

## CHAPTER 1

# Come, My Way

## *Theology as Process*

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.

—GEORGE HERBERT<sup>1</sup>

### Boarding Call

Looked like I was going to miss my connection.

I was delayed in St. Louis based on bad weather in the east. I needed to get north, in order to fly south. . . . So there was nothing to do but go gather some comfort food. I asked an older gentleman, who seemed gracious and also stranded, if I could leave my bag next to him. Thanking him when I returned, I mentioned that if I did miss the flight, I'd arrive late to my own lecture in Texas. He sympathized, saying he'd miss the class he was scheduled to teach that evening. I politely asked what he teaches; and did a double-take when he said "theology." I don't believe I've ever bumped into another "theologian" outside of a religious or educational gathering. This spurred real curiosity. I couldn't help but notice, however, the wariness that began to shadow his respectful manner. No warmth of airport connection could conceal the operative codes: we inhabited opposite ends of a split Protestant spectrum. I didn't need to wave any feminist banner for his pleasant drawl to harden, his eyes to shift downward. He mentioned his admiration for my most conservative former colleague.

I affirmed that colleague's hard work on the early church fathers. And I mentioned that his theology asserts a more absolute sense of orthodoxy than the early Christian traditions warrant.

He then put with great care the proposition that haunts this book. "I suppose there're two camps on this. There are those who think that the truth-claim of the tradition is just relative, and those who think that truth is absolute and unchanging."

"Yes, we sure get trapped in that either/or," I replied, willing my tone to convey respect. I glanced down to collect my thought. "But those aren't the only alternatives. There is a third way!" As I looked up, ready to share this friendly revelation—to my shock he had simply vanished. Without any gesture of farewell, he had spun and rushed to get in line. Boarding had just been announced. I spotted him already camouflaged among the passengers, gaze pointedly forward. He *really* wanted out of this conversation. He really did not want to hear of any third way.

But I'd like to share it with *you*.

### The Absolute and the Dissolute

Most of us do not want to stay trapped in the binary alternatives, in these camps, these predictable polarities of right vs. left, red vs. blue, us vs. you. But conservative Christians are with good reason worried that loss of absolute truth leads to loss of God, which leads to loss of the meaning and purpose of life, which leads to emptiness and chaos for individuals and their societies. But any vocal secularist will, also with good reason, point out all the undeniable violence, delusion, and repression produced by religious absolutes. There doesn't seem to be a firm middle ground in this argument, or at least none that has much appeal: theological moderates, liberals, or progressives (who may look alike from the absolutist viewpoint) have absorbed much of the secular worldview. They want the best of both faith tradition and secular liberalism. Yet their public voices, and often their private ones as well, often lack the force and timbre of conviction.

The third way I want to explore with you under the sign of "theology" is not a middle ground. That would just leave the two poles in place. It is not a compromise, an Aristotelian mean between two extremes, a laid-back moderation, or a strategy to swing votes. It really is something else, something emerging. Something *on the way*. On this way we can afford to sympathize with the concerns of absolutists and of relativists. Indeed, we cannot afford *not* to. We are always already in *relation* to them. Relation does not entail relativism, which dissolves difference. Relationality implies the practice of *discernment*, which

means to distinguish, to attend to difference, and to exercise good judgment. Despite the binary either/ors that back us into corners, there are always *more than two* differences.

On the way of this book the dispiriting polarization will often appear in the guise of religious absolutism and secular relativism. The fact that this antagonism is terribly familiar in Western culture, indeed in much of the global metropolis, doesn't lessen its polarizing grip. Sometimes it breaks into debate; usually it operates subliminally, like a bipolar condition, between us—and also within us.

To make this condition more conscious, let us stage a dialogue between its voices. One party is saying: “There is only one Truth; it is timeless and beyond doubt. We are blessed to possess it. But we are willing to share it for free.”

The other is retorting—“Truth? Your belief is just one perspective among many.”

“Then it isn't the truth!”

“Let's not talk about 'truth'; let's talk about truth-*claims*; and who has the power to *make* them.”

“You are saying that truth is just socially constructed.”

“Of course, like any perspective.”

“That is just relativism.”

“You don't think *your* views are relative to your experiences? You just happen to have the absolute truth?”

“God is the truth, and God is not relative.”

“And you own the truth about God?”

“This will offend you: but God gave us His Word!”

“And those who don't 'get' it will go to hell? What kind of God is that?”

“One who holds us accountable!”

“To what—to your parochial patriarchal projections?”

Of course such a dialogue is just a cartoon. We'd better interrupt our conversationalists before they resort to “BANG POW !!#?!”

The camps circle their wagons. Timeless truth vs. a truth-free time! The absolute vs. the dissolute! The more the one trumpets a single and exclusive Truth, the more the other dissolves it—leaving us with a void to be filled by some hollow Reason and its “value-free” science. And the more the latter reduces truth to a modern *nothing-but* (nothing but sex, nothing but power, nothing but profit, nothing but language, nothing but social construction, nothing but natural law, nothing but genes in a pool or atoms in a void), the harder the former clings to its God-given truth.

Of course, secular thought itself is hardly reducible to this stereotype. It

rightly supports its claims not by appeal to the revelation of a timeless Truth but to a critical assessment of shifting empirical and historical evidence. These claims are necessarily relative to—not therefore *reducible* to—the perspective of the observer who makes them. Relativity, which we must strictly distinguish from relativism, just describes the reality of a relational universe. The human observer belongs to that universe. Therefore all human truth-claims are relative to context and perspective. But why would it follow that truth, or value, is *nothing but* that perspective?

Similarly, religious thought within and beyond Christianity cannot be reduced to the delusion of an absolute perspective—which is no perspective at all. As we will see throughout this book, there have been theologians from the start resisting the temptation to identify their best human perspective with divine revelation. There are numerous theological perspectives sensitive to their own relativity, without sliding toward relativism. But articulating this third way within theology remains a lively challenge, and the primary motive of this book.

In the present exploration we are particularly concerned with how (our) God-talk ups the ante on truth. But what is the link between the truth question

and the God question? There are, of course, truths about anything and everything. But in the vicinity of religion, and in particular of Christianity, truth has also served as code for “God” and whatever God reveals. But even if we understand God to be “absolute”—nonbiblical but conventional language—that understanding does not make, or need not make, any human language (however inspired, however truthful, however revealed) itself absolute.

The best lack all conviction,  
while the worst  
Are full of passionate  
intensity.

