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Contemplating God
with the
Great Tradition

Recovering Trinitarian
Classical Theism

Craig A. Carter

Foreword by Carl R. Trueman

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Prologue

How My Mind Has Changed

The story of how this book came to be written goes back to my doctoral studies under John Webster at the University of Toronto School of Theology in the early 1990s. John was still in his Barth phase at that time; he was publishing a lot on Barth and getting famous in the process. I chose to study Barth as the major theologian for my program and John Howard Yoder as my thesis topic. Yoder was a Mennonite who had studied under Barth in Basel and written a book on Barth's ethics of war. Yoder also had been an acquaintance of my favorite seminary professor, J. K. Zeman, who had attended Barth's seminar in Basel with Yoder in the late 1950s. I began to study Yoder in 1992, and by 1999 I had completed my thesis, which was then published as *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Ethics of John Howard Yoder*.¹ I followed it up with a book titled *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Approach*, in which I argued for a Barthian-Anabaptist approach to social ethics.² However, by the time that book was in print, I was experiencing doubts on multiple levels about both Barth and Yoder, doubts that only grew in seriousness as time went on.

From 1992–2004 I was heavily involved in academic administration, serving as vice president and academic dean at two small Christian universities. Finally, in 2004–5 I had a full-year sabbatical, after which I began to teach full-time. As I thought about my next writing project, I envisioned writing a book on the doctrine of God in which I would argue for a relational understanding of God as the basis for social ethics. Having obtained a contract, I went off to do research. I had been reading Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf, and J. Denny Weaver, and I gradually got deeper into revisionist views of God. As time went on, however, I began to become alarmed by the things I was reading.

It gradually dawned on me that this revisionist road led logically to some form of theological liberalism. I had more or less swallowed a relational view of how God interacts with the world, which sees a two-way influence between God and the world, with both affecting each other. I had also accepted the idea that the relational understanding of God's essence was rooted in the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity as expounded by the Cappadocian fathers. The idea was that the essence of God is relationality, or love between the members of the godhead, which presupposed a concept of three persons, each with a will and each in a relationship to the other two. Thus social trinitarianism grounded relational theism. I wanted to write a book about how this understanding of God provides a basis for social ethics. For a time, it seemed to me that all this was a profound way of rooting the doctrines of the church and the kingdom of God in the very nature of God himself. But up to this point, I had never thought that doing so meant deviating from Nicene orthodoxy.

As my doubts developed, however, I began to see that for many theologians, the logic of viewing God in this way led to a denial of God's wrath and the doctrine of final judgment.

That changed the whole gospel message. Are people really lost? Do they need to repent and believe in order to be saved? Is salvation a matter of heaven or hell, or is it a matter of social justice here and now? Even if you say it is both, is that really where the logic leads in the end? The love of God is viewed by many as incompatible with God's justice and wrath against sin. Of course, there are many cultural pressures calling the whole idea of original sin into question, so it is popular to say that God is love and then define love as little more than liberal tolerance. But that is the path to moralistic therapeutic Deism and the end of Christianity.³

The idea of pacifism was being used by some to redefine the concept of God as "the nonviolent God,"⁴ and once that was accomplished, then anthropology, sin, judgment, atonement, salvation, the mission of the church, and the nature of the kingdom of God were all negatively affected.⁵ One good thing to come out of all my reflections and growing doubts, however, was that I came to see how thoroughly the doctrine of God influences all other doctrines. My fascination with the Nicene doctrine of God only grew, even as my relational concept of God crumbled.

In my earlier work, I had argued that Yoder's concept of following Jesus in the way of peace was simply the ethical implication of an orthodox confession of Jesus as divine, and I had also argued that pacifism was rooted in the Nicene doctrine of God. But now I began to wonder if the revisionist view of God really was compatible with historic, Nicene orthodoxy. Obviously, I was aware of the many heretical concepts of God proliferating in liberal Protestantism today. Maybe the most radical forms of relational theism were not arbitrary deviations from orthodoxy but merely a further step down the same road I and many other evangelicals were traveling. Was not the openness of God theology a logical development of what I was reading? Was I on the way to becoming a process theologian? That seemed preposterous, yet I could not help wondering if I was just being temperamentally conservative rather than rigorously logical, and this concerned me deeply. I'm afraid I have never been enough of a postmodernist to carry logical contradictions around in my head without experiencing severe cognitive dissonance. Having been a student of Clark Pinnock in the early 1980s, I was well aware that drastic theological changes usually occur gradually in stages rather than all at once.

