Introduction

> For that Source is the beginning of everything and from it come Being itself and every kind of being, all source and all end, all life and immortality and wisdom, all order and harmony and power, all maintenance and establishment and arrangement, all intelligence and reason and perception, all quality and rest and motion, all unity and intermingling and attraction, all cohesiveness and differentiation, all definition, and indeed every attribute which by the mere fact of being gives a character thereby to every existing thing.
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> Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, 5.7.[1]

Approaching the world in terms of sharing and receiving should be the bedrock of a Christian understanding of reality, and of Christian doctrine. That is the claim of this book. The heart of that perspective, which often goes by the name of 'participation', rests in perceiving all things in relation to God, not only as their source but also as their goal, and as the origin of all form and character. In that way, notions of likeness and exemplarity lie close at hand, and an inclination to celebrate the variegated particularity of things, as a creaturely expression of the goodness and beauty of God.

For the participatory thinker, a wide range of themes bear the stamp of this perspective, some more theoretical and some more practical. For instance, people who think in these terms tend to be objective, or 'realist', over how we know things, and about the nature of good conduct: their epistemology and ethics, that is to say, tend to be worked out in terms of recognition and reception rather than invention or projection.

[1] Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (London: SPCK, 1987), 100.

A participatory vision is also likely to recognise a depth to things, grounded in their origin in God. This suggests that our apprehension of what is good or true will also always be mediated and incomplete: it will be a real encounter with a goodness and a truth that also always outstrip us. Ethics and epistemology, approached this way, will have a strong note of 'realist' objectivity to them, but combined with humility, creativity, and attention to the context and particularities of the situation in which and through which we think and act.

Within Christian doctrine, participation concerns not only creatures, and what they are like, and how they come to be, but also the difference of God from creation, and consideration of what God is not. A stress on a participatory origin for creatures underlines not only that creatures have being from God but also that God has being from no one and nothing else.

In some of its forms, participation stands in the positive or 'cataphatic' approach to theology, stressing what can be known about God. The contrasting cautious or negative outlook, however – the 'apophatic' approach to God – is also part of a participatory account, stressing as it does that creatures and God are incommensurate. These two strands – one of affirmative statements about God and one of cautious denials – are woven together, in what I take to be a definitive character of a participatory approach, in the 'superabundant' way: the approach to God set out in terms of exceeding excellence, which stresses that our knowledge of God fails not out of poverty but out of abundance. We must retain modesty about what we can know, for instance, when we say, that God is good. That, however, rests not on any sense that God is anything other than good, but rather on acknowledgement that the goodness of God incomparably exceeds anything we understand by that term. Linguistically, this is the territory of analogy, and themes of analogy run parallel to many aspects of participation.

Alongside this, a participatory approach to theology will stress that God is not one more being among beings, and consequently that the relation of creation to God cannot be one of competition: not when it comes to goodness, for instance, or to worth, or to how divine action relates to creaturely agency. The inexpressible difference between God and creatures becomes as much the basis of intimacy as of distance. The relationship between God and creatures is exactly not one of competition or comparison, because the creature and God share nothing in common, in the sense of deriving from some imagined yet more ultimate source, and yet everything about the creature comes to it as a matter of sharing from

God: everything, that is, apart from evil, which is a failure of participation, and therefore a lack, or privation. That makes participation resolutely non-dualist. There is nothing, good or evil, that can be ranked alongside God, nor anything prior to or coeval with God.

In this book, I follow a venerable lineage of Christian theologians in setting out a Christian vision of world that has the notion of participation, and relation to God, lying at its heart. I do that across four main parts. Parts I and II are more abstract, and ask what Christian theologians have meant in talking about participation, especially in relation to God and creation. Parts III and IV explore how participation has been put to work, first in some further aspects of Christian theology, and then in a theological vision of human life.

In Part I, I explore the relation of creation to God, as a matter of participation or donation, by working through the idea of four aspects of causation, taken from Aristotle (384–322 BC). With those 'four causes', I consider what it means for God to be the agent behind creation (its efficient cause), the source of all of creation's characterfulness (its formal cause), and the destiny of all things (the final cause, with that destiny itself set out in participatory terms, as a form of union). Attention to the fourth (material) cause further hones our thinking about creation as a matter of coming forth, since creatures derive from God, but with no continuity between God and the world of a 'material' kind: God is not the 'stuff' from which creation is made. In Chapter 3, then, I discuss why participation is not pantheism. In this first part, I also think about a tradition, running through ancient and mediaeval Christianity, of relating aspects of God's creative action to the divine threefold Personhood of the Trinity.

