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Introduction

This is a book that is concerned to identify resources to help theology think and talk about history. In particular, it sets out to examine the value and the potential of a 'theodramatic' conception of history. That is to say a way of thinking theologically about historical process and the historical character of human agents and environments that emphasizes their dramatic features. This book assumes that a theodramatic theology's identification of what such dramatic features are, and of what makes them dramatic, will need to be informed by attention to literary dramatic traditions – otherwise a theodramatics can claim to be 'dramatic' only in an abstract sense. It therefore undertakes an interdisciplinary approach to what it does. It makes its theological principles open and indebted to literary forms, and it seeks to articulate the value of a theology thus informed for the treatment of historical life; of a world intrinsically and thoroughly historical.

My argument will be that certain insights become available in a theodramatic approach to history which are less likely to come to light when theology operates in more conventional modes (particularly in modes characteristic of the late scholastic and modern periods). Likewise, I will argue that certain complexities in the subject matter of theology are less likely to be betrayed when a theological discussion of historicality is specifically theo*dramatic*. A theodramatics will be less likely artificially to curtail what Dan Hardy calls the 'dynamic, distributed and dense' character of historical life and historical experience.[1] The chapters that follow will draw out why this is so.

1 Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 68.

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Why history matters to theology

Why is Christian theology obliged to think about history at all? Why should it be a matter of importance what resources it has for thinking about history, or whether indeed it has any distinctive resources as compared with other traditions of historical thought? In the universities of the modern West, as presently configured, the analysis of historical events goes on largely in departments or faculties of history (although also in faculties of law, the history and philosophy of science, sociology, classics), and lies in the hands of scholars who are not expected to have recourse to ideas about divine activity, character or purpose when doing their work. Such ideas might in some contexts discredit them as professional historians altogether, because they fall outside prevailing canons of what counts as respectable evidence or defensible speculation. Such ideas may breach the terms within which the conversations of professional academic history are conducted; they may seem to break the rules which are the condition for certain kinds of mutual understanding, interaction and debate within the community of historians.

Nevertheless, the historical events and experiences that preoccupy historians are often not different from those that interest theology. Theology does not in general look at a different history from other academic disciplines; it looks at the same history in a different way. It allows different people into the conversation: people for whom a different framework for the description of historical reality is not *a priori* inadmissible. People prepared, for example, to see the dense, historical world as having an origin and an end in the creative purposing of God, a God who can relate personally to his creatures. People ready to acknowledge the idea that there can be revelation: a prevenient ground *for* our knowledge and perception that is not itself the product *of* our knowledge and perception, and which is moreover neither accidental nor impersonal but which freely, and even lovingly, communicates itself. Such an attitude is not novel; it is simply out of fashion. Until a certain point in the history of Western scholarship it would have been not the tolerance of theological perspectives on historical events but rather their exclusion that would have seemed the more unthinkable approach.

The readiness to see history as having an origin and an end in God's purposes generates the distinctively *eschatological* way in which Christian theology's consideration of historical phenomena differs from other considerations. Christian theology asserts the relationship of all historical

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events, processes and agents to a transcendent order and with it to an ultimate meaning. According to Christian belief, this relationship with the ultimate is indeed what *constitutes* the historical realm of events, processes and agents. Christianity's belief in a final judgement is a belief that the real value of historical phenomena will ultimately and necessarily be made apparent by the disclosure of their relationship to God's ordering, intention and love. Viewed with this expectation, and talked about in the light of such hope, history takes on a different aspect for Christian thought – and Christian theology narrates and explicates history differently as a consequence. Theodramatics in particular promises a set of resources for thinking history and eschatology *together*, in their interrelationship – hence differently from other kinds of historical analysis – for in the area of eschatology a theology of history is always to some extent present, and vice versa.