Surely some revelation is  
at hand . . .

—WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS<sup>2</sup>

I am arguing that when people of faith step out of the mystery and make totalizing claims for our truth and our beliefs, we perpetuate an antagonistic polarity that actually paralyzes faith rather than fostering its living process. Relativity dissolves into the indifferent relativism, and truth freezes into a deified absolute. But we shall see that the antagonism actually turns into a bizarre two-way mirror-game. When the secular, thus cast as the dissolute, turns reductive in its hostility toward religious absolutes, it slides strangely toward an absolutism of its own.

## Is God the Problem?

The camps seem to divide neatly between faith, tending toward absolute and exclusive truth-claims, and secularism, tending toward atheism by way of religious toleration. In the United States, those who are committed to democratic freedom of (and from) religion of course traditionally include the whole range of moderate and liberal Christians. But a secular fear of religion has intensified under pressure from the politically well-mobilized Christian right wing on the one hand and Islamic extremism on the other. This double whammy of fundamentalisms has put some irate atheists on the best-seller list. They help to expose the proclivity of all religious absolutism and exclusivism to violence and repression. With in-your-face titles like *The God Delusion*, *God is Not Great*, *The End of Faith*, and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, such authors predictably preach Reason as the great virtue of democracy.

Intriguingly, these authors show little tolerance for religious moderates—precisely, as *The End of Faith* author Sam Harris explains, because they are tolerant! “By failing to live by the letter of the texts while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally.”<sup>3</sup> He is right that the religious middle does indeed often fail to scrutinize critically certain key presumptions of their own religious faith as well as of their own secular legacy of tolerance. But he presses dauntlessly forward: “Religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.”<sup>4</sup>

Just when one expects a reinforcement of the Jeffersonian wall between church and state, this new anti-tolerance would dismantle it—from the other side! Jefferson had based his hope for democracy—and it was a hope he knew to be far-fetched—precisely on the tolerance of any *beliefs*: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”<sup>5</sup> Harris, however, leaves Jefferson in the dust: “Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be *ethical to kill people for believing them*.”<sup>6</sup>

Could there be a more dangerous proposition than *that*? Harris then comes out as an enthusiast of Buddhism. Since it doesn’t worship a God, it doesn’t count as a “religion.” I agree that we should all learn from Buddhism’s enlightened compassion. Noting that it attends skillfully to the fact that all will die, Harris asks: “Why would one want to be anything but *kind* to them in the meantime?”<sup>7</sup> One must reply, “Well, Sam, because like you said, some of them believe the wrong things and should be killed.”

It is heartening to hear voices of the secular left designate such generalizations “secular fundamentalism.”<sup>8</sup> But I hope this little debate exposes the way

secular relativism mirrors and mimics religious absolutism. That mimicry of opposites makes treacherously difficult the work of a third space—as though theology must find its way through a carnival hall of mirrors. Both atheism and theism can play the game of absolute truth.

Sure, “God” is our problem—when we think that our particular version of God is the only solution. Theological absolutes, especially when deployed against “evil,” may themselves turn evil—as surely as the secular absolutisms that seem to mirror and mimic them in reverse. But “God” is not a convincing “Root of All Evil” (despite a BBC documentary of that title and thesis). There is plenty of historical repression and imperial terror before monotheism—not to mention Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, *after*.

### Christian Right, Planetary Wrong

We have considered how even an ethically minded secularism can turn absolute. Now let us note that the inverse is also the case: the religious absolute can also turn dissolute—and not in a sexy way! When theology portrays our life in this world as a mere pilgrimage to heaven, a mere means to a supernatural end, it tends to dissolve our responsibility for our corner of the material creation. The gross effect is that of an amoral relativism regarding the creation itself. For the earth itself is regarded as “fallen,” and almost all—humans and nonhumans—stand outside the clique of the “saved.” Thus the Christian absolutist melts the creation down into a *nothing-but* (nothing but matter, nothing but this passing world, fallen nature, and so forth) as surely as does the scientific reductionism.

The tragic indifference of most Christians to date toward the ecological devastation of the earth is the major case in point. When Christianity, such as the evangelical Creation Care movement, does begin to raise ecological consciousness, it is met by well-funded Christian repudiations. A supposed scriptural literalism shares a modernist appeal to “just the facts.” But a sophisticated alliance of corporate interests with the religious right has produced an aggressive new anti-environmentalism.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in an “Open Letter,” the Cornwall Alliance declares that “the harm caused by mandated reductions in energy consumption in a quixotic quest to reduce global warming will far exceed its benefits.”<sup>10</sup> This right-wing politico-religio-economic alliance bases a theology of “forceful rule” of the earth on the “dominion” passage of Genesis 1:28.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see in chapter 3, this supposedly scriptural sense of “dominion” supports the formidable coalition between a materialist, profit-driven reductionism and a religious absolutism. We might say that the most reductionist tendencies

of secularism have supported unconstrained, greed-driven economic growth in the name of reason and progress: this is the global face of the dissolute. And it is the dissolute turned absolute. But what is theologically so disturbing is how the laissez-faire capitalism—globalized in the late twentieth century in what the confessed former “economic hit man” John Perkins calls the “corporatocracy”—formed such an effective political alliance with the new religious right.<sup>12</sup> “We believe it is far wiser,” continues the Open Letter, “to promote economic growth, partly through keeping energy inexpensive, than to fight against potential global warming and thus slow economic growth.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus an absolute Christian moralism spins like a dog chasing its tail after an aggressively *amoral* secular economics. Authoritarian Christianity and secular relativism thus mimic and mirror each other’s indifference to the fecund differences of earth’s human and nonhuman populations. The absolute and the dissolute together act like a solvent on the meaningfulness of this world in its irreducible mystery. And between them we begin to witness the quite literal dissolution of the carrying capacity of the earth: creation being forced to “grow” cancerously toward a man-made [*sic*] apocalypse.

## Honest to God

The dizzying mirror dance of the absolute and the dissolute has become self-destructive for soul and earth. Yet most of us aren’t actually at home as relativists or absolutists. Those are caricatures, types, cultural moods, more than positions that thinking people usually espouse. We may identify more with one, yet we can recognize some truth on the other side. But does that mean just creeping off into the muddling middle, into a bland moderation?

