

## PROLOGUE

When she was barely five, my niece Jennifer took me for a walk in her neighborhood. “Come this way, Catherine,” she said, with a dramatic air of hushed excitement. Wielding a stick like a magnifying glass, poking and probing beneath the shrubs along the sidewalk, she handed me a pebble, then a petal, to examine for myself—as though for clues. “What are we looking for, Jennifer?” “We’re on the mystery!” she exclaimed.

I don’t know where she had picked up this precocious imitation of Sherlock Holmes—perhaps from her father, a policeman. She grew into a geologist, so her fascination with the puzzling detail of the world stayed with her. That peculiar phrase stayed with me. With a child’s spontaneity it combines the adventure of a mystery with an intense purposefulness, echoing “We’re on the job” or “We’re on the way.” And yet there wasn’t any crime she was trying to solve. Here was mystery for its own sake!

The way of this mystery, the wonder of its process, is not justified by its endpoint. It wanders ahead in time and in space by no terribly linear path. Yet each step matters. The mystery draws us onward. We are always trying to figure it out; to discern our way; to gather clues, hints, and signs. (So a little event with a child, itself satisfying, becomes a parable for something more.) Along the way we solve one problem after the next. But the content that concerns us here may pose a real enigma: When we think we’ve finally *got it*, have we already lost it?

But we speak God’s  
wisdom in a mystery.

—1 COR. 2:7

Is the mystery “God”? This is a work of theology, *theos/logos*, “God-talk” after all. So the answer must be yes. Divinity is surely a mystery. But notice what already happens? Isn’t it as though the mystery has already gotten solved? Oh, God, sure. *Him*. If you believe in God, you know where we are going. If you don’t, you are out of here. Even to say “God is a mystery” seems to give away the mystery. Like skipping to the end of a book. We bring so much baggage to the concept of “God” that we can hardly move, let alone undertake a journey. Whether we “believe in God” or not—most of us are already loaded down with presumptions about divinity. Theists and atheists more often than not share the same smug concept of God. For example, they presume that what we call God is omnipotent and good, that He proved his love by sending His only Son to die for us . . .

Can we stop right there?

Do you see how loaded with presuppositions just that little sentence is: it presumes that love and dominance work smoothly together, and that nothing that happens to us, however horrible, happens apart from the will of God. It presumes that divinity should be addressed as “He.” It presumes a Christian monopoly on the truth. Moreover, most folk will assume that these presuppositions are simply “biblical.” Yet there is, for example, no biblical term for “omnipotence.” The closest notion, “the Almighty,” is actually a mistranslation of *El Shaddai*, “God of the Mountain”—literally in Hebrew “the Breasted One”!

I am just making a point about the heavy cargo of presumptions that “God” carries for most of us. I am not at this moment disputing any particular presumptions—except for the presumption that such truisms about “God” add up to a meaningful theology, let alone to a living faith. I am wondering whether it is still possible—theologically—to “speak God’s wisdom in a mystery.”

What an attractive definition of theology Paul’s phrase delivers. Yet even in the New Revised Standard Version, the translation I most rely upon, a telling shift happens (no doubt in the interest of clarity). It reads: “But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden.” That sounds as if *now* we are able to speak God’s wisdom directly and transparently, whereas it had been hidden *before*. Yet the point of the text in Greek is that *if* we are speaking this wisdom, we *are now* speaking “in a mystery”—*en mysterio*. The mystery got lost in translation!

What might Paul have in mind? He is reflecting on what “God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” Apparently this spirited “wisdom” (his Greek word is the feminine *sophia*) is not a set of recitable propositions. He is here opposing this enigmatic *sophia* to the wisdom “of this age or of the rulers of this age” (1 Cor. 2:6). In other words, revelation is not the dictation of some unquestionable piece of knowledge. Rather, it resists knowledge in that sense, the top-down

knowledge that masters its objects, that confers power on those who possess it: what the cultural critic Michel Foucault calls “knowledge/power.” How ironic that Christian theology would become the ideology of the rulers. Even now.