At this point, I began to read the fourth-century fathers for myself, which was a life-changing experience. Reading the primary sources carefully is dangerous when all you want to do is to get your book done and use the sources to justify your own preconceptions. The safest course is to refrain from reading anything written before the twentieth century. (To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, a young revisionist cannot be too careful about his reading.)

Eventually I came to the conclusion that the twentieth-century revisionist theologians who were advocating various forms of relational theism and subjecting classical theism to withering critique were themselves snared in highly questionable modernist philosophical assumptions and were in danger of losing touch with the classical orthodox tradition and the biblical roots of that tradition. This was quite ironic, since the revisionists typically used Scripture to refute and revise the tradition. But to me it began to seem as if modern hermeneutics was controlled by certain philosophical assumptions that derive from Kantian and Hegelian metaphysics.

Eventually I realized that *everyone* utilizes metaphysical assumptions in exegesis and that the choice is not between metaphysics or not but rather between unconsciously assumed metaphysics and critically revised metaphysics. It is, after all, highly arbitrary to assume that Hellenization is bad but Hegelianization is just fine. It began to look as if the modern revisionists were far more uncritical of the dominant metaphysical assumptions of their culture than the fathers had been of the dominant metaphysical assumptions of their culture. As I read the fathers—especially Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine—and patristic scholars such as Khaled Anatolios, Lewis Ayres, John Behr, Paul Gavrilyuk, Robert Wilken, and Frances Young, I gradually came to the conclusion that the fourth-century fathers had utilized certain metaphysical concepts in a careful and critical manner, in some cases redefining words and in other cases making precise distinctions, in order to restate the biblical message in ways that preserved the meaning of the Bible and defended that meaning against heresy. I marveled at the care they took in handling the concepts with which they dealt and at how clear their thinking was.

My world was turned upside down, but I gradually came to realize that it was now actually right side up. Many scholars have noted that the supposed corruption of early Christian theology by Greek philosophical ideas is a theory that has run its course and been found to be untenable. But I would go further and say that the nineteenth-century German liberals who invented and promoted this theory were in fact engaged in a kind of projection, insofar as they were accusing the church fathers of doing in their historical context exactly the sort of thing the modern liberal Protestants were doing in their historical context. It is actually liberal theology that has imported unrevised pagan metaphysics into theology. Modernity rejects the theological metaphysics of Nicaea and replaces these ideas with pagan metaphysical ideas that were considered and rejected by the church fathers. While Aristotle was being ushered out the front door, Epicurus and Zeno were sneaking in the back door.

What I have come to call “the liberal project” is the attempt to revise Christian doctrines one by one so as to make them fit into the metaphysics of modernity. The liberal project has two branches, each with a conservative expression and a liberal expression. One branch is the modern project of *historical criticism* stemming from Spinoza; it takes a radical form in liberal higher criticism in the Enlightenment and eventually ends up in Bultmann’s program of demythologization and the Jesus Seminar. It also comes in a conservative version, in which basically conservative scholars seek to work within the constraints of historicism. The other branch of the liberal project is *revisionist theology* stemming from Schleiermacher, and it takes a radical form in process theology and Hegelian panentheism. It also comes in a conservative version in the form of what Brian Davies terms “theistic personalism”⁶ and the various revisions of classical theism described by James E. Dolezal as “theistic mutualism.”⁷ Both Spinoza and Schleiermacher were pantheists, and the entire liberal project is oriented toward reconceiving God in a way that leaves behind genuine biblical transcendence as a figment of Greek metaphysics. The liberal project leads to a neopagan view of God and to the return of ancient mythology in place of a biblical metaphysics.

In a culture dominated by pagan metaphysics, the cosmos is all that exists. Carl Sagan enunciates the quintessentially modern confession of faith (disguised as science) at the beginning of his book when he says, “The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be.”⁸

In such a worldview, it is possible to speak of God as identical with the whole of the cosmos, and so we find pantheism all over the world in various cultures, from India to Greece to the modern West. It is also possible to speak of God as a being within the cosmos, and the possibilities range from the extremely powerful disembodied Mind of Deism to the anthropomorphic figures of the Greco-Roman pantheon or the gods of Norse mythology. These gods can be superhumans or divinized humans, or they can be personifications of the forces of nature. In some cases, they are believed to exist literally, and in other cases they may be thought of as metaphors for natural forces.

Many pagan societies contain a majority of uneducated people who believe in literal gods and also an educated elite that takes a pantheistic view but may participate in the popular religion to avoid controversy.⁹ But what we never see—not in the ancient Near Eastern context in which the Old Testament was written, not in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, and not in the great non-Christian cultures like China and India—is a view of God as the transcendent Creator of all things, who is in the process of guiding history to its appointed destiny in Christ. In fact, the concept of linear history *itself* arises only out of biblical revelation and depends for its coherence on belief in a transcendent Creator. The uniqueness of the biblical doctrine of God was becoming more and more obvious to me, as was the gap between this orthodox view of God and the relational god of contemporary revisionist theology.