Okay, then. Say you are open to self-criticism and exploration; you know that at best you “have this treasure in clay jars,” as Paul put it in a letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 4:7). As the Christian movement became more public, Paul himself was worrying about the danger of arrogance that comes with “the open statement of the truth.”<sup>14</sup> For instance, consider the ancient creeds. Such documents were first forged under the pressure of the Christian emperors from Constantine on to come up with a faith that would help to unify the young Church Triumphant. Creeds are a meaningful mode of theological compression. They certainly make “open statements of the truth.”

The problem comes when that truth becomes absolutized as “the faith”: as, for example, in “whoever desires to be saved must above all things hold the catholic faith. Unless one keeps it in its entirety inviolate, one will assuredly perish eternally.” Faith here means a set of metaphysical *beliefs* about one God in three

persons, “without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance.”<sup>15</sup> Such conciliar statements often waxed uninhibited in their threats and curses, or “anathemas.”<sup>16</sup> For instance, “If anyone will not confess that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one nature or substance . . . let him be anathema.” A whole series of anathemas follows, all demanding “confession” of a theology processed with Hellenistic substance metaphysics.<sup>17</sup> Institutional unity was achieved at the cost of massive divisions and expulsions, with repercussions to this day.

Truth was turned into a belief to which you must assent—or be cursed, denounced, excluded. The clay jar was thrown on the trash heap, replaced by an elegant vessel of imperial alabaster. But did it then contain the truth? Or had the truth-flow of an earlier generation been abstracted into transferable, timeless beliefs, convenient to the Christian empires? Tradition of course needs distilled, compressed codes that it can deliver to the next generation. “Tradition” means “to deliver, to hand over”—and without receiving and making its historic deliveries, theology has nothing to offer. Ironically the word *tradition* is etymologically a doublet of “treason.” Theology can “hand over” its teaching in either sense.

The claim of absolute truth is the greatest single obstruction to theological *honesty*. It seems that Paul already glimpsed this danger, at a point when a Christian theocracy was almost unimaginable.

So then, say you recognize the mysteriousness of the “treasure.” Whether or not you recite some ancient creed comfortably, you don’t mistake faith for absolute knowledge. But despite clay jars and clay feet, you don’t want to hem and haw your way through life, to compromise and qualify every claim, to relativize every revelation. You may relinquish certainty, but you need *confidence*. You want to be able to live *purposefully*, to communicate the force of those values and insights that burst through the haze of business-as-usual. You want to speak openly and *honestly*.

Ever notice, though, that those who already *have* the truth have little patience with honesty? With honest questions, doubts, observations, differences? They don’t have to *learn* anything important anymore. Of course, honesty may lead us again down the road of debunking and doubt—to a dead end where no “open statement of truth” remains possible. What if we don’t want to join either camp? What if we want neither a truthless honesty nor a dishonest truth? How do we break out of this circle? Can theology—if it gets out of stasis and into process—really help?

## Trails and Trials

“Many black women,” according to womanist theologian Delores Williams, “have testified that ‘God helped them make a way out of no way.’”<sup>18</sup> For there is no way there already, prepared. This is all too evident to anyone in a crisis, where prior assurances seem to flee; where we feel abandoned even by the God we thought we knew. And for peoples living in the perpetual crisis inflicted on them by collective injustice, consciousness of this desert wandering is acute. For Moses, responsible for a huge and frightened population in the wilderness: no way! For Hagar, expelled from her fickle surrogate family and lost in the desert with her son: no way. Indeed, “like Hagar and Ishmael when they were finally freed from the house of bondage, African American ex-slaves were faced with making a way out of no way.”<sup>19</sup>

Those who know suffering come closer to a truth about the creation: the future is open, alarmingly or promisingly. The way is not laid out in advance. Creation itself is in process. Our own way forward has not yet been charted. There may be no trail before us at all. Sometimes one can only move forward in faith: that is, in courage and confidence, not in a delusional certainty.

Process is ongoing. Amidst trials and tribulations, life is going on. Exoduses happen. But, like Moses, you may not make it to the promised land. That possibility didn’t paralyze him.

“Hope,” says the theologian Karl Barth, laying to rest any facile faith in end-times or immortality, comes “in the act of taking the next step.”<sup>20</sup> His theology was born amidst the catastrophic struggles of Europe during the period of the World Wars. Barth witnessed the failure of German Christianity, liberal and conservative, to avert the horrors of Nazism, or even, but for the small Confessing Movement, to protest it. He denounced “religion” for its compromises with secular modernity and the death machines. For Barth “faith” is opposed to the theological arrogance—a form of the mirror-dance discussed above—that underlies this unholy alliance.

He insisted instead that all theology is “on the way”: *theologia viatorum*. Any theology on the mystery will resonate. The way is not straight nor the utterance smooth. Theology does not seize—the German for “grasp”—God as its object and the truth as its property. And the different angles of our varied contexts infinitely complicate our inescapably finite and fragmented capacities.

In the many decades since Barth, theology has been winding through radically altered spiritual landscapes. Feminist and liberation theologies have made more explicit the complex ways context forms and deforms faith. (Indeed, they would note Barth’s own systematic blindness to his patriarchal context.)

Context signifies the interplay within a historical geography of all the social, ethnic-racial, sexual patterns that shape our perspective but are often masked by the more conscious beliefs. And in theology *context* is truly *with* text: the way, for instance, Christians, Jews, or Muslims interpret their scriptures will be influenced by the complex interplay of contextual factors—rendered ever more confusing if the interpretative input is ignored.

All theology is *theologia viatorum*. . . . It is broken thought and utterance to the extent that it can progress only in isolated thoughts and statements directed from different angles to the one object. It can never form a system, comprehending and as it were ‘seizing’ the object.

—KARL BARTH<sup>21</sup>

The clay of our merely human perspectives is mixed of these contextual elements. The context touches content, and content reciprocally affects context. For good *and* ill. From the interaction comes change. Because we are beings in relation we are always becoming. Change is inevitable but not necessarily for the better: process in interpretation, as in life, may or may not mean *progress*.

And so we embark on the path of a *theology in process*, a process whose ends are many and open, a way no less purposeful than that which moves toward some fixed goal. The ends of this way do not yet exist: it is truly *viatorum*. The ends are more open than Barth could have recognized. They signify possibilities, not actualities. Theology is not ever identical with faith or with belief—

but, rather, motivated by faith, it takes all our beliefs into the evolving perspective of its interactive process.

