an Autobiography*, London, Continuum, 2002, p.xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John A T Robinson, ‘What future for a unique Christ?, in *Where Three Ways Meet: Last Essays and Sermons*, London, SCM Press, 1987, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous epigram, “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”, is the final sentence of his first book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, p.151. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1972, para.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, for example, Jonathan Sacks, *From Optimism to Hope: Thoughts for the Day*, London, Bloomsbury, 2004; and Rhidian Brook, *Godbothering: Thoughts 2000-2020*, London, SPCK, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp.170-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, NY, Atlantic Books, 2007 and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, Bantam Press, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, p.49. A more nuanced critique of Dawkins’ misunderstanding of theology is found in each of Rupert Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury*, Cambridge, Erdmans, 2008, pp.350-4 and Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means*, London, Bodley Head, 2009, pp.290-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, NY, Harper & Co, 1958, p.60. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Andrew Graystone, *Bleeding for Jesus*, London, Longman & Todd, 2021 and Fintan O’Toole, *We Don’t Know Ourselves*, London, Head of Zeus, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in Boniface Ramsey (ed.) *Augustine’s Essential Sermons*, NY, New City Press, 2007, p.197. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *The Rule of Benedict*, ‘Restraint of Speech’ (Chapter 6), London, Penguin Classics, 2008 edition, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, NY, New Directions, 1973, p.308. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, London, Penguin Classics Edition, 1961, p.97. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, Chapter 8, verse 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (ed. Theodore Spencer), London, Fontana, 1963, p.133. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. To access the broad spectrum of critical scholarship on the Gospels and the Bible as a whole, see: John Barton & John Muddiman (eds.) *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p.83. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, London, Longman & Todd, 2002, p.44. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Audre Lourde, ‘Poetry is not a luxury’, in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London, Silver Press, 2017, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, pp.653, 658, 660, 640, 660 & 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. My go-to source about all of this is Rhian Williams, *The Poetry Toolkit*, London Bloomsbury, 2019. I also find helpful Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. John Carey, *A Little History of Poetry*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2020, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Quoted from page xiv of Mark Oakley’s wise mediation on the sacramental power of poetry – *The Splash of Words.* [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. My edition of ‘The Temple’ is included in George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems* (ed. John Tobin), London, Penguin, 1991. The publication of these poems in 1633, and their initial reception, which was very positive, is discussed in John Drury’s excellent biography, *Music at Midnight: The Life & Poetry of George Herbert*, London, Allen Lane, 2013, pp.279-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The recording I own of ‘Five Mystical Songs’ features the English baritone, Thomas Allen, The Croydon Singers and The English Chamber Orchestra (Hyperion CDA30025). Herbert’s poetry has inspired other composers, notably Judith Weir whose 2005 work ‘Vertue’ is a capella triptych of three of his poems – ‘Virtue’, ‘Antiphon (2)’ and ‘Prayer (1)’. Many others have been turned into well-known hymns, like for example ‘Teach Me My God & King’ (‘The Elixir’) and ‘Let All the World in Every Corner Sing’ (‘Antiphon (1)’). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This way of describing ‘The Call’ is lifted from Helen Vendler’s outstanding survey of Herbert’s poetry, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1975, p.203. Two other very helpful sourcebooks I find are David L Edwards, *Poets and God*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005, especially Chapter 3, and Jane Fallon, *Heart in Pilgrimage: A Study of George Herbert*, Bloomington, Authorhouse, 2008. A good devotional companion is Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul*, London, SPCK, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert*, pp.207 & 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days*, p.101. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Richard Harries, *Haunted by Christ: Modern Writers and the Struggle for Faith*, London, SPCK, 2018, p.38. The best biography of Hopkins I know is Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, London, Faber & Faber, 2011. A marvellous book about Hopkins’s life in faith is Catharine Randall, *A Heart Lost in Wonder*, Michigan, Wm. B Eerdmans, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. This is the thesis of a remarkable book about Hopkins’s art, from which I have benefited enormously – Philip A Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Louvain, Peeters Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Hopkins never systematically accounted for *inscape*. Mention of it is scattered instead in his *Journals,* first turning up in them towards the end of 1869, coinciding roughly with the time he began his philosophical studies at St Mary’s Hall, Stonyhurst. A notable *Journal* entry during that time is the one Hopkins made for 23 December 1869 in which he meditates on his consciousness of dreaming, where at one point he describes a winter scene: *“There was snow . . . On the grass it became a crust lifted on the heads of the blades . . . coat below coat, sketched in intersecting edges bearing ‘idiom’, all down the slope: I have no other word yet for that which takes the eye or mind in a bold hand or effective sketching or in marked features or again in graphic writing, which not being Beauty nor true inscape, yet gives interest and makes ugliness even better than meaninglessness”* (in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, p.201). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, p.205. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’*, in Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, p.128. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. For Ruskin’s influence on Hopkins, see Philip Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, pp.25-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, p.142. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. For Duns Scotus’s influence on Hopkins, see *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, pp.206-8 and Philip Ballinger, *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, pp.103-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. The Victorian English nature-mystic, Richard Jeffries, who was not a Christian, is one of the best secular examples I know of who, like Hopkins, manages successfully to articulate his sense of The Other with a deep sensitivity to the natural world. See his classic, *The Story of My Heart*, London, Constable, 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. This is stanza 5 of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, p.111. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. This is stanza 32 of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, p.118. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. The prominent Bach interpreter John Eliot Gardiner once said during an interview that “you can’t dismiss the theology, you have to enter into the mindset of the believer” (*The Telegraph*, 3 October, 2013). For parallel insight, consult also Gardiner’s *Music in the Castle of Heaven*, London, Allen Lane, 2013, pp.346 & 394 and Eric Chafe, *J S Bach’s Johannine Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.3-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *The Poem as Sacrament: The Theological Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p.236. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, pp.180-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. About these poems, which are sometimes called ‘The Terrible Sonnets’, including the circumstances in which they were written, see Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life*, pp.382-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Haunted by Christ*, p.46. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. About this, see Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Mirror of Nature*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980, p.12. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See stanza 5 of T S Eliot’s ‘The Dry Savages’, in *Four Quartets*, London, Faber & Faber, 1979 edition, p.30. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)