Relational theisms such as process theology and panentheism represent a drift toward pantheism, and the various forms of social trinitarianism and theistic personalism represent a drift toward polytheism. The pressure on Christian theologians to move in these directions is not really coming from the Bible. It is coming from the desire to articulate a doctrine of God that makes sense to a culture in which the concept of divine transcendence has been rejected as unscientific. The choice, it seems to me, is between a Nicene doctrine of God that affirms the transcendence of God and a modern doctrine of God that leaves transcendence behind. But part of the problem we face is that, in order to affirm transcendence, one has to accept the existence of irreducible mystery in our doctrine of God, which seems hard for many modern theologians, including many evangelicals, to do.

The orthodox Nicene tradition generated a doctrine of God in which the three persons (*hypostases*) share one being (*ousia*) and constitute one God. The mystery of God means that the immanent (or eternal) Trinity is incomprehensible to human reason and that what is revealed in the economy (that is, in history) is all true so far as it goes but does not reveal all of God's eternal being. How could it? How could the finite comprehend the infinite? The distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is absolutely crucial if we wish to avoid idolatry. There is only one God—the holy Trinity—but our minds cannot grasp all that God is. Theology is contemplation of the Triune One who creates the cosmos, speaks and acts as the sovereign Lord of history, and who alone is to be worshiped. Contemplative theology thus leads to worship.

In the process of puzzling over how to restate the meaning of biblical texts in order to convey as clearly as possible the truth about the one whom we worship, it is necessary to engage with certain metaphysical ideas. This is especially so when we attempt to clarify how

God relates to the creation. *Creatio ex nihilo* becomes a crucial doctrine with centrally important metaphysical implications for the creator-creature distinction.

The fathers saw theology as a spiritual discipline leading to sanctification, not as a game of solving puzzles or as a way of mastering knowledge of God. For them, “all truth is God’s truth,”¹⁰ so they were unafraid to engage their culture in dialogue. They engaged in dialogue with the best of Greek philosophy in their day and formulated a set of metaphysical doctrines that can be called Christian Platonism, which functioned as the metaphysical framework in which biblical exegesis was done. Christian Platonism is not simply a matter of redefining Christianity in terms of Neoplatonism; actually, Neoplatonism is one kind of Platonism, and Christian Platonism is a rival kind. Historically, Christian Platonism eventually superseded Neoplatonism.

Christian Platonism is a label that can be applied to the theological metaphysics that grows out of fourth-century pro-Nicene theology and becomes integral to classical Christian orthodoxy. Augustinianism is the seminal source of Christian Platonism in the West, and Thomism is one form of Augustinianism. The specific form of Christian Platonism I find most compelling is the “Reformed Thomism” exemplified by Reformed scholastics like Francis Turretin, Puritans like John Owen, and in our day the later John Webster.

Reformed Thomism is a form of Augustinian theology developed during the Protestant Reformation that views the doctrine of God outlined by Thomas Aquinas in the first forty-three questions of the *Summa Theologica* as an exemplary expression of the trinitarian classical theism at the heart of classic Nicene orthodoxy. Reformed Thomism affirms the Reformation *solas*¹¹ and views them as a needed correction of medieval errors, especially in soteriology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology. Reformed Thomism understands the *solas* to be more firmly grounded in the Nicene doctrine of God than were the medieval deviations that the *solas* were designed to oppose. To preserve orthodoxy, Reformed Thomism finds it necessary to grapple with certain metaphysical doctrines, such as *creatio ex nihilo*, as it contemplates the being of God and all things in relation to God. Ultimately, *creatio ex nihilo* is the foundation and source of the great gospel truth “grace alone.” Reformed Thomism embraces mystery and analogical language for God and rejects rationalism and univocal language for God. Reformed Thomism distinguishes conceptually between the immanent and economic Trinity, while affirming that there is only one God in three persons both in eternity and in God’s own self-revelation in history. Reformed Thomists affirm the major Reformation confessions, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belgic Confession. Baptists who embrace Reformed Thomism affirm the Second London Confession of Faith of 1689.