## Theology as Truth-Process

Theology as process remains—like every living, breathing organism—open-ended. And as such it is no less carefully contoured than a closed system. Such theology is on the go. But this does not mean “anything goes,” as absolutists fear. *Many* things go, and some better than others. Discernment between ways better and worse, between the promising directions and the dead ends, never ceases. Theology cannot escape its own edge of judgment, not in the sense of an

ultimate retribution but of a critical and self-critical truth-process.

In the very notion of “process” echoes the old meaning of a formal procedure, as in a “legal process.” The French *procès* preserves the dual meaning of both an *ongoing activity* and a *trial*. The term gains a new resonance through the “truth and reconciliation process” of South Africa. This was a model developed after the stunning, unpredictable end of apartheid: a way opened where there was no way. The truth and reconciliation process evolved in order to facilitate a nation-healing justice. It invented an alternative to a formal trial, a procedure for seeking accountability without vengeance. Reconciliation rather than retribution was the goal, and truth-telling rather than punishment the means. In South Africa it was “a public process of disclosure by perpetrators and public hearings for victims . . . with the intent of moving a country from its repressive past to a peaceful future, where former opponents could work side by side.”<sup>22</sup> The success of such truth-processes remains controversial, in contexts in which there can be no quick fix for a hell of history.<sup>23</sup> But the political metaphor of the “truth process” contributes new meaning to the concept of process as ongoing interactivity.

“*Such a Truth, as ends all strife*”?<sup>24</sup> Only temporarily, as far as history goes. But amidst the trials of history we are beginning to see the slow coalescence of traditions of nonviolent struggle, in which truth cannot be extracted or imposed by force. Theology as process becomes a resource—one among many resources—for nonviolent conflict resolution at all levels. Because we are who we are only in our open-ended processes of interaction, we require a radically relational theology. This relationalism moves always toward what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the beloved community.” A *theologia viatorum* opens vistas of peace without abandoning the struggle for justice. To forge democratic paths of spiritual well-being and public honesty, Christian theology, as we saw in the civil rights movement as well as in the struggle against apartheid, must be mobilized *against* the Christian legitimations of any unjust status quo. But the *against* is the negation of a negation. On the mystery and in hope: we take another step. Love, however, is full of pitfalls.

## Touch of Truth

Along with the public witness of a theology in process are also enfolded difficult intimate truths. Take, for instance, the riveting moment in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker’s *Proverbs of Ashes* when the young pastor Rebecca is confronted in her study by a walk-in, Lucia. Lucia’s husband is an abuser. “I went to my priest twenty years ago. I’ve been trying to follow his advice. The priest

said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, ‘Jesus suffered because he loved us.’ He said, ‘If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.’” She has tried, but now her husband is turning on the kids. “Tell me, is what the priest told me true?”<sup>26</sup>

The truth question: *it matters*. It takes material form in our embodied, terribly touchable, existence—and demands a theological response. Rebecca pauses. Her own relational faith that, in Paul’s words, “love bears all things,” is reeling. “If I answered Lucia’s question truthfully, I would have to rethink my theology.”

She does. “It isn’t true,’ I said to her. ‘God does not want you to accept being beaten by your husband. God wants you to have your life, not to give it up. God wants you to protect your life and your children’s life.’ Lucia’s eyes danced.”

Rebecca has answered theology with theology. And Christian love suddenly ceases to mean: tolerate abuse. Love may bear, for instance, the spouse’s illness, irritating habits, or occasional ill temper. But love does not mean: enable abusers to continue in their abuse. Even the problematic metaphor of “turning the other cheek” means, read *in context*, the very opposite of enabling more enmity: it is a strategy for interrupting it. The patience of love is not placation of injustice. In the wake of the women’s movement, the context for all future theology shifted. If “the personal is the political,” neither domestic abuse nor global violence can be pacified. As our chapters on passion and com/passion will probe more deeply, we make peace and we make love only inasmuch as we make justice. The authors of *Proverbs of Ashes* narrate many such events of religiously sanctioned violence—not to put the kabash on Christian theology but to call it to account.

Notice that right in the episode, Rebecca used strong truth-talk: no relativism here! But we hear not a truth imposed, but *in touch*: it takes place in reciprocity. And it unfolds as a *process*. First in the form of a dialogue, in which Lucia could tell her truth, could witness to it, and be heard. Without such validation

You say love is a temple,  
love a higher law  
Love is a temple, love the  
higher law.  
You ask me to enter, but  
then you make me crawl  
And I can’t be holding on  
to what you got, when  
all you got is hurt.

—U2<sup>25</sup>

by Rebecca, the truth of Lucia's life would not be happening. She was not on her way. Lucia "had been heard to her own speech," in the classic phrase of feminist theologian Nelle Morton.<sup>27</sup> Lucia soon moved out, got new job training, a new job, a new life. Formal legal processes were involved. Her husband eventually got help, and she permitted visitation with the children.

One sort of truth had been scripted by the priest, with very material, devastating effects. The proposition "Jesus suffered because he loved us," like "democracy is the best form of government," is in itself a plausible claim. But I am suggesting that its *truth* depends on the context of the spirit: is it in *touch* with the very *love* it names? Abstracted from its living relationships, even a proposition about divine love can be cited "in bad faith." It can be turned into a terrorizing absolute. Such abstraction from text and context, whereby a proposition can then be reinserted unilaterally into any life situation, is the temptation of all forms of truth-language, but above all of theology. It is the fertilizer of every atheism.

The apostle Paul warned of those who "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25). But such a lie is so good because it looks and sounds like the truth. The exchange can happen under cover of theology itself! Such spiritual dishonesty will not be answered by a wimp-out relativism (as in "The priest had his opinion, I have another, what is yours?"). It was answered in this case by a spontaneous and confident *counter-truth*. The capacity to speak truth—sometimes to power, sometimes to the disempowered—is what in the religious traditions we mean by "witness" or "testimony." We will discuss this biblical sense of truth in the next chapter.

Rebecca was not just expressing a truth that she already "possessed." She didn't. Rather, the truth she heard herself articulate had the character of an event, a happening: it surprised her as well. She makes no claim, like the prior clergyperson, to tell The Truth. Nonetheless she finds herself speaking honestly, *truthfully*. She offers a *touch of truth*: a humble, fleeting, and healing gesture. Yet the theological truth-claim she made only arose in response to Lucia's courage to come in and tell the truth of her life.

A touch, a connection, takes place—and a fullness flows into our waste and void spaces. It begins to wash out the dysfunctional absolutes that have kept us trapped. Such truth of flow replaces fixed truisms with living relationship. But then we must not confuse relationalism with relativism, in which every relationship is equally good.