To sum up this section, we may say that Christian theology is obliged to think about history because in believing that heaven and earth and everything in them are God's creation, it therefore believes that the irreducibly historical dimension of being is also something created by God: its temporal extension, its successiveness, its narratability. But it has more reason even than that for thinking about history. In believing that the divine Son assumed the condition of sinful humanity in order to make divine light and action savingly legible there, Christian theology is directed to pay attention to finite actions and interactions in time as the medium of God's speech. In thinking about history in these ways it does what only theology can do. It shows what is distinctive (though not exclusive) about its contribution to discussion with other disciplines about the subject of history: namely, that it is a discipline defined by its *response to*, and its *thinking out of*, divine self-disclosure.

Introducing the cast, the stage and the action

So, then, it is in certain key areas that the dramatic emphasis of a theodramatics will have its most obvious theological effects – and all of these have implications for the way that history is conceived. Drama displays *human actions* and *temporal events* in *specific contexts*.[2] *Theo*dramatics concerns itself with human actions (people), temporal events (time) and their specific

2 These three areas of concern are not entirely unrelated to the concerns of neo-classical drama with 'three unities' (a concern developed from Aristotle's *Poetics*) – namely, with action, time and place.

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contexts (place) *in relation to God's purpose*. As noted in the previous section, this means that a theodramatics will inevitably have an eschatological dimension – this is one of the things a theodramatic approach focuses most clearly. It also means that a theodramatics will focus with especial clarity the theological interpretation of freedom in Christian life (and in human life more generally). This too arises from a theodramatic concern with (i) human actions in (ii) specific contexts and (iii) through time, and it will provoke questions in turn about a theology of the Church and the saints – these being classic focuses for theology's reflection on people, place and time.

An attention to drama, in other words, draws theology's attention to three central concerns. These concerns are with the character of agency (the *people* dimension); its necessary conditions (or 'context' – roughly equivalent to the *place* dimension); and the way in which such agency may or may not be related to (and narratable in the form of) a wider 'plot' (the *time* dimension). They are crucial to a good understanding of any kind of dramatic theory, theological or not, but they will have special connotations in a consciously theological account. A theodramatics will have rich theological resources to bring to its consideration of the subjects of the world's drama (the 'cast'); of the acting area in which they perform (the 'stage'); and of what may be identifiable as the movement of the play (the 'action') – to its treatment, that is, of people, place and time.

These concerns should not be isolated too crudely from one another. They are closely interrelated, and they all lead back to the central question of freedom, and of how it comes to birth in the interaction of what I will call (following Rowan Williams) 'subjects' and 'structures'.[3] The task of bringing subjects and structures together can be a challenging one. Whenever a description of individual freedom intersects with a concern to narrate history, these challenges are identifiable. (The problematic has been given particularly thorough expression in Paul Ricoeur's study of historical consciousness, *Time and Narrative*.)[4]

3 'Structure', in this usage, can refer *both* to the 'stage' of the action *and* to its emplotment.
4 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–8). Ricoeur's mammoth study addresses the difficulty in speaking of the 'oneness' of time, and yet the simultaneous pressure (often practical and ethical in character) to continue to do so. The shared narratability of agency and of events in and through time (history conceived as narrative) is essential to any idea that subjects can act coherently and manifest constancy in time. Yet no narrative identity is a 'stable and seamless identity' (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 248), and one cannot ever claim exhaustive and definitive explanation of the meaning of a subject's action, or the events in which such action is embedded. My own project is very much in sympathy with Ricoeur's in this regard – opposing (as Ricoeur's poetics of narrative does) 'the ambition of thought to

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One of the key challenges to which a theodramatics is required to respond, therefore, is balancing the claims of personal freedom against the narrated unfolding of a greater historical 'action' (a narration to which Christianity is quite properly committed in the light of God's revelation). A theodramatic assertion of the freedom of God seems to make impossible a 'closed' narration of history as a merely inevitable chain of events, and (because this divine freedom is a trinitarian freedom, which is to say 'personal' and above all *loving*) it seems to yield the grounds for seeing free individuals as precious to and sacramental of God. The perfectly abundant divine life, being the condition of human beings' temporally extended interaction as creatures, will not negate but can (in a way one cannot fully get the measure of) 'contain' and even enhance freedom.