Part II is about language, first in the sense of surveying terms and ideas that have been used to think about participation, and then in a chapter on how language itself is participatory, not least when it comes to speaking about God. In Part III, I expand the range of theological topics beyond creation and the doctrine of the Trinity, which feature prominently in Part I, with chapters on Christology, human action and freedom, the nature of evil, and a survey of how the themes of redemption and the fruits of the work of Christ might feature in a theological vision articulated in a participatory way.

In the final section, Part IV, I look at how a participatory approach, grounded in notions of sharing, reception, and likeness, bears on various topics that are integral to human life – knowledge, love and desires, ethics, and law among them. I end, in the Conclusion, with an argument

that to approach existence in terms of participation it is necessarily also to approach it in terms of relation. For all things to come forth from God is for all things to come forth related. As well as introducing a further theoretical consideration (in the connection between participation and relation), I address some of its implications for common life, or politics.

SOURCES

Three comments may be useful when it comes to sources. The first is that I want to root discussions in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. I do not claim this book as an exercise in what is sometimes called 'Biblical theology' (a theology elaborated in response to particular Biblical texts), but I have wanted, as a Christian systematic theologian with philosophical interests, to demonstrate that a participatory perspective is not an import, foreign to the perspectives found in the scriptures. We read there, after all, that 'all that we have done, you have done for us' (Isa. 26.12), that 'every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change' (James 1.17), and that 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28).[2] I have sought to show that perspectives from across Biblical sources cohere within a participatory scheme – aspects of which surface across the arc of Biblical writing – most particularly in relation to Christ.[3]

A second comment about sources is to point out that Christian writers in this tradition have typically not been afraid to read non-Christian texts, and to think in their company. I have commended that position in an earlier book,[4] and it will be in evidence throughout this volume. I do not wish to deny that, for the Christian, the scriptures offer the privileged and irreplaceable revelation of God. However, a willingness to think about what might be true alongside all who seek the truth follows from the participatory picture itself: if the world has a participatory character etched upon it and woven into its depths, then celebration of the light

[2] Quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (hereafter NRSV), Anglicized Edition (copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved).

[3] An Index of Biblical References is to be found at the back of this book. My attention is focused more on the New Testament than on the Old, since that better fits my expertise and training.

[4] *The Love of Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy for Theologians* (London: SCM Press, 2013), xiii, 34, 64–7, 76, 78–9, 86–9, 117–19.

of scripture does not imply unremitting darkness elsewhere. All reality, in some way, bears witness to the one who made it, and what other people have noticed about it – people such as Plato (429–347 BC) and Aristotle – is worth attention.

Plato is the philosophical father of explicitly participatory thinking as we know it today.[5] Aristotle stands in more complex relation to this approach, but he had drunk too deeply from Plato's wells to eschew this scheme altogether. Indeed, Aristotle had drunk too deeply from the wells of *reality* (if we take it to proceed in a participatory fashion from its eternal wellspring) for his thought not also to yield frequent insights for a participatory way of thinking. While this book is most obviously Platonist in philosophical outlook, it also often draws on the thought of Aristotle. As I have previously written, to my mind the ideal combination is to supplement Plato's sense of the broad picture of metaphysics with Aristotelian detail, worked out against the backdrop of Biblically derived principles.[6] In that way, as Jacob Sherman has written, participation 'seems to reach for a theological canopy far beyond its Platonic roots'.[7] Here we encounter one of the ironic joys of intellectual history: that a significant philosophical project in late antiquity was the attempt to synthesize Plato and Aristotle, in order to shore up a rival system of belief to burgeoning Christian monotheism, and yet it was in fact within monotheism – historically chiefly Islamic and then Christian – that such a synthesis would in fact reach its fullest conclusion.[8]

[5] For a discussion, see Cornelio Fabro, 'The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation', trans. B. M. Bonansea, *Review of Metaphysics* 27, no. 3 (1974): 454–6; Karl Jaspers, *Plato and Augustine* (New York: Harvest Books, 1962), 28–35. Fabro discusses Platonic notions of participation after Plato in 'Intensive Hermeneutics', 459–61.

[6] *Love of Wisdom*, 124, where I express my debt on this point to Fran O'Rourke.

[7] Jacob Holsinger Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 25.

[8] For an interpretation of Neoplatonism in these terms, see Fabro, 'Intensive Hermeneutics', 457. This book draws attention to the centrality of participation in the thought of Aquinas and therefore belongs within the trajectory, unfolding since the middle of the twentieth century, which places as much emphasis on Aquinas's Platonic heritage as on the Aristotelian. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Le Thomisme et La Pensée Italienne de La Renaissance* (Paris: Institut d'Études Médiévales; J. Vrin, 1967), 24–9; W. Norris Clarke, 'The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas', in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Persons* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 89–101. It is striking to note how even central figures in earlier twentieth-century study of Thomism tended to overlook the importance of participation. Étienne Gilson stands as an example.