It is the process and the caress of this truth-fullness in which the present book is interested. Theology that matters, a theology in touch, can help open a way where there had been none. But it is likely to stir up our own uncertainties

in the process. It may confront us with the chaos in our lives. For instance, the chaos of an abusive family system may remain hidden under the socially sanctioned order of marriage. At another scale, the chaos produced by war may result from the attempt of one power to inflict its order—whether under the name of “democracy” or “God”—on others. And in terms of theology itself, thoughtful people who had been subjected to an unquestionable set of beliefs cannot begin to question those absolutes without undergoing some sense of dissolution, some crisis of belief. The truth-process does not eliminate uncertainty or its chaos. It makes it visible, in order to release a livelier, more redemptive, *order*. But such order, like the truth it supports, cannot be imposed: it must *emerge*. It resembles what scientists now refer to as “self-organizing complexity,” the nonlinear order of an open system. The chaos of dissolution can become the very stuff of creation, as chapter 3 on the creation will propose. Exposing the dissolute ethics legitimated by abusive theological absolutes, we break out of the mirror game. We approach not a *relativism* of anything goes—but a *relationalism* of: everything flows.

## Calling “God”

What would it mean to do theology as an *open system*? Theology as an academic and church discipline is usually referred to as “systematic,” suggestive of a majestic architecture of doctrines, a medieval cathedral of the mind. Without losing the gothic brilliance of the discipline, let us recognize the dilemma. The very word *theology* seems to yank our gaze upward, away from the pain of abused persons, away from our intimate or public passions, away from the adventures and misadventures of our embodied lives, here, now.

Theology: bits of an old creed echo through our brain: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only begotten son . . . born of the Virgin Mary. . . . All vivid images, snatched from the biblical story. Their familial resonances may strike us as meaningful and indispensable, as beautiful in their antiquity, as patriarchal pontifications, or as childish nostalgia, kitschy among adults. But whatever emotional coloration they may have for us, they condense wide systems of thought and lively biblical narratives into compact abstraction.

Theological language is an odd mix: of vivid story-characters extracted from scripture and the most cosmically stretched ideas from ancient Greek philosophy onward. I love this mix. But it is complex—and dangerous, when we neglect its complexity. From the rich and messy set of narratives comprising the Bible, certain metaphoric themes were lifted up, repeated, generalized—a pro-

cess of abstraction beginning to happen within the Bible itself, at least in Paul's writing, touched by Greek Stoic philosophy. Abstraction is a necessary part of any reflective process. But by means of these abstractions, stories have been often dogmatically pounded into simple propositions of belief. These abstractions are convenient. But they too easily mask the complex mix of metaphor, history, and philosophy. Indeed, they may disguise the metaphors as pseudo-facts.

When we forget that these metaphors are metaphors, when we think, for instance, that the metaphor of "God the Father Almighty" refers in a direct and factual way to an entity up there, we are committing what the philosopher of process, Alfred North Whitehead, called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness."<sup>28</sup> Those concrete attributes of fatherhood refer to the particular experiences of biological fathers within the context of a monotheistic patriarchy, in which an "almighty" deity could of course only be imagined as masculine. The fallacy lies in confusing the concreteness of metaphors derived from a particular, finite historical context with the infinity we may call—for want of a better word—"God." *Literalism* is the simple word for this fallacy. It freezes theology into single meanings. Instead of flowing from an inexhaustible truth-*process*, meaning gets trapped in a truth-*stasis*.

Yet mystery is itself not absolute. Otherwise we would have nothing to say. And that is why we use metaphors of all sorts in theology: to realize our relationship to the mystery.

To realize it in language: to *speak* God's *sophia* in a mystery. But in such speech, words, as Eliot says, "strain/Crack and sometimes break under the burden . . ." Scripture is littered with broken words, words breaking open new meanings, breaking open closed systems. The Bible brims with metaphor, trope, figure of speech, parable, psalm, prayer, story. When abstract propositions of belief (like "Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior" or "I believe in the triune God") that are rare in scripture become fixed in a closed system, the fallacious factualism kicks in. The propositions then draw our concern *away* from the concrete processes of our shared creaturely life, rather than spiritually illuminating them. Metaphors

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes  
break, under the bur-  
den,  
Under the tension, slip,  
slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision,  
will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

—T. S. ELIOT<sup>29</sup>

(like the Christ, Lord, Savior, Trinity, and so forth) then lose their metaphoric valency, their open-ended interactivity: for metaphors are language in process, not in stasis.

The metaphors are ground down into changeless truths when the *abstraction* makes itself *absolute*: those terms mean almost the same thing in their Latin root: both signify a “drawing away from,” a separation. When that separation is absolute it becomes irreversible; the abstraction frees itself of reciprocity with the bodily world. Thus an absolute truth is deemed nonrelative to anything else, *absolved* of all interdependence, all conditions, all vulnerability, all passion, all change. Those with some theological training will recognize the abstract (and surprisingly nonbiblical) features of the God of classical theism.

But what if that sort of changeless stasis is not even what God—let alone the creation—*means*? What if “God” did not first and need not now mean some super-entity up there in an abstract heaven, invulnerably transcendent of time and its trials? Scripture has no such notion. Its metaphors suggest a transcendence of qualitative difference but not of dispassionate immutability. But, of course, the Bible virtually never gives any abstract definition of God. One of the (two) times it seems to, it announces: “God is love” (1 John 4:16). Does this suggest some changeless and dispassionate paternal entity? Or rather a mystery of infinite relationship?

And yet the metaphors of this love, in its inexhaustible interactivity, got frozen twice over: in the abstractions of a changeless omnipotence on the one hand, and the stereotypes of a literal and literally masculine Person on the other. “He” appears (and for this book the masculine article will be used strictly in historical citation or in present irony) at once chillingly distant and intrusively present: an absolute masculine infinity can combine with the violently loving interventions. Of course, some can catch subtler meanings behind the popular clichés of a God-man who “comes down,” presumably from Heaven Up There, dons a birthday suit, and after gamely sacrificing himself “for our sins” soon gets beamed up again. . . . But far too many thoughtful people, through too much early exposure to the Big Guy in the Sky, develop life-long God allergies.