The contention of this book is that a well-conceived and sensitive theodramatic theology, when it addresses the question of subjects and structures in history, will have the resources it needs to think about their interrelation with suitably developed wisdom. It will be protected from the pull towards making one too crudely subject to the other. In this respect, it will be offering a distinctively theological corrective to a central dilemma in modern thought, which has circled almost obsessively around what it sees as the 'problem of freedom'. The pull towards making subjects the privileged key to the interpretation of the 'historicality' of life leads to a particular way of describing and enacting history. The pull towards making structures, or systems, the key to the interpretation of the 'historicality' of life leads to a different way of describing and enacting history. In both cases, there are very definite consequences, political, economic, environmental, military, and more. Dan Hardy writes:

> At the risk of oversimplifying highly complex matters, there are two major ways in which people have traced the 'plot' of history. One of them focuses on individuals and their immediate connections, their functional connections sideways, backwards and forwards, replacing the dynamics of history with 'family genealogies' as it were. The other concentrates on the dynamics of historical change, 'systematizing' it through machine-like or life-like explanations . . .[5]

bring about a totalization of history entirely permeable to the light of concepts' (p. 255), while refusing the idea that there are only private histories (separate temporalities) belonging to separate human communities or individuals, and with no possibility of contact or overlap with each other. If temporality has a unity, it is a 'multiform unity' (p. 256), better acknowledged in the 'imperfect mediation [i.e., the complex, sometimes ragged, discursive and open-ended mediation]' of narrations of a poetic kind (p. 256) rather than in some total, conceptual mediation.

5 Hardy, *Finding the Church*, pp. 64–5. By 'life-like explanations' Hardy means explanations that work by appeal to organic models.

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Hardy goes on to indicate some of the ways in which these different conceptions of history have direct social consequences. He traces a habit of mind in continental Europe that concentrates on 'large-scale systemic issues'. In this model it is in the operation of rational systems, to which individuals are relatively-speaking subordinate, that historical development will work itself out – or else in the rational harnessing of systemic forces. Policies about tax, public services, the environment, and so on are formulated accordingly. In America, Hardy argues that it is to the individual and the defence of individual interests that primary attention is paid. This gives rise to 'the notoriously "litigious" society found there, the product of a combination of individualism and the search for simple causes for any problem'.[6] Historical development works itself out through the interaction of individual interests, choices and initiatives, as in the model of the free market.

Hardy identifies another way (which he argues is embodied in a distinctively English view of history). Such a view is best seen in 'complex narrative histories', in which 'complex – often local – connections of people, movements and events' are allowed to become visible, and 'primacy is given neither to individuals nor to grand narratives with a clear outcome'.[7] My argument in this book will be that not only 'complex narrative histories' but, more particularly, *dramas* offer the best literary correlate here for the distinctive view of history that Hardy wants to promote. With the help of sensibilities learnt from attention to drama, it is possible to approach history in a way that is alert to the importance of 'delicate fabrics of trust, learning and productivity'[8] – fabrics in which subjects and structures do not wrestle with one another in a sort of competition for dominance, but in which they interrelate and flourish in forms of (for example) family life, local community and education. In these contexts it can be seen how '[t]he quality of our individuality is inseparable from the quality of the society in which we exist'.[9] Subjects and structures can be seen mutually informing one another in appropriately complex ways.

Such a conception of history, informed by a dramatic understanding of how cast, stage and action need each other, will have a density to it which will cause both the 'systemic' and 'individualist' conceptions of history identified by Hardy to look 'thin'. This is because, in his words, '[b]oth views – systemic and individualist – privilege and implement abstractions and principles that lead in quite different directions from the carefully

6 *Ibid.*, p. 65. 7 *Ibid.* 8 *Ibid.*, p. 67. 9 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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distributed, layered, dense and dynamic' way which a Christian view should promote and embody.[10]