This book is an exploration of the wisdom and the way of a theology that can only be spoken—when it can be spoken—in the spirit of mystery: in attunement to that which exceeds our knowing. Such knowing of the limits of our knowledge comes not, however, from the stifling of critical questions and the obstructing of open quests—but from their adventurous pursuit. Theology as the language of faith partakes of historical analysis and critical reason, as do the other *-ologies*. But it is older. And it has always pushed beyond academic boundaries into the language of communities of faith and into the enquiries of individuals alienated from any church, temple, synagogue, or mosque. It has a massively Christian history. But as a term *theology* originates in ancient Greece; it branches into the development of all three “peoples of the book” (the prophet Mohammad’s term for the biblical legacy); it travels beyond monotheism, as in current discussions of “comparative theology.” Theology is not better or truer than other disciplines of thought. Indeed, it has over its complex and conflictual history legitimated more violence than any other *-ology*.

Those who involve themselves in theological questions seek wisdom only as we relinquish any pretense of innocence. Wisdom has always already outgrown innocence. The biblical prototype—the divine Sophia—precedes all creation, after all (Prov. 8:22-23). She has seen it all. This mystery does not warrant ignorance of our history and our institutions, of our hugely varying effects on the planetary contexts of theology. Often what is called “mystery” (as in “Don’t ask questions, it is a holy mystery”) is mere mystification, used to camouflage the power drives of those who don’t want to be questioned.

The church began in a mysterious transcultural event of questioning: “All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’” That is the collective vision-experience depicted in Acts 2, when the spirit drove the little secluded community out into the public square. Over their ecstatic heads were glimpsed shimmering fiery tongues; from their mouths, in the author’s amazing pun on *tongues*, were heard the multiple *tongues* of several foreign languages. My classrooms in theology are more sedate. But they are rich with international students, not to mention students of all kinds of U.S. backgrounds—so this “speaking in tongues” speaks to the concrete perplexities of understanding one another across all of our difficult, strangely accented, differences. All of our different religious and irreligious backgrounds. Our raced, sexed, cultured, and truly spirited complexities. Our burning disappointments and our unspeakable desires. Yet moments of fiery discernment do take place.

## Open-Ended Interactivity

An ancient theological tradition captures the paradox of speech about the unspeakable in a beautiful metaphor: that of “the luminous dark.”<sup>1</sup> This book proposes a way for theology to avoid the garish neon light of absolute truth-claims, which wash out our vital differences. Yet this way will just as firmly elude the opaque darkness of the casual nihilism that pervades our culture—the “whatever” of indifference. That indifference takes cover behind a secularism that, as we shall see, sometimes mimics the fundamentalist absolutism it reacts against. This book shares the worry of Jim Wallis about “both religious and secular fundamentalists.” The first group, he writes in *God’s Politics*, “would impose the doctrines of a political theocracy on their fellow citizens, while the other would deprive the public square of needed moral and spiritual values often shaped by faith.”<sup>2</sup>

In the interest both of our widest social values and our innermost spiritual yearning, this theology has much to speak—even about the unspeakable! But its proposals will never boil down to theological truth-propositions with which you must finally agree or disagree—though hopefully you will do much of both. It pursues instead the way of a theology in process: which is to say, a way of *open-ended interactivity*.

Faith is not settled belief but living process. It is the very edge and opening of life in process. To live is to step with trust into the next moment: into the unpredictable. I hope this book will unsettle some presumptions that you had begun to doubt anyway. I hope it will help you think, feel, and imagine the next step of your own spiritual path. For this theology the spirit (which I do not capitalize outside of citations, because it is ambiguously both within and beyond us, and because the ancient languages didn’t either) is gift and breath and flow and flame.

The spirit in which we journey is a spirit in process. And so divinity itself—that which we can name or conceive as “God”—will be discerned in process. “Discerning divinity in process” carries a double meaning: our theological images shift, diversify, and evolve; and that which we imagine *in* those images is discerned to be a living process. *Process* in this book means *becoming*: it signifies the intuition that the universe itself is not most fundamentally a static being or the product of a static Being—but an immeasurable becoming. Indeed the word *genesis* in Greek means “becoming.” The God of a universe in process may in powerful ways turn out to be a God in process: that is, in open-ended interactivity with each of the gazillions of us creatures. For the divine process, if we can imagine it at all, is infinite and therefore inexhaustible. The traditional unchangeables of God may prove to be points of theological fixation rather

than fixities of a divine nature. They may be the false fronts of our cultural immobilities: “God as Unchangeable Absolute” functions as “Sanctioner of the Status Quo”—even if that status quo is unjust and unsustainable.<sup>3</sup>

Human power thus reciprocally projects itself into unquestionable images of a changeless divine power. But theology is not as stuck as many presume (dismissively or approvingly). As an example, feminist theology, an undercurrent of the present text but not its primary concern, has over a few decades begun to demystify the changeless masculinity of the unchangeable absolute. Such highly charged challenges to traditional images may seem to threaten the transcendent otherness of God with new projections. But they may also deepen it. “The mystery of God transcends all images,” writes a leading theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, “but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female reality.”<sup>4</sup> Mystery is not a stagnant pool but a flowing infinity. A theology of becoming discerns its divinity in and as a living process.