Allergic reactions, I hear, can only be treated with a bit of the original allergen. In other words, the literalisms of God-talk can be cured not by atheism but by an alternative theology. What, however, would such a therapy for secularists have to do with the needs of people of faith? For communities of faith will naturally and necessarily speak in their own traditional codes; they will play what Wittgenstein called “language games,” with their own peculiar grammars and rules of communication nowhere more apparent than in the liturgy. But I have come to trust that members of these communities must not be insulated from

their own doubts. Their doubts will only deepen if they are protected from the solvents of secular relativism. Particularly when it comes to the leaders and the thinkers among communities of faith, they will find that they share something of the allergic reaction; they are inevitably, for good and for ill, immersed in a secular culture. Both its habitual nihilism and its healthy skepticism are part of us all. For the sake of our own honesty and therefore our own confidence, indeed the confidence of our testimony, we need the breathing room of a theology in process. We need its adventure and its guidance. This is not a way of what is Sunday-schoolishly called “learning about God.” But it is a way of discerning divinity in process. In the process of our open-ended, on-the-ground interactions, a theology of process, itself open-ended and interactive, discerns a process and an interactivity that it may also call “God.”

Anselm classically defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*—“faith seeking understanding.” Not faith that already understands and so no longer needs to seek. That would by definition no longer be theology. Theology is not itself the faith but its quest. If we stop seeking, we are no longer *on the way*. Faith seeking understanding has then turned into “belief that understands.” It then closes down the very root of *quaerens*, from which come both *question* and *quest*. Speaking the divine wisdom in a mystery, theology remains a work of human speech. Theology is not the same as faith or belief, but a disciplined and relational reflection upon them. God calls, but we are responsible for what we call “God.” And God may be calling us to that very responsibility!

Can an open-systems theology, operating as it must in the third space beyond the absolutes of rigidified metaphors and the dissolutes of mere repudiation, set theology itself back on the mystery? Or does any *theology as such* presume too much? What does the faith that seeks already presume? As a theological process, faith is of course somehow *in* God.

“God”! As *theos-logos*, God-talk, theology cannot take its first step without a leap of faith: if not into an entire apparatus of dogmatic answers, into a discourse in which the *name* of God already shapes our questions. So after all does God-talk always solve the mystery before it even starts?

## Speaking of the Mystery

Is it possible that the very name *God* endangers the mystery that it names? The practice of not pronouncing the name of GXD, yet writing it as the tetragrammaton YHWH<sup>31</sup> answered over two millennia ago to this paradox. In more casual speech, Jewish tradition began early to use a delightful nickname for the mystery: the unnameable One is addressed as *Ha Shem*—“The Name”!<sup>32</sup> Sixteen

centuries ago, Augustine put it perfectly: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*—“If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.”<sup>33</sup> And eight centuries ago, another monk, the great mystic Meister Eckhart, tried to still the knowing “chatter” of religious folk: “And do not try to understand God, for God

So be silent and do not chatter about God; for when you chatter about him, you are telling lies and sinning. . . .

—MEISTER ECKHART<sup>30</sup>

is beyond all understanding.”<sup>34</sup> He was carrying on the tradition of “negative theology”: a strategy within theology, indeed within classical theology itself, that negates any presumption or pretense of knowledge of God. For it reminds us that, like us, all our concepts and names are finite, creaturely language spoken by creatures, based strictly on creaturely experience—and so radically different from the mystery “God” names. Indeed sometimes the term *absolute* is used not to amplify beliefs about God but to protect God’s

radical difference from all creatures—as absolved from all “positive attributes.” And just a bit later, Nicholas of Cusa, an early Renaissance cardinal who loved Augustine and Eckhart, characterized this tradition in its radicality: “Therefore the theology of negation is so necessary to the theology of affirmation that without it God would not be worshiped as the infinite God but as creature; and such worship is idolatry, for it gives to an image that which belongs only to truth itself.”<sup>35</sup>

What we call “God” is literally—*not*. The only proper name for God, from the perspective of negative theology, is the infinite: a purely negative term. Theology, however, whether in scholastic sophistication or in popular religion, is perpetually tempted to mistake the infinite for the finite names and images in which we clothe it. And this is idolatry. Idolatry of a most deceptive kind, the truth made lie: we might call it *theolatry*.

Mysticism means, as the word itself hints, not primarily special experiences or esoteric gifts, but a persistent attunement to the mystery. Every religion has its mystical tradition, its language of mystery, where words point toward the silence. These are very verbal disciplines, by which theology itself learns to check its own theolatries—not to inhibit its metaphors, its narratives, but their reification, their absolutization. These traditions cultivate discernment of the unknowable God—or of what in other traditions does not bear the name *God*. As Lao Tzu, the great Chinese mystic of the “Dao,” the name for “way,” put it over 2,500 years ago, the Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao. All lan-

guage is finite and creaturely, however inspired. Mystics groove on inspiration. But they rigorously negate, or as we say now, deconstruct, the absolutism that presumes to name the infinite like some person or entity over there; that knows God with any certainty, abstract or literal. They keep theology on its way. In her richly traditional theology of the divine Wisdom/Sophia, Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, shows how the classical way of negation is now crucial for challenges to exclusively masculine God-images: “no name or image or concept that human beings use to speak of the divine mystery ever arrives at its goal: God is essentially incomprehensible.”<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless the negative theologians of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam did not stop naming God. As Franz Rosenzweig put it: “Of God we know nothing. But this ignorance is ignorance of God.”<sup>37</sup> To the contrary, the challenge of naming the unnameable, seems to clear the space for fresh metaphors of the mystery. Cusa called this ignorance, an ignorance not innocent of its own ignorance, the knowing ignorance: *docta ignorantia*. The mystics never tire of speaking of the unspeakable. The infinity of the divine generates an endless multiplicity of possible names. So the mystical traditions, with their iconoclastic edge, may help us all to discern the mystery of the infinite within the finite. It is like a depth, bottomless and eerie, that now and then boils up at the shadowy edges of our experience. *Bullitio*, “bubbling over,” was Eckhart’s word for the overflow of the divine into the world. At this effervescent edge theology itself is bubbling over, speaking—in burning tongues and modest metaphors—“God’s *sophia* in a mystery.” Or we really should just shut up.