John Webster, especially in his later writings, has been very influential in modeling how to do Reformed Thomism in the contemporary situation.¹² Reformed Thomism is currently enjoying something of a renaissance in writers such as Michael Allen and Scott Swain,¹³ Richard Muller,¹⁴ Carl Trueman,¹⁵ J. V. Fesko,¹⁶ James Dolezal,¹⁷ Steven J. Duby,¹⁸ and those influenced by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, the Davenant Institute, the Greystone Theological Institute, the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies, and other like-minded organizations that seem to be springing up on a regular basis these days.

Contemporary interest in Reformed Thomism is an example of *ressourcement* in an age of grave cultural decline. It is a natural response to the crisis of late modernity in which postmodern relativism has dissolved all metaphysics into the will to power. The corrosive influence of neo-Marxist and postmodern ideas have led to the collapse of natural theology and the natural moral law and now threaten the concept of natural scientific law itself. It seems to me that these developments completely discredit the modern critique of premodern classical metaphysics because modernity has utterly failed to sustain any viable alternative to classical metaphysics. Nihilism cannot support a flourishing culture.

As modernity collapses, it is critically important that we recover classical orthodoxy. However, late modern metaphysics makes impossible the kind of biblical interpretation that generates classical orthodoxy, because late-modern thought arbitrarily rejects out of hand the metaphysics of Nicaea. So the problem of modernity is actually a metaphysical crisis as well as a doctrinal and hermeneutical problem, and these three things are so intertwined that they need to be tackled together. Reformed Thomism is a logical, coherent, biblically based school of thought, which has the potential to generate the fresh and vital kind of theology that needs to be done in what we could term the post-postmodern or postcritical era now dawning.

The pro-Nicene theology of the fourth century emerged on the basis of a certain type of biblical interpretation. The modernist rejection of the metaphysical framework or “sacramental ontology”¹⁹ in which this way of reading Scripture flourished has led many modern thinkers to assume that we cannot read the Bible that way anymore. As I worked my way through these issues, I found the question of hermeneutics becoming more and more complex and also, at the same time, more and more important. I realized that it would be insufficient merely to demonstrate that modern doctrines of God—like Moltmann’s dynamic panentheism, for example—were incompatible with Nicaea. This is true and easily done; one can look at Stephen Holmes’s work, for example, to see things spelled out rather clearly.²⁰ But what is to be said in response to the claim that patristic exegesis was inferior to modern exegesis and therefore that Nicaea has to be revised according to newer, better ways of interpreting of the Bible?

The surprising answer is that modern historical criticism actually is inferior to premodern exegesis, not superior to it.²¹ The church has always understood the Bible to have a spiritual sense in addition to the literal sense, which is an extension of the literal sense and not a contradiction of it. But I found myself having to go deeper into the hermeneutical question to make that case, and eventually I had to admit that I was writing two different books. So I separated out the material on hermeneutics as a separate book.²² Having made the best argument I could for the hermeneutical approach of the Great Tradition, I have now tried to put that approach into practice in the theological interpretation of Scripture done in the present book. This book is thus based on the previous one in that it seeks to do theology in the way the previous book recommended as the classic approach to doing theology.

I am currently involved in writing a major commentary on Isaiah for the International Theological Commentary series (T&T Clark). In it I attempt to interpret this centrally important biblical book using the classical approach to biblical interpretation that has been used throughout church history by theologians in the Great Tradition. My book on hermeneutics and this one on the doctrine of God are meant to support and prepare the way

for the highest form of theology, which is done in the form of commentary on Scripture. The modern separation of exegesis and hermeneutics from doctrine is a recent innovation and a serious weakness of modern theology. The way forward is to break down the hyper-specialization that weakens our attempts to hear God speaking clearly in his Word.

Lewis Ayres's *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*²³ has been extremely important to me, and I have used it several times in a seminar I offer on fourth-century theology. One reason it is so important is that Ayres sees so clearly how wide the gap is between fourth- and twentieth-century theology, and he shows convincingly how poorly modern theologians understand pro-Nicene theology. It is dangerous for Christian theologians to be orthodox in the sense of wishing to confess the trinitarian theology of Nicaea and yet be so historically illiterate and so philosophically ignorant that they do not understand why the fathers in this formative period said what they said, with whom they were debating, and what issues were at stake. Knowing only the form of the words of the creed is not exactly of no value whatsoever, but it is inadequate. In such a situation, one is at risk of not understanding when or how contemporary thought goes off the rails and leaves orthodoxy behind. This is the perilous condition of much of what remains of Christian orthodox theology today.