Above all the inevitably non-dramatic way of understanding history through atemporal or 'synchronic' principles constitutes a betrayal of its material. It fails to give due attention to particulars – to the individuals, the exceptions to rules, the resistances to explanation and the densities of meaning that ask for recognition in a *good description* of historical reality. Theodramatics offers a different 'grammar' for describing history, and one which this book will claim has greater adequacy to what it seeks to interpret and evaluate. An appreciation of drama makes available a more adequate source of categories for giving voice to the truth of creaturely life before God than other genres (archetypally, 'epic' or 'lyric') could ever be – let alone the categories of analytic philosophy and the scholastic textbooks. In particular, drama teaches both theology and history to evaluate actions and events in their constitutively, irreducibly 'diachronic' character, and it teaches them to bring to bear a more acute sensitivity to the particularity of what they treat. Meanwhile, the fact that theodramatics is Christian theology, and not a dramatic theory which refuses the idea of a divine empowerment of and involvement in human existence, means that it ought not to fall back too readily on apparently self-evident 'norms' for the interpretation of history. Its openness to the free otherness of the divine means that theodramatics is (or ought to be) ready for transformative newness in every successive moment of history, such that principles are always identified and marshalled only *provisionally*, and remain subject to correction. Moreover, its awareness of God's use of creaturely particulars – finite and temporal – for his self-communication means that theodramatics yields (or ought to yield) a more nuanced understanding of the 'shaped' character of Christian existence, of its corporate context, and of its temporal 'spread-out-ness' (Hardy) than might otherwise be possible. Or, to recall the terms used already, it ought to yield a more nuanced understanding of the cast, the stage and the action and their interrelation in the unfolding of the world's drama. There are consequences to the successful development of a theodramatics that is sensitive to this temporal vision of creaturely life and interpretation, and more careful in its reading of particulars – consequences that go beyond the scholarly analysis of historical process. A good theodramatics lends itself to the fostering of ethical responsibility, political creativity and liturgical subtlety.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

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Another crucial capacity of a theodramatics – a component in fact of its ethical sensitivity – will be its recognition of the tragic, in and with its recognition of the irreducible importance of particular instances. It will not generalize away 'the striking actuality of disruption, evil and suffering'.[11] Disruption, evil and suffering occur, or 'find room', because there is contingency in the ways and the institutions by which history unfolds.

The position from which I write should perhaps be acknowledged at this point. I write as an Anglican theologian, and the particular case made in this book for the value of theodramatics will be influenced both consciously and (more than likely) unconsciously by Anglican habits of mind. Part of the suitability to Anglican theological thought of the kind of theodramatics I will advocate – and part of the reason its relevance to thinking about history is so interesting to an Anglican – is because of the strongly historical way in which Anglican thought habitually conceives of the realization of God's goodness in the world. It does not as a rule hold what Hardy calls '"systemic" conceptions of history and goodness';[12] it is provisional in its judgements (born out of and working with 'settlements' in time, layered one upon another, and open to correction in the light of new historical circumstances). In this respect it has analogies with the English common law tradition, as opposed to its 'Roman' counterpart.[13] It does not, with the tendency towards making 'total' explanatory claims that often accompany atemporal modes of thought, believe that God's truth,

11 *Ibid.*, p. 67. 12 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

13 An interesting artistic parallel might also be pointed to here. In Wallington Hall in Northumberland there is a central interior courtyard on the ground floor surrounded on all four sides by murals, painted by William Bell Scott. Though it is presently owned by the National Trust, the Trevelyan family were owners of Wallington at the time the murals were painted. The murals all concentrate on Northumbrian history, but each mural on a different scene in a different period. The presence of the Roman legions and the building of Hadrian's Wall as a defensive boundary with the Scottish north; the growth of Christianity through the preaching of the Celtic monks; the Viking raids; and so on up to the age of iron and coal and the coming of the railway. This central room in the house communicates something of the complexity of a two-thousand-year span of history. It is also remarkable because all the different scenes it depicts are about one place, Northumberland – the place where the Hall stands, and where the viewer of the murals finds herself when looking at them. The murals therefore give precisely the sense of a layered reality: not a tour of far-away places, but an insight into the historical depth of one place; a cross-section through time. The present of the viewer standing in Wallington Hall is revealed as being the product, and indeed the continuation, of a long process of historical formation in which one historical meaning after another is laid down upon its predecessors (while allowing its predecessors still to remain visible). The various scenes are not forced to tell a story (although naturally they are the product of selection and inevitably reflect a particular nineteenth-century perspective on what 'counts' in history as most important, inspiring, heroic or poignant). What they do instead is to speak powerfully about the complex implication of historical events in each other, and make it possible for the viewer to trace many interpretative pathways through the sequence of murals.