Yet in the mystical traditions, orthodox or countercultural, God-talk is not forbidden or forbidding. Its mystery attracts. The caress of that mystery is like the touch of truth—delicate rather than abusive. But mystery becomes mystification if it inhibits the struggle to understand, if it blocks the quest. Mysticism becomes repressive if it restricts truth to the exotic experiences of an elite. Eckhart, when he tells us to stop chattering, is not telling anyone to remain silent. Nor is Karl Barth, not at all a mystic but a booming proclaimer of the Word of God, when he whimsically likens theology—properly broken speech—to “the ‘old wife’s’ stammering.”<sup>38</sup>

The calls to be quiet, to listen, to meditate, or to pay attention are not orders of silence or censorship. Theology needs breathing room between its words—the better to speak them! “Silence,” writes Elliot Wolfson on Jewish mysticism, “is not to be set in binary opposition to language, but is rather the margin that demarcates its center.”<sup>39</sup> Silence folds in and out of speech as breath folds in and out, inspiration and expiration, of the body. *Spirit* in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin literally means “breath.”

Yet Protestantism especially has been afraid of silence, even in a worship service—as though it would swallow the Word. Odd that we in the West must turn to yoga or Zen to recover the incarnate moment-to-moment attention to our breathing. This attention was implicit in the occidental contemplative pathways. Contemplative prayer breathes beneath and beyond our theologies of misplaced concreteness.

“Such a way as gives us breath.”

## Attractive Propositions

Nonetheless theology routinely gets called “knowledge of God.” I am suggesting that this definition smacks of the dreary theolatriy. But all the *-ologies* are disciplines of knowledge, with their scholarly traditions and historical texts. Am I making theology an exception?

On the contrary, it is an arrogant exceptionalism that I am questioning. Theology as an academic discipline comprises a vast compendium of knowledge—none vaster. But this is *knowledge of its myriad texts and contexts, not of God*, their supreme symbol. This history will be important to any student of theology, especially if he or she is studying for the ministry in a historic Christian tradition. The historically anti-intellectualist, fundamentalist, or “Bible-believing” ministries have no patience with theology, and often consider it all more or less heretical. But their identification of faith with propositional beliefs—“fundamentals”—then becomes all the more absolute.

All that has been revealed, thought, understood, and rethought is the basis and background for a faith that is still, always, seeking; but none of it adds up to the truth. Truth, like the manna, cannot be hoarded, refrigerated, or dried. It is a gift of the present and a grace of relation.

Theological truth, in other words, cannot be captured in propositions, no matter how correct. But neither does it happen *without* propositions. Theology is one hulking body of truth-*claims*, including that made by the present sentence. Theology—not the truth it seeks—comprises a shifting set of propositions, frayed and porous at the edges. Some of its propositions will *propose* more attractive, more healing and redeeming possibilities than others. To propose is not to impose—but to invite. A proposition may be more like an erotic appeal than a *compelling* argument: we get propositioned! In chapter 5 we will consider the process theological idea of the divine lure as God’s invitation to each of us, at every moment, to become. Indeed, we are putting some key propositions to the test in this volume—propositions encoded in such ancient doctrinal loci of the tradition as the creation, the power, and the love of God. These will be

*doctrines in process*: on trial and in movement. If these symbols do not help you think differently about what most *matters* in your life *now*—not looking back in a haze of nostalgia for the lost Plan A, nor forward to some Plan B afterlife, but *now*—they fail the test.

Theology then is a truth-process, not a set of truths. It speaks “God’s *sophia* in a mystery” but *is* not that wisdom. If theology is not for you a bubbling process that helps your life *materialize* differently and gladly, its propositions have lost their life. Its metaphors have become frozen and brittle. Toss your theology on the waters.

It may come back—manifold.

## Process Theology

Nothing more surely characterizes our era, which we might as well call post-modern, than awareness of multiplicity. High-speed global travel and communication confront us with an endless array of cultural and religious differences. This plurality sends some running back to the security of some absolute: *nulla salvus extra ecclesiam*—“No salvation outside of the church.” And it dissipates others in a global marketplace of options: in my city you can buy dreamcatchers, hand-painted Guadalupes, plump plastic Buddhas, and a neon flashing Jesus all in one shop, on your way to do yoga after work on Wall Street. But when the many become the manifold, folded together, held in relationship, the third way is unfolding. To put this propositionally: relationality saves pluralism from relativism. Indeed, that proposition proposes something about how all propositions propose to us: they make new relationships possible, amidst the clutter of options.

For a relational theology, the multiplicity of the universe and of our own lives within it exercises profound spiritual attraction. Getting to know other religions, participating in secular movements for social justice—these count as positive theo-

God-relatedness is constitutive of every occasion of experience. This does not restrict the freedom of the occasion. . . . It is God who, by confronting the world with unrealized opportunities, opens up a space for freedom and self-creativity.

—JOHN B. COBB JR. AND  
DAVID RAY GRIFFIN<sup>40</sup>

logical activities, not threatening to one's own faith but clarifying and enriching. Again, only an absolutist Christianity views other inviting ways as competitors rather than conversation partners. A robust and living faith does not feel threatened by dissolution in the face of multiple possibilities. But pluralism represents a steep learning curve for the monotheistic traditions. What theologian Laurel Schneider calls "the logic of the One" has operated to abstract the divine from the manifold of metaphors and manifestations evident in each of the scriptural traditions.<sup>41</sup> In this book we cannot explore the intersections and differences of various religions. But we distinguish carefully between the relativism that slides toward the dissolute, offering a smorgasbord of ideas for sale—and a *discerning pluralism*.

Pluralism, if bound together with a robust relationalism, lets us build on and beyond Jeffersonian tolerance. It lets us *engage*, recognizing that we influence one another already anyway. We are willy-nilly interconnected. This has always been true, but in this century it has become obvious. For good and for ill, no creature, not even a hermit in the Himalayas or a molecule of oxygen a mile over her head, is untouched by the whole life-process of the planet.

No theology has earlier or better embraced the truth of our radically relational interdependence than has the movement called process theology. Rather than sensing in the impinging multiplicities of the world a growing threat for the Christian faith, it has recognized a bottomless gift. As Cobb and Griffin write, process thought "gives primacy to interdependence over independence as an ideal. Of course it portrays interdependence not simply as an ideal but as an ontologically given characteristic." It is the source of our mutual vulnerability as well as our fondest community. "We cannot escape it. However, we can either exult in this fact or bemoan it."<sup>42</sup> And it is precisely the dynamism of our interdependence, by which we constantly influence each other—flow into each other—that keeps us in process. "We influence each other by entering into each other."<sup>43</sup> If the world is an open-ended process of interactions, it is because we may exercise choice in the way we influence each other's becomings and the way we shape our own becoming out of the manifold of influences. We are indelibly marked by our past. We cannot escape the process of being influenced and of influencing. But we may exercise creative freedom within it.