While this book is written from a Christian perspective, themes of participation are found in other religious traditions. Shared origins and trajectories sometimes underlie those similarities of outlook, as when Christian and Jewish thinkers have reflected on the same Biblical texts, or when they – alongside Muslim scholars – have tried to judge what can and cannot be considered wise in the writings of the Greek philosophers, not least in relation to monotheism. More broadly, however, the questions that have received participatory answers – such as the relation of the finite to the infinite, or of the many to the one – stand before all humanity. The reader wanting to explore how some of the themes in this book have been discussed in other religious traditions will find a perceptive study in David Bentley Hart's *The Experience of God*.[9] Agnes Arber's *The Manifold and the One*, although considerably older and less scholarly, and indeed somewhat idiosyncratic, was written with beguiling enthusiasm and provides another view into a wider, interfaith perspective on some of what is discussed here.[10]

A third note about sources relates to particular Christian texts. A participatory approach is found throughout the writings of the Church Fathers, and while the Greek Fathers might feature particularly prominently in any such list (not least Gregory of Nyssa [AD 335–94], Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite [5th-6th century], Maximus the Confessor [AD ca. 580–662], and John of Damascus [AD ca. 675–749]),[11] a participatory outlook was also profoundly important for Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), the pivotal Western Father. I concur with Mark Clavier's recent assessment that participation is the 'key' to understanding Augustine's theology of 'God, creation and the mechanics of salvation'.[12]

[9] David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

[10] Agnes Robertson Arber, *The Manifold and the One* (London: J. Murray, 1957).

[11] Friedrich Normann, *Teilhabe, ein Schlüsselwort der Vätertheologie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978); Torstein Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David L. Balás, 'Participation', in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo Seco and Giulio Maspero (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 581–7; Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'union à Dieu chez Denys L'Aréopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 77–93; Torstein Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially chapter 5.

[12] Mark Clavier, *Eloquent Wisdom: Rhetoric, Cosmology and Delight in the Theology of Augustine of Hippo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 113.

In the later Western tradition, a wide range of thinkers wrote in this vein, including Anselm (1033/4–1109),[13] Bonaventure (1221–74), and other scholastics. In this book, however, I have given central place to Thomas Aquinas, as a clear master of the participatory perspective.

No book on themes of participation in Christian thought could hope to do justice to anything but a tiny fraction of Christian writing. Choosing a single main author on which to focus grounds my discussion in historical texts in a way that is concrete and specific. I have added discussions of other authors either because they have some particularly valuable insight to offer, or in order to indicate the breadth of historical sympathy for this way of thinking.

Some other writer from the scholastic period could have been chosen to represent Christian accounts of participation, but Aquinas is easy to justify: his thought is woven through with participatory language, and his pattern of asking searching questions of himself and of his sources makes him an ideal interlocutor. He drew upon a remarkably wide range of influences, and was a deeply Biblical thinker. Next to the Apostle Paul, for Aquinas, came Augustine, who was, as we have just noted, another profoundly participatory thinker. Aquinas was also deeply influenced by some daringly participatory texts, which were only just being translated into Latin in his day, or were only then receiving a wide readership, written by Christians such as Pseudo-Dionysius, and by the Neoplatonists who had influenced them, such as Proclus (AD 412–85). Part of Aquinas's greatness is to have stood at the confluence of these traditions. He is also significant for our purpose both because he sought so strenuously to think about Christian ideas in the context of Christian life and practice, not least in terms of prayer and social life, and because of his influence on subsequent theology. Historically speaking, Aquinas has come to play the leading part in Christian participatory thought, at least in the Western Church. Finally, Aquinas is also a topical choice: in the early twenty-first century, he is enjoying widespread attention across churches and traditions.

There are references to the works of Aquinas throughout, even if some are no more than citations. With them, I wish to acknowledge his influence on my own perspective, and to indicate passages in his writings that

[13] The *Monologion*, in particular, reads as a fantasia on participatory themes (translated by Simon Harrison in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008]).

the reader may wish to consider, if she wishes to explore these themes in his thought in greater detail. On other occasions, I provide a full quotation, and a discussion, where what Aquinas wrote bears particularly upon the fundamental structure of what I wish to describe and argue for.

I am willing to make a claim for a fundamental convergence of outlook – for a participatory approach – that spans doctrines and authors. There is a broad, shared approach that we can call participatory. The differences in approach within it are not without significance. In choosing Aquinas as my primary interlocutor, I recognise the vigour with which he explored such an approach. All the same, the sense of a broadly shared participatory framework is profound, for instance – to name only a few examples – in Paul, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Nicholas of Cusa, and then – in some cases with greater ambiguities and departures – in Lancelot Andrewes, Richard Hooker, the Wesleys, Jonathan Edwards, C. S. Lewis, and many others. I am not claiming complete uniformity of outlook, even among the most undeniably participatory writers, and I take their differences to bear witness to the health of this outlook, not to poverty. The work of demarcating differences of emphasis, not least in terms of the vocabulary and imagery employed, remains of considerable value, but I take that to be more a matter of variation in accidents than in substance.