I admit to having been part of the problem. I am painfully aware of how little I understood the fourth-century debates over the doctrine of God until the past fifteen years. In addition to my own laziness, I also blame deficiencies in my education. The designers of my seminary curriculum obviously thought that the study of patristic theology and exegesis was totally unimportant. My doctoral program at Toronto required a course in liberation theology but none in patristic theology! That pretty much sums up in a nutshell what is wrong with the modern academy. I can only be thankful that I did get an honors BA in the history of philosophy in which we read nothing but primary sources, and this has been the most useful part of my education. But there is no future for orthodox theology unless pastors and professors make it a priority to understand the classical tradition of Nicene orthodoxy. This is part of what motivates me to write this book.

As I become increasingly aware of the distance between Nicene orthodoxy and much of contemporary evangelical theology, I realize my need for deeper roots in a living tradition. Thomas Oden argued that if members of various denominational traditions were each to burrow down to the roots of their own traditions, they would find themselves closer to one another as a result. This is because the various Christian traditions converge the further back in time we go.²⁴ Instead of looking for the lowest common denominator in the present, he recommends looking for the oldest and most fundamental traditions as a strategy for true ecumenism. But trying to go all the way back to the Bible while ignoring the patristic, medieval, and Reformation periods is not effective. If we wish to be orthodox and not merely repeat ancient heresies, we need to know historical theology. I have, therefore, gone deeper into my own Baptist roots and studied the seventeenth-century Reformed Baptist tradition in England. The Second London Confession of 1689 shapes my identity as a confessional Protestant. I also am privileged to have held the office of Theologian in Residence in my local Baptist church for over a decade now, in addition to serving as professor of theology in an evangelical university. So I am accountable to a local church and not just to the academy.

My theological work is not that of a freelance thinker. Instead, it is a part of a living tradition of classical orthodoxy that stretches back to the New Testament apostles, who proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. I have gone from wanting to revise classical orthodoxy to joyfully and wholeheartedly celebrating it; in this book I aim to defend it.

1. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001.
2. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007.
3. This term was coined by C. Smith and Denton in their book, *Soul Searching*. The book describes the religious beliefs of American teens based on wide-ranging and extensive research. Moralistic therapeutic Deism, the dominant belief system of today's youth, can be summarized in five points: (1) a god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth; (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions; (3) the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem; (5) good people go to heaven when they die.
4. J. Weaver, *Nonviolent God*.
5. For an example of the slide into liberalism and the loss of contact with true, Nicene orthodoxy, see McLaren, *New Kind of Christianity*.
6. Theistic personalism is the view that God is a being among beings within the cosmos, a person like us only greater in magnitude, power, wisdom, etc. See Davies, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 9–16. We will discuss this idea at length later in this book.
7. Theistic mutualism is the idea that God and the world change each other as a result of a mutual relation in which they participate. In “hard theistic mutualism,” change is forced on God by the world; in “soft theistic mutualism,” God sovereignly chooses to allow the world to change him in some way. In both cases, the impassibility of God is denied, and immutability is either denied or redefined in an incoherent manner. See Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 1. Dolezal conflates theistic personalism and theistic mutualism, whereas I see them as closely related but distinguishable. We will discuss these matters thoroughly as we go along.
8. Sagan, *Cosmos*, 1.
9. That was the situation Augustine encountered with many Platonist philosophers of his day and he is highly critical of them for engaging in polytheistic worship when they clearly knew better. See Augustine, *City of God* 8.13 (I/6, 257–58).
10. A. Holmes, *Idea of a Christian College*, 25.
11. *Sola gratia* (grace alone), *Sola fide* (faith alone), *Sola Christus* (Christ alone), *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *Soli Deo gloria* (glory of God alone).
12. See Scott Swain's comments about Webster: “John is the supreme contemporary exemplar of dogmatic theology in a (shall we call it?) Reformed and Thomistic key, and an encouragement to many of us who aspire to fulfill the theologian's vocation faithfully and intelligently” (*God of the Gospel*, 7).
13. See Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*.
14. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*.
15. See Trueman, *Creedal Imperative*.
16. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*.
17. In addition to Dolezal's *All That Is in God*, mentioned above, see also his *God without Parts*.
18. Duby, *Divine Simplicity*, and his *God in Himself*.
19. This term is used by Hans Boersma in a series of important books to describe essentially the same thing that I call “Christian Platonism.” See esp. Boersma, *Nouvelle Theologie*; Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*; and Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*.
20. S. Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*.
21. See the seminal article by Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis.”
22. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*.
23. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
24. Thomas Oden is the author of many books that have influenced me. But let me mention three: *After Modernity . . . What?*; *Requiem*; and *Rebirth of Orthodoxy*. His greatest contribution, however, was his vision for, and general editorship of,

the Ancient Christian Commentary Series published by InterVarsity Press. This was a monumental accomplishment, for which he will always be remembered with gratitude.