For a growing number in this millennium, theology is of renewed interest, but only as a living and relational process, sensitive to difference. To say that theology is a process is to say that theology itself unfolds in relationship and in touch. It has always been multiple. It is unfinished, always, and on the way. But the metaphor of process only takes on this intensity because of the many decades of the tradition called "process theology."

Process theology is grounded in the cosmology of Whitehead, the early-twentieth-century mathematician who became a philosopher in order to connect the radical new insights of Einstein's relativity theory and quantum indeterminacy to our living sense of value. He announced that the primary task of philosophy must be the reconciliation of religion and science. His elaborate rethinking of the universe as one immense, living, and open-ended network of spontaneous interactions inspired the movement called process theology. It was developed early by Henry Nelson Wieman and Charles Hartshorne; John Cobb made it a systematic theology and a practical movement, with the collaboration of David Ray Griffin, Marjorie Suchocki, and the Claremont Center for Process Studies. This ecological and pluralist vision comprises a vast community of authors, teachers, clergy, and activists collectively rethinking the core values and symbols of the West. It is finding ever more spokespeople throughout Asia as well. The present book does not seek converts to process theology. But it takes part in the richly theological, political, and ecological vision of a process-relational universe.

It is perhaps becoming apparent that *theology as process* proposes something not just about the process of God-talk, but about what we mean by the name *God*. It does not negate theological absolutes *absolutely*; indeed, it is not often developed in relation to negative theology at all.<sup>44</sup> For it affirms an open system of theological metaphors. For process theologians, *God*, at once eternal and becoming, is a living process of interaction. In other words, the mystery may be addressed with metaphors of eros, of flow, of illimitable interactivity, of open ends and unknowable origins, of immeasurable materialization. But for process theology God does not lose the personal aspect. The infinite creativity of the universe is limited, contoured, drawn into relationship by what Whitehead called "the divine element in the universe." The impersonal infinity can be appropriately addressed with the interpersonal metaphors of the biblical God.

The language of prayer, the metaphors of mysticism, the scriptures of the world, provide various strategies for intimacy with the infinite. Theology is another such strategy of relationship, which process theologians have sought to revive within and beyond the churches. Such theology seeks to understand without abstracting ourselves from the process we seek to understand. Like quantum theory, it recognizes that the observer participates in that which s/he observes. Any theological standpoint outside of the process of the universe would be a fallacy of misplaced concreteness. To discern God in process means to discern at the same time our own participation in that process: our participation as social individuals, that is, as individuals who participate in one another and in God.

Amidst the uncertainties of our own history, we matter to this divinity whose *sophia* we utter. The interrelationships that bind all creatures together produce both risk and stability, change and conservation. The God of process theology

There are two principles inherent in the nature of things . . . the spirit of change and the spirit of conservation. There can be nothing real without them.

—ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD<sup>45</sup>

resists stasis but also fragmentation. For the open, self-organizing complexity of the world can only develop through bonds that hold firm, that channel life and support meaning. Those who wish to protect elements of religious orthodoxy without rigidification, for example, or those who wish to protect the global environment without denying human need and natural shifts, will appreciate the refusal of predictable polarizations. A third way proposes both theory and practice for theology. Its discerning pluralism thrives in the conjunctions of spirited change with

living traditions. The God of process theology, whose incarnate context is what William James called “the pluralistic universe,” is the discerning pluralist *par excellence*.

## Such a Way

“We are not alone,” in the words of a great twentieth-century hymn: “therefore let us make thanksgiving, and with justice, willing and aware, Give to earth and all things living, ‘liturgies of care.’”<sup>46</sup> Theology, if it lives, expresses a liturgical cadence and care. We who are finite moments participating in an infinite process need more than our own individual inventions of meaning—even if we cannot escape the constructive process. Theology, as in Augustine’s *Confessions*, is itself a kind of prayer. It breathes a prayer, like his, full of poetry, arguments, quotes, doubts, and discoveries. A text that breathes, that leaves its readers breathing room. A prayer evidently intended for a much wider readership than just God!

Once I was lost, but now I’m found: and still finding my way. “Such a Way as gives us breath”—will also keep us on the mystery. To do theology with honesty and without mystification, to “speak God’s *sophia* in a mystery,” is a process we will have to undertake together. Theology—if it means God-talk—is not God

talking to us or through us. It is not our talk about God, like an object we could know. We talk critically and creatively about the God-talk of scripture and tradition. But theology signifies something more: theology is a way of discerning divinity in process. The process is both that of our faith seeking understanding—and of that which we seek to understand.

Theology is not a truth I already possess and can write out and deliver to you. The argument of this writing is that truth—and above all theological truth—cannot be *had*. But as the next chapter demonstrates, under the sign of truth and in a familiar scene of trial, we can take part in its process. “Willing and aware.”

Between the absolute and the dissolute, arises the *resolute*. Like a gift, our confidence flows. And we take that next step. We might even board together.

We have only begun to make our connections.

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## CHAPTER 2

# Pilate's Shrug

## *Truth as Process*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise . . .

—EMILY DICKINSON<sup>1</sup>

Early in the present millennium, *The Colbert Report*, a wildly popular late-night-comedy parody of right-wing news shows, launched the word *truthiness* on its first airing. Truthiness belongs to “those who *know* with their *heart*.”<sup>2</sup> “Heart” here signifies not love, but rather a kind of feeling brewed of an unquestioning and unquestionable belief. For instance, “. . . what about Iraq? If you ‘think’ about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces to the rationale for war. But doesn’t taking Saddam out ‘feel’ like the right thing?”

“Truth,” as Daniel Boorstin notes more grimly of current U.S. culture, “has been displaced by believability.”<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush gained a reputation as “our most postmodern president” for his facility at changing the facts to fit the position: “Call the estate tax a ‘death tax.’ Present relaxed environmental regulations as a Clean Air Act. Tout increased logging in national forests as a fire-prevention measure called the Healthy Forest Initiative.”<sup>4</sup> Yet absolute truths are emitted from the same sources. We have been bombarded by a shifting, hallucinogenic radiation of over-processed absolutes—concerning economic growth, terrorism, war, good, evil, and God—by the very media that have made truth a matter of spin. A spin, far from Dickinson’s “slant,” pretends to be the straight-talking