In the interest of this process this book draws on the wisdom of a particular twentieth-century ecumenical tradition, with roots in philosophy and natural science as well as religion, called process theology. This book can be read as an introduction to process theology. But compared to much of the process tradition, which I continue to value and teach, I am using the metaphor of “process” in a multivalent and fluid sense, more tinged with mysticism, more freighted with scriptural narrative.

## Seven Signs

The process of this book unfurls through the seven thematic phases encoded in the seven chapters. Reminiscent of the seven seals of the Apocalypse? If so, the opening of each of these will, I pray, unleash not doom but hope! Each involves a familiar doctrinal and scriptural symbolism, unfolded in perhaps unfamiliar ways. Different themes could have been chosen, another number would have been possible. But these are the themes that called to me, sometimes gently, sometimes urgently. Writing a book is a mysterious process, too.

We open with the question of theology itself. Putting theology in process means freeing it from a deadly mirror game I will call the binary of the *absolute* and the *dissolute*. In this polarization, the desire for absolute certainty reacts against the fear of a nihilistic dissolution, a relativism indifferent to meaning and morality: “At the end of another lost highway / signs misleading to nowhere,” go the popular Green Day lyrics of “Jesus of Suburbia,” “No one really seems to care.”<sup>5</sup> So the first chapter asks, must the alternative to the lost highway be a rigid “my way”? Do we need unquestionable beliefs in an

immutable transcendence—to save us from signs misleading to nowhere? Other signs become legible.

What if truth itself is a way, not an endpoint? What if the way and its truth deliver no totalizing absolute—nor deliver us to the indifferent dissolute? What if we have here to find a third way? In the second chapter, under the sign of truth, certain biblical figures begin to accompany this theological process, such as that of Pontius Pilate, signifying a dissolute relativism; and that of the vulnerable one offering testimony before him. Of a changeless omnipotence? Or of a becoming relationship?

On this nonlinear journey of becoming, the third chapter sends us back to the beginning—where under the sign of creation, the universe emerges out of some mysterious and long-forgotten waters. An exegesis of the first chapter of the Bible yields fishy results, suggestive of an open-ended process of creativity, of a creation that didn't happen way back when, once and for all and once upon a time, but is happening even now.

The fourth chapter explores the sign of divine power. So many lose faith over the dogmatic assumption of God's all-controlling power. What did they do to deserve this disease, this war, this natural catastrophe, they ask? Here the third way surrenders neither to the Calvinist doctrine of omnipotent providence—nor to a mere presumption of holy impotence. What would happen if power begins to redefine itself in terms of the gospel of love?

Yet love has been rendered such a dissolute notion, sexed up or sappy, selfish or self-demeaning, that the potency and passion of the ancient scriptural symbols of love, in both Testaments, have drained out of our collective consciousness. But can we afford to abandon the wisdom of love? So under the sign of passion, we explore the process theological idea of the divine Eros, the lure, that dares us to become. To become more than we are. We surface the desire hidden in our doubts. And then in the sixth chapter we look at the other side of the model, the reception of us in the divine. In the interaction of this passionate creativity and this responsive compassion, another model of justice, alien to vengeance, suggests itself.

The seventh sign unfolds a few familiar parables of the *basileia*, “the kingdom of God.” Here a more explicit reflection on the meaning of the figure of Jesus as the Christ becomes possible. The messianic process that he at once actualizes and shifts reveals his *priority*—over and against the standard focus on his *identity*. Yet it is precisely the interplay of revelation and concealment in the parables that will keep Christology on the mystery.

In a theology that emphasizes the open-ended, an ending poses a problem. So we consider the ultimate story of end things, the Apocalypse, as a way

of coming not to closure but to dis/closure. That slash will remind us to keep disclosure *open*: to let revelation reveal something we don't already know! Here, in the sign of the spirit, a hot-tongued "Pentecost in the head" counters our end-of-the-world scripts. Deadlines may become lifelines. The last days may turn into the first, the least may turn out to be the most. A way may open where there wasn't one.