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goodness or beauty are 'only exemplified in [its] own system of reality or symbols'.[14] On the other side, it does not, either, work with individualist conceptions of history and goodness: 'a conception of faith founded on God's choice of the human being, by the "grace" of faith enabling the individual to respond'.[15] It believes in establishing forms of common life, common responsibility, common prayer which are genuinely realizable forms of godly life in history. It is discursively held to, and aware that it is not *above* but *part of* the contingent, incremental movements by which human institutions and forms of life anticipate their ultimate aim in the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Anglicanism has tended to believe that this draws it more effectively into what may be called 'the informing dynamics of all history':

> This is the *truth*, the *imparting of goodness*, and the *energizing of life* for goodness that are the Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – everywhere pressing the historical life of the world to its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.[16]

However, although finding a place in an Anglican tradition of thought, this book's principal dialogue partners will not in fact be Anglican. They will be Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed thinkers of the modern period – indeed, a very specific representative of each. Working through sustained and deep conversation with these thinkers (and also through sharp critique of them) is itself a recognition of the role of particularity in the development of theory. It is in the spirit of what it argues a theodramatics should insist on; it recognises the need for specific standpoints – places from which to act and speak – if there is to be interpretation of human beings' deep (and divinely given) implication in history. Acknowledging the particularity of my own standpoint, as well as concentrating on particular conversation partners in the development of a theodramatics (rather than attempting to lower a perfectly formed and universally relevant theodramatic theory from above), is therefore not only pragmatic but principled. It also intends to be appropriately modest. What is offered in the pages that follow is not that dubious thing, 'a theology of history'. It is a heuristic for thinking theologically about history – and expects to take its specific place in the continuing incremental, contingent, distributed process by which history's deepest truth comes to expression.

In this next section, then, we look at the principal partners in conversation with whom this idea of a theodramatics is to be explored.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 72. 15 *Ibid.* 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6.

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Principal conversation partners

The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar is foremost among those whose thinking generates this book's idea of theodramatics. Von Balthasar explicitly chose categories drawn from drama in his attempt to give expression to the truth that all Christian theology tries to articulate – the truth of God's interest and involvement in the world. He thereby made a defining claim about the dramatic character of the Christian revelation, and the dramatic response that it demands.

The five volumes of *Theodramatik* – where these dramatic instincts are most fully worked out – are the heart of von Balthasar's huge theological trilogy. It is there that the major dogmatic themes of his thought are woven together most effectively, and in a more sustained way than in the essays of his *Explorations* and *Elucidations*. There we find his decisive treatments of anthropology, christology (including soteriology), the Church, eschatology, and the Trinity. These, taken together, are the matter of the Balthasarian 'theodrama', and it is with these five volumes that I work most closely in what follows.

One of the great twentieth-century theological minds to reflect upon the way theology and history must understand each other – Donald MacKinnon – anticipated the importance of von Balthasar's *Theodramatik* in precisely this area.[17] MacKinnon had a sense that a theological use of dramatic categories would be immensely fruitful though no less demanding when confronted with the need to do justice to the intractable difficulties of human historical experience – to the tragic realities of human moral failure and suffering (these concerns always smouldering at the core of his own thought). The present book follows MacKinnon in seeing *Theodramatik* as the most mature staging of von Balthasar's dogmatics, and the most rewarding locus for an examination of what animates his theological work – as well as offering his most valuable resources for addressing the importance of how to do justice to history.

Of course, no reader of his 'theological dramatic theory' can take it for granted that he or she knows what von Balthasar understood 'drama' to mean. There were many thinkers in the nineteenth century whose thought about drama von Balthasar read, but far from being unanimous

17 Cf. particularly D. M. MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM, 1979), pp. 66–8, 164, and *Themes in Theology: The Three-fold Cord* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1987), pp. 6, 158–9, 182, 215.

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