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

In his 2009 paper, 'The Retrieval of Deification', Pavel Gavrilyuk criticised contemporary Western treatments of theosis, and more broadly of participation in God, for failing to relate their discussions to sacramental and ascetical theology, as the context in which they were typically found in the Early Church, and later in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.[14] A distance from ecclesiology might be another deficit, although I would have more confidence than Gavrilyuk that such themes have featured in a good deal of Catholic writing on participation.

The themes of sacramental theology, prayer, spiritual discipline, and ecclesiology are likely underrepresented in this book. That is not because I consider them to be unimportant, but rather that I have already written

[14] Paul L. Gavrilyuk, 'The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum', *Modern Theology* 25, no. 4 (2009): 647–59.

about both ecclesiology and sacramental theology from a participatory perspective.[15] Ascetical theology receives some attention in Chapter 14 of the present book, but perhaps not the full attention it deserves (as another emphasis that Gavrilyuk wishes to stress). I may have opportunity to make a contribution in the future, but for the most part I look to others, more competent in that field than I am.

DOCTRINE AND METAPHYSICS

The subtitle of this book is *A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*. That may raise hackles among those who wish for a more fundamental separation of philosophy from theology, for whom there is therefore no such thing as a distinctively Christian approach. The business of metaphysics is to offer an account of the nature of the world, and especially of its fundamental structure at the level of being. In that sense, representatives of various different religious traditions can indeed concur to a significant degree in their metaphysical outlook. Anyone might come to the conclusion, for instance, that analysis of physical objects in terms of form and matter pays dividends, or that one understands causation all the better by seeing four dimensions to it. In that sense, I come closer to conceding a degree of independence to philosophy than I have done in the past. On the other hand, it also seems to me naïve to suppose that people hold their philosophical convictions in isolation from their theological convictions, and vice versa. Nature might stand open before all, but we do not all draw the same conclusions from it. As witness to that, it is clearly not true that an analysis of the world in terms of form and matter is simply obvious to all insightful people everywhere, or that according four dimensions to causality is sensible (to return to those two examples). Certain religious traditions open our eyes to certain philosophical accounts, and vice versa. Religious convictions play a part in whether those ideas get a hearing: speaking up for causation at all, or seeing form

[15] On sacramental theology, the reader is directed to *Why Sacraments?* (London: SPCK, 2013) and *Blessing* (London: Canterbury Press, 2014); on ecclesiology, see *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), with Alison Milbank, especially three of the chapters that I contributed (chapters 1–3), as well as an early essay, 'Theology and the Renewal of the Church', in *The Hope of Things to Come: Anglicanism and the Future*, ed. Mark Chapman (London: Mowbray, 2010), 69–87. For a survey of participation in discussions of baptism and the Eucharist in the New Testament, I suggest Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 192–218.

and not only matter, has not been a universally popular position of late, and a good proportion of those who have defended causation, and the non-reduction of material things to the bare fact of their material components, for instance, have been inspired by a religious perspective. That is not incidental.

APPROACH

For the most part, with this book I have sought simply to present the rudiments of a participatory approach to theology and metaphysics, and to let that vision commend itself. I have adopted that method, rather than offering a great deal by way of criticism of other approaches. Only in a couple of places have I sought to show the inadequacies of a contrasting position, for instance in relation to Anders Nygren, and desire for the good, in Chapter 14. I have brought in such an element of criticism where I thought that it would help to underline what a participatory perspective might say, by way of contrast. I considered closing several of the chapters, perhaps all of them, by asking what would be lost were one to take a path strongly diverging from a participatory one. That, however, is not the way I eventually chose to proceed. Participatory theology belongs firmly in what my first tutor in Christian doctrine called the 'warm stream' of Christian theology, not its 'cold stream', and I hope that the almost universally positive tone of the treatments offered here will allow form to follow content.

Finally, a few words may be in order about how readers might approach this book with different ends in mind. I have attempted to write it in such a way that it is both accessible to those for whom these ideas are relatively new, and so that it possesses sufficient scholarly rigour and freshness of thought to be of interest to those with a longer-standing interest in participation. With that in mind, I have made a twofold distinction among notes and supporting discussions. Sources and short asides are found in footnotes, which appear throughout the book in the usual way. Here and there, however, some particular idea or set of texts warranted a longer discussion, which might be of less interest to the reader approaching these discussions for the first time. I have collected these discussions as Further Notes at the end of each chapter.